

Coolie from Marxist Perspective in Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*

Bina Adhikari*

Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze critically about Mulk Raj Anand's novel Coolie from Marxist perspective. Although Marxist theory of literature developed out of Marx's and Engel's general remarks concerning culture, art and literature in relation to their discussion about social economic and political questions as a literary theory. So Marxist criticism can be taken as the twentieth century phenomenon. Coolie is a great work of art and a number of themes and ideas have been woven into its texture. However, its central theme is the exploitation of the poor and the under-privileged by the forces of capitalism, industrialism and colonialism. This theme had been studied in depth with reference to Munoo, a poor, helpless orphan, who is denied his fundamental right to life and happiness, who is exploited and made to suffer, till he dies of consumption. Munoo is not the only victim of such exploitation, the novelist makes it quite clear, that such exploitation and denial of life and happiness is the lot of the poor everywhere in India, whether in villages or big cities like Daulatpur and Bombay. The lot of the poor is equally wretched and miserable whether in rural or urban India.

Keywords: Coolie, Marxist, Contemporary society, Revolutionary activities, Philosophy

Introduction

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, Karl Marx (1818-1883) in association with Frederic Engels (1820-1895) invented radical economic, social and political theories which spread with amazing effect throughout the world heralding the dawn of new era. The same theories, which are known as Marxism today, have been capable of influencing the whole world by furnishing strong ideological basis especially for the political movement. Marx was the most advanced economist, sociologist and supreme ideologist who formulated the most revolutionary and scientific theories in the time of the tremendous socio-economic changes resulted from the scientific discoveries and establishment of large-scale production industries. This theory explicitly disproves the bourgeois economic, social and political system establishing the philosophy of proletariat the lowest stratum of the society. They initiate the movement of the proletariat, i.e the movement of those who do not furnish material things but work, against those who possess abounding amount of wealth without

* Asst. Professor of English,
Patan Multiple Campus, Patandhoka, Lalitpur, Nepal
Email: binaadhikaridang@gmail.com

much labour. The emancipatory movement initiated by Marxism aims at abolishing the concentration of wealth in the hands of tiny minority by seizing political and legal power from the hands of bourgeois class. Thus, Marxism as a political theory advocates class struggle of the proletariat against the ruling class until the political power is seized and socialist emancipatory society is established.

Marx was an extraordinarily influential political thinker in the whole history. Marxist theories of social and historical development had lasting effect in all social, economic and political activities. Marxism brought a significant change in bourgeois ideology. It challenged the old viewpoint of philosophy itself. As Marx himself explicitly stated that "Philosophes have only interpreted the world in various ways the point is to change it" (Selden 24) and explained life and world from quite a different perspective. His theories that aim at intensifying the inevitable process of change brought considerable change in the concept of art and literature as well.

Marx and Engels, the exponents of Marxism, however, have not been found any systematic works entirely centered of art and literature. So, "the interpretation of the relevance of Marx's theories to literature is a matter of dispute not merely between Marxists and non-Marxists (sociologists, literary critics, philosophers) but has been and is still the subject of bitter controversy between those claiming to be Marxists" (Saxena 21). "We find diverse concepts about art and literature among the Marxist critics and theoreticians themselves. It treats literature as reflection of outside reality and sees it as the negative knowledge of the actual world whereas Marxists talk about revolutionizing the whole sphere of art and literature themselves and puts their all efforts on bringing newness is theatrical production, so they all agree that literature that can be properly understood within a larger frame work of social reality" (Forages 167).

The originality of Marxist literary theories, however, is disputed. Rene Wellek one of the most influential twentieth century critics, refuses to recognize any of the new trends in criticism as aboriginal. In his illuminating essay "The main trends of Twentieth Century Criticism" he observes that much of the criticism written today can't be accepted as entirely new. As he writes, "We are surrounded by survivals, leftovers, throwbacks to older stages in the history of criticism". In the same essay, he argues that, "The new trends of criticism, of course, have also roots in the past, are not without antecedents, and are not absolutely original" (Wellek 115).

