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Dalit Literature Reflected by Mulk Raj Anand in Untouchable and Coolie

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Abstract: *Mulk Raj Anand's novels, Untouchable and Coolie, examine the complex interplay of caste and class oppression in pre-independence India through their characters, Bakha and Munoo. Untouchable reveals Bakha's plight as an untouchable, navigating a harsh reality defined by societal norms of purity and pollution. His encounter with an upper-caste man elicits hysteria, highlighting the caste system's fragility and his yearning for dignity. The narrative proposes various means of escape, including spiritual conversion and technological advancements. In contrast, Coolie follows Munoo, who, despite a higher caste, faces economic exploitation as he shifts from rural poverty to the complexities of colonial capitalism, ultimately succumbing to tuberculosis. Anand criticizes the commodification of life within this capitalist system, presenting Munoo's tragic fate as a consequence of systemic class oppression. Together, these narratives explore the intersection of caste and class, illustrating how structural injustices deny the agency of subaltern individuals, while contrasting Bakha's inner turmoil with Munoo's innocence, thereby addressing themes of dignity, exploitation, and marginalized existence in India.This study contributes to understand the Reflection of Dalit Literature in Untouchable and Coolie by portyaying the characters like Bakha, Munoo, Sohini, Gujri, BibijiandLakshmi.*

Keywords: *Anand, oppression, caste, Dalit Literature, exploitation, Bakha, Munoo.*

Introduction: Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable (1935) presents a powerful psychological and sociological critique of the Hindu caste hierarchy through the lived experiences and troubled consciousness of its protagonist, Bakha. By compressing the narrative into a single day, Anand transforms the ordinary experiences of an oppressed individual into a profound exploration of social exclusion, psychological trauma, and human dignity. For Bakha, time does not represent progress, freedom, or new possibilities; rather, it becomes a repetitive cycle of humiliation, discrimination, and existential anxiety. His daily existence is shaped by the persistent experience of untouchability, through which caste-based oppression becomes an inseparable part of his psychological reality.

The binary opposition between purity and pollution constitutes the central thematic structure of the novel. This socially and religiously constructed distinction reduces the untouchable body to a perceived source of contamination and legitimises the exclusion of marginalised communities from public and social spaces. Bakha's accidental physical contact with an upper-caste man in the marketplace becomes a significant turning point in the narrative. The incident exposes the irrationality, cruelty, and fragility of the orthodox caste system, revealing how an ordinary human interaction can be transformed into a public accusation and an occasion for collective humiliation.

Anand also offers a compelling representation of the psychological internalisation of systemic oppression. Bakha experiences an internal conflict between his natural desire for dignity, respect, and social acceptance and the inherited social position that demands obedience and self-abasement. His admiration for British clothing, habits, and lifestyle further reflects his desire to escape the degrading conditions imposed upon him by caste society. However, his aspiration for individual transformation remains constrained by the deeply entrenched structures of social discrimination.

The novel's concluding movement introduces three possible approaches to overcoming untouchability: spiritual transformation through Christian conversion, social and moral reform through Mahatma Gandhi's emancipatory message, and technological intervention through the introduction of the flush toilet. These alternatives represent different dimensions of the struggle against caste oppression—religious, political, and material. Gandhi's address offers a moral challenge to caste-based discrimination, while the technological alternative suggests that modern sanitation systems could eliminate the degrading practice of manual scavenging. The flush toilet, therefore, becomes more than a symbol of industrial progress; it represents the possibility of transforming the material conditions that sustain the caste-based division of labour.

Ultimately, Anand does not present technological modernisation as an immediate or complete solution to caste discrimination. Rather, he uses the idea of the flush toilet to suggest that scientific innovation, combined with social reform and political awareness, can challenge the material foundations of untouchability. Through Bakha's experiences, Untouchable exposes the dehumanising consequences of caste hierarchy and affirms the universal human desire for dignity, equality, and freedom.

