



SHATTERED INNOCENCE: THE SILENT SCREAMS OF CHILD LABOR IN MULK RAJ ANAND

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ABSTRACT

The novel *Coolie* (1936) by Mulk Raj Anand is a story about Munno, a child labourer from the Kangra Hills, and the tragedy of child labour in colonial India. Munno's forced entry into a series of roles of exploitation – Domestic servant, Factory worker, Coolie and Rickshaw puller – represent the destruction of childhood and the innocence of others, imposed by the remnants of feudalism, Colonial capitalism and the class hierarchy. The physical exhaustion, malnutrition abuse, making the child a disposable unit of cheap labour, culminating in Munno's early death from TB are described by Anand. The “silent scream” on the title is the voiceless suffering of the labouring child and Anand's humanist protest of a social order which denies education, play and dignity to the young one. The novel's realism, based on Munno's own experience in India, which emphasizes the importance of being a social conscience and a reformist, gives the narrative a wider perspective to criticize systemic injustice, while also remaining relevant to the hardships that Indian people still face today.

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Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) was an early pioneer of Indian English literature, along with the likes of R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, as a founder of the modern Indo-Anglian novel. Anand was born in Peshawar (now in Pakistan) on 12 December 1905 to a Kshatriya family, the son of a coppersmith who became a military clerk. He attended Khalsa college, Amritsar and went on to get a PhD degree in philosophy from University College London. He had the opportunity to meet members of the Bloomsbury Group in England, and was influenced by writers such as E.M. Forster and D.H. Lawrence, all of whom influenced his realistic and socially committed style of writing. Anand is known as a humanist and a social realist, and he exposed the exploitation and underprivileged condition of the Indian people through his literary works, highlighting poverty, caste discrimination and class oppression. He vividly portrays the lives of the downtrodden—untouchables, coolies, peasants and urban poor—bringing out the harsh realities of the pre- and post-independence of Indian society. Some of the well-known novels, such as *Untouchable* (1935), which is about a young sweeper boy Bakha and criticizes the caste system, and *Coolie* (1936) about a 14-year-old orphan child boy Munoo who has been pushed into the world of child labour because of poverty, are worth reading.

In this book entitled "Shattered Innocence – Silent Schemes of Child Labor", Mulk Raj Anand becomes the sympathetic chronicler of the masked atrocities perpetrated on children in a society that is consumed by poverty and exploitation. The novel *Coolie* is an innovative piece of work on this theme. Anand exposes the ways universal poverty, family pressures and heartless capitalist structures steal children's childhoods through the innocent but quickly growing figure of Munoo. Munoo's story is that of a lighthearted boy in Munoo, who grows up as a servant, factory worker and rickshaw puller, uncovering the "silent schemes" of exploitation: low wages, physical abuse and sexual harassment, hazardous working conditions, and the complete lack of education and play. Anand does not only point out that he accuses a whole socio-economic system that deems poor children to be 'not reusable labour'. His prose is full of empathy and the keenest social criticism, frequently using Marxist concepts to demonstrate the way that imperialism, feudalism and industrial capitalism conspire to break open young lives. As Munno's death at age 15 from tuberculosis embodies the worst outcome of a stolen innocence, the book serves as a reminder that a child's death is never in vain. The book reminds readers that a child's death is never in vain, while Munno's death at the age of 15 from tuberculosis is a symbol of the worst case scenario of a stolen innocence.

Anand's human-centered vision stays extremely related today. In his essays, he calls upon the readers to take on the current reality of child labour in India and across the globe and reminds us that there is always a child behind every fact, whose dreams have been quietly broken by the tactics of those in power. Through his art, Anand was not only recording suffering, he was also creating the path for dignity, equality and social justice for the least of these.