Marxism before Russian Revolution in October 1917 was only a theory out of practice. The success of Russian Revolution made the revolutionaries feel necessity of revolutionizing every aspect of social life for continuation of their journey to socialism. They found that art and literature could play very influential role in developing human understanding and they could be used for spreading socialism. Therefore, politicians like Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky gradually began explaining literature from Marxist political

perspective (Eaglet 69). Literature was prescribed certain rules Wellek discusses about the further development of Marxist theories and states that even in soviet Russia literature was given certain autonomy till the "Socialist Realism" was imposed in about 1832, and the authors were demanded to reproduce reality objectively i.e. accurately. "Socialist Realism" not only prescribed the recipe but also asked the authors to be socialist realist, Literature was directly intervened in accordance with political interest. The writers were openly demanded to use their art for spreading socialism.

Soviet intellectual literary scenario was highly dominated by linguistic and literacy theory known as Russian Formalism immediately before and after October Revolution. As stated by David Lodge. "The focus on Russian formalist upon the medium rather than the message of literary artifacts brought it into conflict with the official ideology of post-Revolutionary Russia, and under Stalin it was suppressed. Most of its exponents were silenced, or forced into exile" (Lodge 15).

The Exploitation of the Under-Privileged

Anand's reputation rests chiefly upon his being a writer of sociological novels which deal with some of the most glaring evils in India life including untouchability and the exploitation of labour, Anand's pictures of poverty in India, and of the wretchedness and misery caused by poverty, are most vivid and most poignant. By vivid and forcefully describing the sufferings of the poor and the under-privileged, Anand appears before us as an uncompromising critic of the whole class of the perpetrators of injustice and cruelty. Every novel by Anand seems to have been designed by him to arouse the social conscience. There is hardly any ugly or sad aspect of Indian social life which has not been made the target of attack in the novels of Anand. Indeed, Anand may be regarded as the leading author in India of the novels of protest. His novels aim at denouncing social evils of all kinds, and it is this aspect of his fiction which has won him the esteem and admiration of the novel-readers in India. Anand's early novels (Untouchable, Coolie) are primarily the literature of protest; and Anand shows in this novel a deep sympathy for the working classes and for the unemployed people. Anger and compassion are the two feelings which are upper most in Anand as the author of these novels of protest against such social evils as the caste system and the poverty of the millions of people in India. The Marxist creed appealed to Anand because it offered an explanation of, and a solution to, the sufferings of the poor and the unemployed in India. The element of protest is inseparably connected with Anand's view of life.

The novel opens when Munoo is an orphan of only fourteen years of age. In the idyllic nature surroundings of his native village, he is quite happy with his playmates even though he is ill-treated by his aunt Gujri and his uncle Daya Ram. Even this simple rural community is not free from capitalistic exploitation. To be a victim of exploitation seems to be the terrible destiny of poor Munoo, for even at this early age. "He had heard of how

the landlord had seized his father's five acres of land because the interest on the mortgage covering the unpaid rent had not been forthcoming when his father had died a slow death of bitterness" (Anand 37).

Poverty compels Munoo to be apprenticed to life at the age of fourteen, and to be exploited even by his uncle. His expectations are extremely modest. His first encounter with urban world is in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, Sub Accountant, Imperial Bank, Sham Nagar. He makes a wrong beginning for he relieves himself near the wall of the house and is branded as a stupid, rustic loafer. The lady of the house and is branded as a stupid, rustic loafer. The lady of the house, Bibi Uttam Kaur, a snobbish and suspicious termagant, underfeeds, nags and humiliates him, and his uncle takes away the poor three rupees which he earns. All this, however fails to dampen his high spirits completely and it is finally this "living vitality", and "irrepressible impetuosity" which drive him away from the house as, one day while dancing a monkey-dance, he bites the daughter of Bibiji to make the whole thing more realistic. Before he runs away from sham Nagar, Munoo has learnt his first lessons in the harsh school of the modern urban world. He has realised finally his position in the world. He was to be a slave, a servant who should do the work, all the odd jobs, someone to be abused, even beaten. He was condemned by an iniquitous system always to remain small, abject and drab.