Feudalism, Capitalism and the Commodity Value of Human Lifein *Coolie:* In Coolie, Mulk Raj Anand shifts his analytical gaze from the rigid, local structures of religious orthodoxy and caste-based discrimination to the extensive and exploitative networks of colonial capitalism, tracing the tragic journey of Munoo from rural destitution to industrial death. Unlike Bakha in Untouchable, Munoo belongs to the Kshatriya caste, traditionally regarded as a higher position within the Hindu caste hierarchy. However, his extreme poverty renders this social status practically meaningless, exposing how modern economic structures transform existing social vulnerabilities into forms of class exploitation (Anand, 1936; Desai, 1948). Munoo's journey across the subcontinent—from the feudal restrictions of his village to the chaotic industrial environment of Bombay and the privileged domestic spaces of colonial Shimla—becomes an indictment of an unequal and rapidly modernising society (Anand, 1936). In this changing social landscape, feudal landlords, British industrialists, and sections of the emerging Indian bourgeoisie participate in economic relationships that perpetuate the exploitation of displaced rural labourers (Chandra, 1966). Anand critically exposes the harsh reality of the capitalist "cash nexus," through which human relationships become increasingly governed by monetary interests, reducing impoverished individuals to disposable commodities and cheap labour units (Anand, 1936; Williams, 1973). Munoo's slow and painful death from tuberculosis is therefore not merely an individual biological tragedy but also a symbolic consequence of exploitative economic and social structures that consume the physical strength of the subaltern poor while denying them adequate living conditions, security, and human dignity (Anand, 1936; Niven, 1996).

Class and Caste: A Comparative Synthesis: Read together, Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable (1935) and Coolie (1936) offer a dialectical representation of institutional oppression in pre-independence India, revealing the intersection of social identity and economic status in the disempowerment of the subaltern subject. Untouchable presents a microscopic examination of caste-based ostracism, in which marginalisation is assigned at birth and reinforced through religious and social notions of purity and pollution. Coolie, by contrast, provides a broader examination of economic dispossession, demonstrating how structural poverty produces another form of social exclusion, irrespective of an individual's traditional caste position. Bakha is confined by the physical and social boundaries of his community and is compelled to announce his presence to avoid contaminating members of higher castes. Munoo, on the other hand, experiences continuous

geographical displacement, moving through different urban and industrial spaces only to encounter the same exploitative economic structures. The contrasting possibilities of liberation are also significant. Coolie foregrounds the importance of workers' solidarity, class consciousness, and collective labour organisation, whereas Untouchable explores humanitarian reform, technological intervention, and social transformation as possible responses to caste discrimination. Ultimately, both novels demonstrate how the subaltern experience is shaped by the systematic denial of human dignity, bodily autonomy, and economic security under caste hierarchy and capitalist accumulation (Anand, 1935, 1936; Perera, 2014).

Mulk Raj Anand's Coolie can be interpreted as a Marxist critique of colonial capitalism, employing social realism to examine the alienation, commodification, and eventual destruction of the Indian working poor. Published in 1936, the novel emerged during a period of global economic depression, colonial exploitation, and growing labour movements. Anand's political engagement with Marxist thought and the Indian progressive literary movement informs the novel's concern with economic inequality and social justice. However, his involvement with the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War took place in 1937, after the publication of Coolie, and should not be presented as a direct influence on the novel's composition (Anand, 1936; Perera, 2014; South Asian Britain, n.d.). Rather than offering merely a sympathetic portrayal of poverty, Anand presents a critique of the relationship between colonial capital and indigenous structures of economic domination, through which the rural poor are transformed into a vulnerable and exploited labouring population (Perera, 2014).

From a Marxist perspective, Munoo's journey represents the movement of an impoverished rural subject from an agrarian economy into exploitative wage-labour relations. His uncle and the local landlord restrict his opportunities, leaving him increasingly dependent on the sale of his labour-power for survival. This situation can be examined through Marx's concept of primitive accumulation, which describes the historical processes through which producers become separated from their means of production and are compelled to depend on wage labour (Marx, 1867/1976). Munoo's displacement therefore symbolises the economic vulnerability of individuals who lack ownership, financial resources, and control over their means of livelihood.