Literature Review

Indian English novelist and social realist Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) has been widely studied and researched for his depiction of the underprivileged in Indian society, particularly in his seminal novel *Coolie* (1936). The theme "shattered innocence – silent schemes of child labour" encapsulates the key acts of kindness of Anand in his representation of the systematic exploitation of children: the invisibility of socio-economic structures like poverty, caste discrimination, feudalism, capitalism and colonialism that deny children their childhood. The scholarship in this field is mainly focused on *Coolie*, as the protagonist Munno, a 14-year-old orphan, represents the tragedy of the wounded innocence, and is forced to work as a domestic servant, workshop worker, and rickshaw puller, dying young of tuberculosis. These "silent schemes" are not the overt plots that critics describe as the nature of Anand's work, but rather "communal systems" which govern child exploitation without any form of rebellion or resolution. Prejudice and labor exploitation receive focused attention in numerous criticisms. Anand refers to child work as "the worst kind of social abuse" and Munno suffers from physical and emotional abuse from people such as his aunt, Babu Nathoo Ram's wife, Bibiji, and factory owners, such as Ganpat. He is beaten for trifling faults, overworked in the mills that Britishers own, disturbed by public riots and wage cuts. Feudalism, capitalism, and imperialism are working against Munno, and he is an innocent, silent victim, as critics point out; he is "obedient" and "innocent," "happy and contented despite ill-treatment," and "a pawn in fate's hands." It is not destiny, it is society: Munno's emotional woes (humiliation at floor feeding, thoughts of death as relief) show that there is no revolution or Gandhian/Marxist awakening. The theme focuses on child suffering and marginalisation, and develops deeper in recent knowledge (2023-2024). One study portrays this as a 'suffering saga of the marginalised' as Munno fights for food, shelter, identity and sympathy and endures contempt, slaps, abuse and kicks from relatives and masters. The poor are considered "worthless" by the rich and the capitalist forces at the "center" exploit the "margin". Children are voiceless and without identity because corruption is

social, political, economic and cultural. Other readings of Anand's writing take this farther: for instance, in novels such as *Untouchable* (1935), Bakha and Munno are the broken children of caste and economic oppression. Children are subjected to “unhuman conditions” on a daily basis, with the “cash nexus” having a greater effect than caste alone. In his humanism, Anand requires the dignity of the tormented, and literature as improver art, without compromising aesthetic principles. Overall, the literature come together on Anand’s Marxist-influenced yet humanist lens: Coolie charges invisible “schemes” of exploitation (e.g., factory hazards, minimal wages, familial cruelty) that silently erode innocence. Though there are detractors who say that sometimes Anand is too much on the ‘telling side,’ most have found his empathetic realism, psychological insight and timeless application, in this instance that child labour still exists in India despite laws, highly refreshing and reminiscent of Munnoo. While there is yet no comparative analysis with other global narratives about children and work, or with a postcolonial perspective, the collection of writings does illustrate the work of the storyteller, Anand, as a teller of tales of stolen childhoods, for social justice.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research method of literary approach in which the main research instrument is documentary analysis which is used in the study of documentary text in *Coolie* (1936) by Mulk Raj Anand. The study examines regular exploitation of child labour as disempowers the childhood innocence in invisible socio-economic systems like poverty, feudalism, capitalism and colonial system, as portrayed by Anand. The methodology is informational and critical; the close reading and the application of the appropriate theory reveals “silent schemes” within the narrative.

1. Research Design

The design of the study is **descriptive – analytical and interpretive**. It involves:

- ☐ **Primary Source Analysis:** In-Detailed examination of *Coolie* as the core text, accompanied by citations to Anand’s other works like *Untouchable* (1935) for reasonable insights into marginalized childhood.
- ☐ **Secondary Source Analysis:** Review of existing critical literature, scholarly articles, and books on Anand’s humanism, social realism, and portrayal of exploitation.
- ☐ **Theoretical Framework:** The analysis is based in:
 - o Social Realism — to emphasize Anand's realistic portrayal of the lives of the downtrodden.
 - o Marxist Literary Criticism — to explore group struggle, capitalist exploitation and the commodification of child labour (e.g., Munno as a one use labour unit in factories and as a rickshaw puller).
 - o Humanistic Approach — inspired by Anand's philosophy, focusing on psychological effects on the protagonist Munno, empathy and dignity.
 - o Elements of Postcolonial Criticism — to understand the chemistry of British colonialism; Indian old-fashioned system and the developing industrialization in pre-Independent India.

The multi-theoretical lens provides a subtle understanding of the way in which the economic forces and social attitudes work behind the scenes to deprive children of innocence.

2. Data Collection

- ☐ **Primary Data:** The full text of *Coolie* (Penguin or standard). Highlighted events include Munno's life in the village, as a domestic servant in Sham Nagar, working in the pickle factory at Daulatpur, in the cotton mill in Bombay and as a rickshaw puller in Simla.
- ☐ **Secondary Data:** Scholarly books, journal articles and critical essays on Anand's works, the theme of child labour and social protest literature. Sources include analyses that point to poverty, suffering, discrimination and early death of childhood.
- ☐ **Contextual Materials:** Historical and socio-economic background on child labour in colonist and modern India; background of the story of Anand and his influences, such as Marxism, Bloomsbury Group, and Indian independence movement.