The Sham Nagar episode is only the first act in the tragic drama of exploitation. In Daulatpur while he is well treated by Prabha Dayal and his wife, he is ill-treated by Ganpat who frequently beats him and hurls abuses at his innocent head. When Prabha Dayal is ruined by the treachery of his partner and the factory is sold out, Munoo works as a coolie to make both ends meet. He finds that there is cut throat competition, and the corn traders exploit the situation. The coolies are paid extremely low wages, are made to carry excessively heavy loads and are abused, beaten and turned out at the least fault, and sometimes merely at the whim of the trader. They are treated as vagabonds and are entirely at the mercy of the forces of capitalism represented by the traders. Munoo is not alone; he is only one out of the countless victims of such exploitation.

The exploitation is presented on a much larger and more terrible scale in the Bombay phase of Munoo's life. Here big industry and its owners are the forces of exploitation. Munoo takes up service in Sir George White's Cotton Mill and is exposed to the full force of industrial and colonial exploitation. "The factory is a huge octopus with its numerous tentacles clutching the labourer in its deadly grasp slowly, paralysing and poisoning him" (Naik, 34). The ill-paid, ill-housed, under nourished and bullied labourer is broken, both in body and mind, as Munoo finds his friend Hari is, though his own youthful vitality saves him from this ultimate fate.

The fifth and final act of Munoo's tragedy commences when Mrs Main warning, whose car knocks him down, takes him to Simla, as she wants a servant, his own wishes

in the matter being, of course, of no consequence, she makes him her boy servant, her rickshaw puller and there are hints that he is exploited sexually also, "deep rooted feeling of inferiority! "to the superior people who! "lived in bungalows and wore! "Angrezi clothes "(Anand 243).

Capitalism, colonialism and industrialism are not the only forces which exploit Munoo and his like, communalism too lends a hand. A worker's strike is easily broken by casual rumours of communal disturbances which divert the wrath of the labourers from the mill to the religious factions among themselves. The fires of communal hatred are further fanned by politicians, who have their own axe to grind. In the whole process, the exploited labourer loses his job, his livelihood and sometimes even his life. Here Anand exposes and describes the hard-heartedness, the greed, the lachery, the arrogance, the hypocrisy, the selfishness, and the meanness of all those agents of cruelty and exploitation. Munoo struggles for the improvement of his life and even for survival but poverty and over work kill him, and Munoo is not the only victim, Ratan, Hari, Lakshmi, and numerous others too are shown as struggling for better living conditions and even for survival, but the fate of most of them would be the same as that of Munoo.

Depiction of the Working Class

Mulk Raj Anand was never a throughout-going or doctrinaire Marxist, even though he was greatly influenced by Marxist ideas. The most appropriate work to describe his character and his philosophy as conveyed to us through his novel is "humanism". It is true that Anand did fall under the spell of the Marxist doctrine but he never joined the main stream of Marxism or Communism. He had believed that the communists were the only people: who were devoted with all sincerity and single-mindedness to the upliftment of the under-privileged and the social outcasts; but at the same time he made it clear that he was not a "fellow traveler" in the technical sense. This thinking was undeniably conditioned by Marxist theories, but he never became a wholly committed Marxist, and he does not appear in that high in his novels either. We have to accept fully and without any reservations his claim that he had developed a love for human beings as such, even in their weaknesses, frustrations, and failures, and further that he had developed a sense of solidarity, harmony, and friendship with other people. Whatever critics might say to this point, we must refuse to dub Anand as a communist or Marxist, and we must insist on calling him a humanist, meaning by this term a champion and an advocate of the rights of all human beings to a place under the sun. In his other novels, he appears as a champion of the poor, the destitute, the under privileged, and the exploited classes of Indian society.