Through Munoo's journey, Anand depicts exploitation across several locations, including the village, Sham Nagar, the Daulatpur pickle factory, and the Sir George White Cotton Mills in Bombay. Each setting represents a different manifestation of unequal power relations. Sham Nagar's domestic environment reveals exploitation through paternalistic authority, psychological humiliation, and unequal employer-servant relationships. In Daulatpur, the factory environment exposes Munoo to physically demanding work and degrading living conditions. In Bombay, exploitation becomes more institutionalised through industrial labour relations, where the interests of mill owners and the vulnerability of workers determine the conditions of production (Anand, 1936; Vandertop, 2020). Anand consequently presents the colonial city not simply as a symbol of modernity but as a space in which industrial development and economic inequality coexist.

The Marxist concept of surplus value provides an important theoretical basis for understanding this exploitation. According to Marx (1867/1976), capitalist production generates profit through the appropriation of surplus labour beyond the value returned to workers in the form of wages. In Coolie, the contrast between industrial wealth and the impoverished conditions of labourers illustrates this unequal relationship. The workers contribute their physical strength and productive capacities to industrial development but remain deprived of adequate economic security and social dignity. The relationship between the British mill owners and the local supervisory authorities further illustrates how colonial industrial power operates through interconnected systems of economic and workplace control (Anand, 1936; Perera, 2014).

The concept of reification, particularly as developed by Lukács (1971), is equally useful for interpreting Munoo's experience. Reification refers to the process through which human relationships and activities

increasingly assume the character of things or commodities. In Coolie, Munoo is repeatedly valued according to his capacity to perform labour rather than his individuality, aspirations, or emotional needs. His body becomes an instrument of production and service, while his personal identity is subordinated to the economic demands of employers. The factory workers' close physical proximity to machines and their difficult living conditions reinforce the novel's representation of human beings being absorbed into the industrial environment. Munoo's transformation from an individual with hopes and aspirations into an economically expendable labourer illustrates the dehumanising consequences of commodification (Anand, 1936; Lukács, 1971).

Anand's representation of the Bombay workers can also be interpreted through Marx's concept of the reserve army of labour. Marx (1867/1976) uses this term to describe the unemployed and underemployed population that remains available for employment and places pressure on the bargaining power of existing workers. In Coolie, the presence of large numbers of impoverished individuals seeking work highlights the insecurity of labourers who can easily be replaced. This oversupply of labour weakens workers' capacity to negotiate better wages and working conditions. Their economic vulnerability consequently becomes a structural feature of the capitalist labour market rather than an isolated personal misfortune.

Munoo's final employment as a rickshaw-puller in Shimla represents the most physically demanding stage of his exploitation. His body becomes the principal instrument through which he earns a livelihood, as he carries wealthy passengers through the hill town. This contrast between the physical exhaustion of the labourer and the comfort enjoyed by colonial elites exposes the unequal distribution of wealth, mobility, and privilege. Munoo's declining health and eventual death from tuberculosis symbolically reveal the human cost of an economic system that consumes the physical capacities of workers while failing to provide adequate protection or security (Anand, 1936; Vandertop, 2020).

Marx's theory of alienation offers another important framework for analysing Munoo's experiences. Marx (1844/1975) identifies four interconnected dimensions of alienation under capitalism: alienation from the product of labour, from the process of production, from other human beings, and from the worker's own human potential. These dimensions can be traced throughout Munoo's working life. He participates in producing commodities that remain beyond his economic reach; he exercises little control over the conditions and organisation of his work; his relationships with employers and other workers are shaped by unequal economic interests; and his physical and emotional development is restricted by the continuous struggle for survival. The contrast between producing cotton goods that he cannot afford to enjoy and physically carrying passengers whose privileges remain inaccessible to him illustrates the separation between labour and its benefits. Anand thus represents alienation not merely as an economic condition but also as a deeply human experience involving the loss of freedom, dignity, and self-realisation.