No empirical surveys or fieldwork are involved, as the study is purely literary and text based.

3. Research Tools and Techniques

- ☐ **Close Textual Reading:** Analysis of the use of narrative techniques, character development (particularly Munno's psychological change from a child to an adult, and the loss of his innocence), dialogue, symbolism (hunger, disease, change of location from village to city, exploitation imagery), etc.
- ☐ **Thematic Analysis:** Identification and categorisation of recurring themes as follows:

- o Shattered innocence (Munnoo's transition from playful village boy to exploited laborer).
- o Silent schemes of exploitation (low wages, physical abuse, dangerous work, family abuse, and social apathy).
- o Trauma and alienation depicted psychologically.
- ☐ **Comparative Method:** Short comparisons with actual children's work problems or other characters in the literature; to emphasize the novel's timelessness.
- ☐ **Critical Discourse Analysis Elements:** To identify the implicit ways in which power relations (class, caste, gender, colonial) are naturalised in the text, the following elements of Critical Discourse Analysis are employed.

4. Procedure/Steps of Analysis

- ☐ **Reading and Annotation:** Multiple readings of *Coolie* with interpretation on passages associated to child labor, innocence, and exploitation.
- ☐ **Identification of Key Instances:** Registering specific episodes (e.g., beatings by Bibiji, overwork in the factory, contracting tuberculosis) that illustrate "silent schemes."
- ☐ **Application of Theory:** Interpreting these instances through Marxist and humanistic lenses to show systemic rather than individual causes.
- ☐ **Synthesis with Literature Review:** Integrating findings with existing criticism while identifying gaps (e.g., limited focus on psychological dimensions of lost innocence).
- ☐ **Conclusion and Implications:** Drawing insights on Anand's reformist intent and the continued importance of the theme in contemporary India.

5. Scope and Limitations

- ☐ **Scope:** The scope of the document is mostly limited to *Coolie* with judicious reference to Anand's other writings at the time and socio-historical background. There is still a focus on the storybook version; the arithmetic and policy analysis of child labour are not the focus.
- ☐ **Limitations:** Being a text-based study, it does not have primary data from child laborers. Interpretations are somewhat subjective, but based on evidence from the text and sound criticism. The study admits some propagandistic tone, as pointed out by some critics, in Anand.

6. Ethical Considerations

From a literary point of view, there are no ethical concerns. This research, however, is respectful of the theme of child exploitation as there is no melodrama, and is human centric; advocating for dignity and social justice, by Anand. This methodology would help research the topic in a systematic way while incorporating literary aesthetics with socio-critical investigation and discover the "shattering of innocence" in child labour which has remained a silent and universal phenomenon in the Indian society of the overseas Indians in Mulk Raj Anand's work through an evidence-based approach. This method can be followed deeper psychologically and/or comparatively, if desired.

Findings

Close textual reading and analysis of *Coolie* (1936) by Mulk Raj Anand, combined with a thematic exploration and the application of a Marxist, social realist and humanist approach, highlight a number of key insights into the theme of shattered innocence and the hidden agendas of child labour.

1. Systematic Shattering of Childhood Innocence

Munno, the 14-year-old protagonist, starts out as an energetic, playful village boy with plenty of energy, and dreams. But soon, poverty and rejection from home and society make him a hasty grown man fighting for his life. His innocence is undermined as he is exploited in successive settings: as a domestic servant in Sham Nagar, a factory labourer in Daulatapur, a mill worker in Bombay and rickshaw puller in Simla. Significant scenes show how he is deprived of basic pleasures such as playing, learning and loving. Instead, he has to endure hunger and beatings, verbal abuse, and dangerous working conditions. Toward the end, as Munno dies of tuberculosis at the age of 15, childhood finally seems to be fully erased. The novel illustrates that this loss is not accidental but a direct outcome of invisible socio-economic forces. Munnoo's realization — "I am a Kshatriya and I am poor... No, caste does not matter. The babus are like the sahib logs, and all the servants look alike" — marks his painful awakening to class-grounded realities over traditional caste divisions.