Traditional Marxist theory of literature claims that literature reflects reality outside it. It is a socio-historical phenomenon: however, they do not have one to one correspondences. Literature does not make mechanic representation. Now let's examine Colie. The word "Coolie" means a carrier of loads, or one who transports a load from one place to another on

his head, or on his back, or even on a bicycle, or on a cart. Thus we have coolies on railway stations, we have coolies who pull rickshaws; we have coolies in market-place. There are thousands and thousands of such persons in India, but the word "coolie" does not carry any respectability with it. Actually there is nothing to degrade a human being in the work he does in any of these capacities provided he is paid adequately for his labour. The word "coolie" has become a term of contempt only because the man who does a coolie's work is not paid adequately and because too many people were available in the past to do this kind of work. In our own times, those persons, who do this kind of work, not only get adequate payment for their pains but show an undisguised contempt for their employers. Munoo, the protagonist in this novel, becomes a coolie in Daulatpur when Prabha is reduced to bankruptcy. Munoo then continues in that role for some time even after Prabha has left Daulatpur for good. The term "coolie" applies to Munoo in Daulatpur and later in Simla where he becomes a rickshaw-puller. But even when he is working as a domestic servant in Sham Nagar, he is a kind of coolie because his work there too is endless drudgery and the pay is very small.

Whether there were more rich or more poor people, there seemed to be only two kinds of people in the world. "Caste did not matter, I am a Kshatriya and I am poor, and varma, a Brahmin is a servant boy, a menial, because he is poor, no, caste does not matter" (Anand 69). Munoo's touching expression is an evidence of what matters is economic condition, not caste. Mulk Raj Anand's sympathy for the poor, working class of people appears first in this novel when Munoo's plight as a domestic servant in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram in Sham Nagar is described. Munoo here has not only to do all the work like a slave, but is also rebuked, reprimanded, scolded, and even abused most of the time by Bibiji. Then one day he receives a severe beating from Babu Nathoo Ram himself because of an indiscretion which he has committed. We next find Munoo in Daulatpur where he begins working in a pickle and Jam factory. Although Munoo here receives all the kindness and affection of one of the owners of the factory, he is treated very badly by the other owner whose name is Ganpat. Besides, the factory itself is a dark and unwholesome den where the atmosphere is the unhealthiest and depressing. A few other servants working in the same factory are as happy as Munoo, chiefly because of the ill-treatment which they receive from Ganpat. Thus one of the employers as also the place of work causes all the misery for the workmen here. After Prabha is reduced to bankruptcy, Munoo and Tulsi become coolies in the real sense of the word. Now, the manner in which the plight of the large number of coolies, who are available in the Grain Market and the Vegetable Market of Daulatpur, has been described in the novel shows that author's deep sympathy for them. There is a big rush for jobs every morning in these markets. The coolies try to outbid one another by asking for the lowest possible wages for the work, and the employers shun them and rebuke them for the overcrowding which they have caused. One of the traders, for instance, says to them: "Get back, get back. None of you will get a job if you don't get back" (Anand, 191).

Similar conditions prevail in the Vegetable Market. Here Munoo, sees swarms of coolies who, urged by the fear of having to go without food, rush at the shops, pushing, pulling, and struggling to attract the attention of the traders or the customers who might hire them. Munoo, seeing this competition among the coolies, wanders away into the side-streets and into the by-lanes to be hired by some elderly lady going towards the Vegetable Market and wanting to hire a coolie in advance. The same state of affairs prevails at the railway station where coolies are clamouring for passengers who might need them to carry their luggage.

The plight of the coolies in Bombay is very much the same Munoo had heard of Bombay as a city of glamour and grandeur. But he is amazed to find that even here thousands of coolies have to sleep on the pavements of the city because they have no homes. The conditions of life for the mill workers here are no better and wages are low. No living accommodation is provided by the management of the mills, and the workers have to find for themselves in this respect. Whatever accommodation in roadside huts or in the city lawns is available, is sadly inadequate so that the workmen and their wives and children find themselves cramped in dark corners. The streets in which these chawls are situated are full of urine and dung. There are, for instance, only seven latrines for two hundred men in one such locality. The working hours are long, and the newcomers are exposed to injury by the machines at which they have never before worked. The work men of the Sir George White Cotton Mill, where Munoo gets a job through Hari, are at the mercy of the head foreman, and are exploited not only by him but by the pathan gate-keeper. There is a Sikh Shopkeeper who does not mind selling grocery to the workers on credit provided they pay him a high rate of interest on the loans. A worker by the name of Ratan is dismissed arbitrarily by the head foreman and, although he contacts the trade union of which he is a member, he obtains no redress.