More importantly, Anand uses the possibility of collective labour organisation to examine the difficulties of developing proletarian solidarity. In the Bombay episodes, workers' efforts to organise resistance against exploitative industrial conditions are undermined by internal divisions and communal tensions. The conflict between Hindu and Muslim workers weakens their capacity to recognise their shared economic interests. This situation can be interpreted through the Marxist concept of false consciousness, which describes how dominant ideologies and social divisions can obscure the structural sources of exploitation and prevent workers from developing a unified class perspective (Marx & Engels, 1970). Rather than directing their grievances towards the unequal industrial system, workers become divided by communal identities, thereby weakening the possibility of collective resistance.

Anand's representation of this conflict is particularly significant because it demonstrates how class solidarity can be disrupted by religious and communal divisions. The novel suggests that workers who experience similar forms of economic exploitation may nevertheless be prevented from acting collectively when their social identities are mobilised against one another. The failure of labour solidarity therefore exposes the

limitations of working-class resistance under colonial conditions. This interpretation is consistent with Perera's (2014) analysis of Coolie as a work of socialist literary internationalism that connects colonial labour exploitation with broader questions of class, migration, and social justice.

The Humanist and the Marxist: Although Mulk Raj Anand's Coolie (1936) is deeply informed by Marxist ideas, his literary representation reveals an important ideological tension for Marxist literary critics. Classical Marxist literary theory often emphasises the development of proletarian class consciousness, collective resistance, and the possibility of social transformation through organised working-class action. Socialist realism, particularly in its established Soviet formulation, frequently presents the working class as an agent of historical change. Anand's novel, however, does not follow this pattern of revolutionary optimism. Instead, it combines a critique of capitalist exploitation with a strong emphasis on individual suffering, psychological vulnerability, and humanist sympathy (Anand, 1936; Lukács, 1962).

Munoo, the central protagonist, never develops a mature revolutionary consciousness or assumes the role of an organised political activist. Throughout the narrative, he remains a vulnerable and bewildered figure whose experiences are shaped by poverty, exploitation, displacement, and the unequal power relations of colonial society. His response to suffering is largely personal and emotional rather than explicitly political. Consequently, Munoo does not emerge as a conventional Marxist revolutionary protagonist who recognises the structural causes of his oppression and mobilises collective resistance. His tragic trajectory instead emphasises the psychological and physical consequences of economic exploitation (Anand, 1936; Marx, 1844/1975).

Anand partially relocates the possibility of working-class resistance to secondary characters, particularly Ratan, the wrestler and factory worker who demonstrates greater awareness of labour rights and collective organisation. Ratan represents a more assertive working-class identity and introduces the possibility of trade-union solidarity within the industrial environment. Through this character, Anand indicates that collective resistance may provide workers with a means of challenging exploitative labour relations. Nevertheless, this possibility remains fragile and is undermined by economic insecurity, social divisions, and communal conflict. The contrast between Ratan's relative political awareness and Munoo's personal vulnerability highlights the uneven development of class consciousness among the working poor (Anand, 1936; Perera, 2014).

The novel's ending further reinforces this ideological complexity. Rather than concluding with a successful workers' uprising or the triumph of organised proletarian resistance, Anand ends Munoo's journey with his tragic death in Shimla. This narrative decision shifts attention from revolutionary victory to the human consequences of systemic oppression. Munoo's death becomes a powerful representation of the physical destruction of the impoverished labouring subject, whose suffering remains largely unrecognised by the privileged social order. In this respect, Coolie departs from the conventional expectations of socialist realism, which often emphasises collective agency and the historical possibilities of working-class transformation (Lukács, 1962; Anand, 1936).

The distinction between critical realism and socialist realism is therefore particularly useful in interpreting Anand's literary approach. Critical realism exposes the contradictions and inequalities of existing social structures through detailed representations of ordinary human experience, whereas socialist realism, in its conventional formulation, places greater emphasis on the development of socialist consciousness and the possibility of collective transformation. Anand's Coolie combines Marxist social criticism with the emotional depth and ethical concern associated with humanist realism. He identifies the structural mechanisms of capitalist exploitation but does not provide a clearly articulated revolutionary programme for their overthrow. Instead, he directs the reader's attention towards the suffering of the marginalised and the moral necessity of recognising their humanity (Lukács, 1962; Williams, 1977).