2. Silent Schemes of Exploitation

Anand exposes "silent schemes" as rooted controlled mechanisms rather than overt troublemaking:

- ☐ Familial and Feudal Cruelty: Munno is driven out by his aunt and uncle after his parents' death due to landlord exploitation. In Babu Nathoo Ram's household, Bibiji's physical and emotional abuse treats him as subhuman.
- ☐ Capitalist and Industrial Exploitation: Factory owners like Ganpat subject child and adult workers to long hours, low wages, dangerous machinery, and sudden retrenchments. In Bombay mills, wage cuts and communal tensions further victimize the poor.
- ☐ Colonial and Urban Indifference: British-owned industries and the urban elite view coolies as disposable "beasts of burden." The cash nexus reduces human beings to mere labor force units.
- ☐ Societal Normalization: Children copy elders' prejudices biases losing their natural empathy and turning shrewd or vengeful. Society offers no protection, education, or sympathy; instead, it silently colludes through indifference and hypocrisy.

These schemes operate through poverty, debt, migration, and lack of legal safeguards, making child labor appear inevitable instead than criminal.

3. Psychological and Emotional Trauma

Munno is deeply alienated, humiliated (such as eating food on the ground) and suppressed rage. He is very passive and stoic, and experiences only fleeting moments of kindness from people such as Prabha Dayal, but never revolts on purpose, his thoughts often straying towards death as a means to escape the psychological damage. Anand's narration skillfully brings out the inner world of the child who is innocent but humanistic despite the cruelties he faced and creates a more poetic and poignant scene.

4. Broader Socio-Economic Indictment

While Munno visits various villages and cities in rural and urban India, Anand guides the reader through the intricacies of feudalism, capitalism, imperialism, colonization and the beginning of emerging industrialization in colonial India. Child labour is not the central theme of the novel, but rather it is a symptom of class conflict, of class exploitation without conscience. Munno is millions of faceless, voiceless victims of an unjust order, "coolies." The death of the main character is a very robust condemnation: society passes on young people, it does not support them.

That is reinforced by comparisons with today's realities in the findings, which show that despite the law prohibiting such practices, patterns of child exploitation have continued as a result of poverty, poor law enforcement and capitalistic pressures.

5. Anand's Humanistic and Reformist Vision

Anand doesn't preach but simply portrays what he sees realistically and gives depth to the characters to inspire empathy. He is a Marxist in his analysis of class exploitation, but humanistic in his attitude to Munno's dignity. The novel serves as a "problem novel" and an "epic of the poor," as it promotes social justice, dignity for the marginalised and calls for a change of system. It has emphasized the importance of conscience awakening literature while not compromising their artistic abilities.

Conclusion

The novel uncovers the normalized mechanisms of the "silent schemes" of exploitation: famine as a force that compels migration, the idea that an orphan is a burden or a source of cheap labor among relatives, bosses who make children as their slaves, and an economic doctrine that considers profit more important than human dignity. The early death of Munno from TB at the age of 15 is the most that could be paid for exploitation of youth – the whole ability. However, the acting of Anand is very humanistic, he brings his Munno's psychological depth, some moments of happiness to him and his innocence makes his suffering all the more touching. The novelist resists preachiness, with his attention to realistic detail and the empathy in his narration calling the reader to conscience. Anand's criticism is very pertinent even almost 90 years later. While India is now an independent country, its Constitution and child labour laws have failed to stop the continuation of the 'silent schemes' in varied forms due to the influence of the ongoing poverty, lax law enforcement, migration, and modern capitalist temptations. Today millions of children are losing their childhood innocence in unsafe occupations, as at Munno, in domestic service or in various forms of informal employment. The novel challenges uncomfortable truths: the attitudes of the majority of the population towards the poor have not altered in essence; and that the economic systems are still often more concerned with profit than with the rights and dignity of the poor. Finally, Coolie is not just a fictional gem but a plea for social reform, empathy, and justice. Anand requests the society to be kind, equal and truly concerned to stop the indifference and exploitation of the people. He is unceasing in his portrayal of the

condition of the oppressed, and in his sympathy and compassion he shows the power of literature to rouse man from his stupor. Through the continued presence of child labour and the unwelcome presence of maturity, Munnoo's story is a reminder to us that the real measure of development is not just economic growth but the opportunity for every child to enjoy the dignity, freedom and beauty of unspoiled childhood. The impact of Mulk Raj Anand's humanistic vision lives on, not just as a reflection of the issues facing society, but also as a promise and a hope for a fairer world. Anyone who reads this novel has a great obligation towards the book lovers and that is to overcome the organisations which ruin the lives of youth and bring about a society in which no child is forced to be a "coolie" before he or she reaches the age of living.

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