Now here in this novel does Anand preach the Marxist doctrine of economic equality, and nowhere does he preach violence as the means to attain economic equality or economic and social justice: Not even by implication does he preach economic equality or the use of violence. All that he seems to be saying in this novel is that the workers should not be exploited or victimized but should be paid adequately so that they can live like human beings, with a certain dignity and in some comfort. He does not identify himself either with Onkar Nath or with Sauda. He simply states the case of each dispassionately, leaving us to form our own view, and our own view is that Anand's humanitarian sympathies have prompted him to depict the existing state of affairs in India and thus to rouse the conscience of the intelligentsia, of the politicians, and of the capitalists. He is surely a committed humanist but not a committed Marxist (or Communist).

Social Criticism

Coolie is a picaresque novel. In other words, it is a novel of social criticism. In this novel Anand has given a comprehensive view of the society of the time. He has concentrated at the seamy side of life, and has shown the misery, wretchedness and degradation of the poor. The poor are hungry and sick, weak and helpless at all places. They have been reduced to this state by the combined forces of capitalism, colonialism, industrialism and communalism. To delete the complete his social criticism, Anand has even brought in a Hindu-Muslim riot, and has added the Simla episode as an indictment of the Anglo-Indian Community (Berry 97).

However, the analysis of Coolie will involve with reference to the social and economic realities that are traced artistically in the novel. It refers to the Marxist Theory of Literature and examines the text from that perspective. The Marxist philosophy claims that it is man's social being that determines his consciousness, and it is that consciousness which determines of his literary works. Further, it also claims that art and literature are part of the super structure and it should serve the base on which it rests. Similarly, the orthodox Marxist theory of art insists that the primary function of art is to serve the working class people representing their feelings, problems and heightening the class struggle. Although, we find views regarding the creation and function of art and literature among the Marxist literary theoreticians themselves.

Hungarian Marxist philosopher and literary critic, acknowledges the realist view about literature and strongly argues that literature directly corresponds to prevailing social situation and presents, "a true more complete, more vivid and more dynamic reflection of reality (Selden 29). He clearly states that this reflection of reality is not photographic. So the picture presented in literature is not mechanic, therefore, not exactly alike to the real situation. It is only the knowledge of reality. In his brilliant critical work, the meaning of Contemporary Realism (1950) he denounces the modernist trend in art and literature. Attacking modernist innovators such as Joyce, Kafka, Backett, he vigorously argues that the duty of an artist is not only to mirror the surface appearance. For him, the mimetic must be accompanied by the didactic function.

A work of art as Marxist literary criticism suggests, should be studied keeping the contemporary social situation and the biography of the author on the focal point. Similarly, it is the duty of a critic to examine how the author's real experiences are merged in his literary works. It straight forwardly claims that the literary interpretations remain incomplete if the social aspects which strongly influence the author's consciousness are ignored (Asnami 14). At the same time such exploration devoted of social realities neither helps to perceive the author's intension nor his/ her achievement can be judged appropriately.

Anand is a pioneer in the field what is known as the sociological novel (Sinha 49). His novels are an indicament of the social evils which have still not been removed from

Indian society. *Coolie* is a novel of protest. Here, Anand is protesting against the capitalist exploitation of the poor and the underprivileged people in the country. It shows social reality in the novel. Thus, Marxist approach closely applies in *Coolie*, which examines comparing the social and economic situation of the time. Anand, believing himself to be one of the millions of human beings who had inherited this terrible and beautiful world of the twentieth century, gradually began to merge himself with the following vibrant core of humanity, and to feel its grief to the very marrow of his bones. Because of his profound interest in human welfare, Anand almost became a Marxist in his beliefs though he did not actually join the main stream of communism. He fully accepted the Marxist view that it was not the consciousness of men, which determined their existence but that it was the social existence of men, which determined their consciousness. We can see the capital punishment to poor and orphan boy Munoo.