Ultimately, Coolie should not be understood as a straightforward example of revolutionary socialist realism. It is more appropriately interpreted as a work of critical realism informed by Marxist social analysis and humanist commitment. Anand exposes the mechanisms of colonial capitalism, class exploitation, and labour alienation, yet his narrative resolution centres on individual tragedy rather than collective political victory. Munoo's death does not negate the novel's Marxist concerns; rather, it intensifies its criticism of a social and economic system that destroys vulnerable human lives. Through this combination of ideological critique and humanist pathos, Anand demonstrates that the struggle against exploitation involves not only political and economic transformation but also the restoration of human dignity (Anand, 1936; Perera, 2014).

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Anger v. Innocence: What essentially distinguishes Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* from *Coolie* is the psychic make-up of the heroes. Bakha and Munoo, crushed by the machinery of institutionalized oppression, internalize and process their suffering through radically different emotional spectrums. Bakha's consciousness is characterized by an inner bubbling claustrophobic rage, a rage born of existential confinement. Munoo's consciousness is characterized by a resilient, tragic childlike innocence, which persists despite the incessant economic exploitation.

The psychology of Bakha in *Untouchable* is influenced by the pressures of a rigid caste system that brands his body as a constant source of pollution. He is born into his oppression; it is personal, inescapable, and existential. It creates a unique psychological trauma in the form of a deep, smoldering rage.

Bakha is strong, athletic and intelligent – all qualities that make his forced subservience all the more galling. He is slapped in the marketplace for not declaring his 'polluting' presence. His immediate internal reaction is explosive animal rage. He flexes his muscles and his eyes flash and has a brief urge to strike back at his upper caste abuser. But this rage is instantly smothered by centuries of internalized social conditioning, turning the volcano inward.

Bakha's rage is born of a tragic desire for glitz and integration. His obsession with "fashun" – wearing British military surplus – is a pathetic effort to forge an identity outside the bounds of his caste. Each time he is reminded of his reality (a housewife throwing bread at him in the street, for instance), his internal dialog swings wildly between violent self-hatred and a cerebral, acrid resentment of the social order. Bakha is a solitary, while Munoo enjoys the company of others in passing. Anger makes him more aware of his surroundings. He sees the hypocrisy of the temple priest, Pundit Kali Nath who tries to molest Bakha's sister Sohini and at the same time screams that her presence has polluted the temple. Bakha is a modern, proto-revolutionary consciousness, imprisoned in the prison of a medieval social matrix and of unexpressed fury.

Munoo in *Coolie* is, however, the tragedy of a displaced soul, with a desperate, almost instinctive optimism, but being ground down by the wheels of colonial capitalism. Munoo's oppression is economic, not ritual. He does not experience these hardships as an existential curse, but as a series of unfortunate shifts in a grand, confusing world.Munoo is always curious like a child and wants to play, even when his employer's wife, Bibi Uttam Kaur, verbally abuses him in a horrific manner or he is made to work in the stifling heat of the Daulatpur pickle factory. Abuse does not diminish his sense of self-worth in the world; he is always looking for beauty, laughter and human connection. His spirit is wonderfully springy, bouncing with naive hope to every new destination.

Bakha looks at the upper castes with fear and a deep-rooted resentment, while Munoo has no systemic hatred for the bourgeoisie. He looks at the rich children of Sham Nagar and does not want to overthrow them. He only wants to be their friend and to share their happiness. He accepts his role as servant with a gentle, fatalistic compliance, mistaking the predatory relations of capitalism for real human interactions.Munoo's ruin is, in the end, his childlike innocence. In Bombay and Simla, he is continually exploited because he

lacks the cynical self-preservation or the protective rage that keep Bakha on his guard. A foul woman, Mrs Mainwaring, hires him to pull her rickshaw in Shimla. Munoo tries so hard that he hemorrhages to death, partly because of a naive, desperate wish to please his maternal, upper-class employer. He is too innocent to have a revolutionary consciousness, and his quiet death of tuberculosis is a moment of intense pathos, not of political defiance.