Coolie is a great epic of misery. In this novel Anand deals with the misery and wretchedness of the poor and his struggle for a better life. This novel brings us into contact with many segments of Indian society. So that the general effect is panoramic. Just as there was plenty of evil in *Untouchable* though there was some goodness in it too. The evil in this novel manifests itself in the forms of selfishness, greed and cruelty though the root of the evil is poverty Munoo's misfortune in Bombay constitutes perhaps the most important section of the novel, with its accounts of life on the pavements or in the slums, and its pictures of the prostitute's quarters, its labour troubles, its communal disturbances and other, ugly aspects. Munoo is the coolie after whom the novel has been named.

Marxist approach to the study of literature is one of the important approaches as it emphasizes the literature relevance to the society. Literature is the expression of human feeling, which is largely shaped by the socio economic situation in the society. Therefore, in order to explore the inner meaning of literary work, it should be put into the social context and examined from various angles.

In this novel, Anand had made a comprehensive study of various kinds of human relationships, and has contributed to our understanding of man, the whole man Anand is the creator of the novel of human centrality, he has imparted realism to the Indian novel in English, and introduced a whole set of new characters. As Srinivasa Iyengar puts it, "Anand is often undistinguished and seems to be too much in hurry, but the vitality of his creation, the variegated richness of his creations, the variegated richness of his total comprehension and the purposive energy, of his narrative, carry all before them" (Iyengar 22).

Conclusion

Anand has given a faithful picture of the exploitation of the underprivileged and the misery which was the lot of the poor in pre independence India and which continues to do their heels even after independence. The treatment is elaborate, the subject has been studied from various angles and in various societies and the temptation to lay on the colours too thick has, on the whole, been avoided.

Anand's novels portray the real life situation of the society he lived. Marxist approach that emphasizes the sociological aspect of a work of art can be very much appropriate to the proper understanding of his works. This paper aims to present the systematic of *Coolie*, one of the widely read Anand's novels. Such study may encourage the later researchers to explore Anand's work from the Marxist sociological perspective which is very much necessary for coming to the right conclusion, especially of Anand's novels. It also may provide some impulse against the bourgeois attempts to uproot literature from society and lead it to humble position as the study emphasizes the fact that literature should not entertain but educate the society too, literature which is the expression of human experience, is neither created in vacuum nor received so, therefore it cannot be kept apart from the society. It also may add some impulse to the Marxist theoretician's belief that the study of the work of art especially the novels isolating the social realities cannot give true meaning to them.

Works Cited

- Anand, Mulk Raj. *Coolie*, Arnold Publishers, 1981.
- Asnani, Sham M. *Critical Response to Indian English Fiction*. Mittal Publications, 1985.
- Berry, Margaret, *Mulk Raj Anand: The Man and the Novelist*. Amsterdam Oriental Press. 1971.
- David Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, Pearson Longman, 2nd Ed., 2007.
- Anand, Mulk Raj. "The Early Struggle of a Novelist", *The Journal of Common Wealth Literature*. VIIA, 1972, pp. 47-56.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction, London: Long Man 1983*. "Capitalism Modernism and Post Modernism". *Modern Criticism and Theory*. Ed. David Lodge. Longman, 1992.
- Forgacs, David, "*Marxist Literary Theories*", *Modern Literary Theory*. Ed. Ann Jefferson and David Robey. Bastford Ltd., 1986.
- Iyengar, K.R.S. *Indian Writing in English*. Sterling Publishers, 1984, pp. 331-335.
- Saxena, R.C. *Labour Problems and Social Welfare*. Educational Publishers, 1952, pp. 1-800.
- Selden, Ramon *A Reader's Guide to Modern Literary Theory*, 2nd ed. 1986.
- Sinha, Krishana Nadan, *Mulk Raj Anand*, Kalyani Publishers, 1995.
- Wellek, R. *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism*. Vikas Publishers, 1970.