Psychologically, the deep difference between the two protagonists is in the way their particular modes of marginalization affect their inner worlds, producing a sharp contrast between Bakha's claustrophobic internal rage and Munoo's resilient, tragic innocence. Bakha's trauma is existential in that it is born from the inescapable accident of birth; his psyche becomes a pressure cooker of suppressed fury, hyper awareness, and intense self-loathing because his very body is branded as a permanent site of spiritual pollution. He behaves with the defensive, wounded pride of an outcast who can see the malice of his oppressors, but is rendered helpless by centuries of social conditioning. Unlike the latter, Munoo is not marked by ritual stigma but by economic dislocation, which allows him to retain a flexible, almost innocent hopefulness that looks for joy, play, and maternal love in the most predatory spaces of colonial capitalism. Bakha experiences the abuse meted out to him by society as an attack on his human dignity and this sparks a dormant revolutionary impulse in him. Conversely, Munoo experiences his suffering with passive incomprehension and fatalistic compliance, constantly confusing the exploitative mechanisms of the market for human relations. In the end, this psychological duality plays into Anand's larger critique. Bakha's simmering rage unmasks the ways in which religious orthodoxy shatters and embitter the individual soul, while Munoo's abiding, childlike vulnerability highlights the brutal mechanics of a capitalist system that views human goodness as an expendable, consumable commodity.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie* foreground the double burden of caste oppression and patriarchal exploitation on female characters. The character of Sohini (Bakha's sister) in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* is a fitting example of the double jeopardy of caste and gender. The physical vulnerability and sexual exploitation of the Dalit woman by upper caste men, such as the priest Pandit Kali Nath, is revealed. Unlike her brother, Sohini has virtually no mobility or public voice; she is restricted to menial labour and domestic chores, epitomizing the way patriarchal hierarchies within and without her community dispossess marginalized women of their agency. In *Coolie*, the women characters shift the focus on the harsh realities of capitalist and class-based exploitation, where poor working-class women are reduced to commodified labour. Taken together, the two novels depict marginalized women at the crossroad of caste stigma, economic subjugation and systemic patriarchy.

Conclusion: Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie* are monumental markers within Indian social realism, offering a devastatingly comprehensive dual anatomy of the institutional and structural machineries that fracture the subaltern subject.Through the contrasting yet symmetrically tragic trajectories of Bakha and Munoo, Anand constructs a deep Dalit literary thesis to show that oppression in pre-independence India is not just a social pathology or an economic casualty. Rather, his stories illustrate a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship where religious intolerance, feudalism and contemporary colonial capitalism intersect to systematically strip the subaltern worker of bodily freedom and human dignity.

By limiting the narrative arc of Untouchable to one claustrophobic day, Anand offers a microscopic study of the deep psychological trauma born of dogmas of ritual purity and pollution. Here time for the protagonist is not a motor of progress but a cyclical trap of public humiliation and existential terror. Rather Coolie takes the analytical lens to a macrocosmic level. With rigorous Marxism, Anand charts the reification and commodification of the human proletariat, turning his eyes away from the localized spaces of religious orthodoxy to the fluid, predatory networks of industrial capital. The tragic ironies of Munoo's journey--a high-caste Kshatriya rendered an interchangeable instrument of labour, a factory hand who sleeps beside the machinery, a rickshaw puller who literally consumes his own physical tissue to serve the colonial elite--lay

bare the ways in which modern economic structures render traditional status meaningless, actively transmuting caste vulnerabilities into raw, unmitigated class exploitation.Anand's social-realist intervention ultimately rejects the easy comforts of facile sentimentality, and offers, instead, a cold, systemic diagnosis for a fast-modernising India. In this changed landscape, the feudal landlord, the British industrialist and the ascending native bourgeoisie conspire to impose a predatory "cash nexus" which turns the subaltern poor into disposable commodities. The difference in the resolution of the two texts—the flush toilet as technological and humanitarian salvation, a materialist equalizer in *Untouchable* versus the call for proletarian solidarity, class consciousness and trade-union resistance in *Coolie*—points to the complex nature of Anand's radical vision.

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