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Theme of Picaro in Selected Novels of Charles Dicken's and Mulkraj Anand

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Abstract

This paper examines the theme of the picaro in selected novels of Charles Dickens and Mulk Raj Anand, exploring how both authors employ the picaresque tradition to critique the social, moral, and institutional failures of their respective societies. Dickens's Oliver Twist and David Copperfield depict wandering child protagonists whose episodic journeys reveal the brutality of Victorian England its workhouses, child labor, class hierarchy, and criminal underworld. In contrast, Anand's Untouchable and Coolie reframe the picaresque within the Indian colonial context, using marginalized child protagonists such as Bakha and Munoo to expose caste oppression, economic exploitation, and colonial injustices. While Dickens modifies the classical picaro by portraying morally innocent heroes who resist corruption, Anand transforms the picaro into the oppressed victim whose suffering reveals systemic social evils. Through episodic structures, mobility, satire, and encounters across diverse social spaces, both authors use the picaresque mode as a powerful literary tool for social criticism. This comparative study argues that the picaro becomes not merely a wanderer but a lens through which

the moral fabric of society is illuminated, exposing universal patterns of injustice across cultures.

Key Words

Social Realism, poverty, Dickens, Economic.

Introduction

History of Victorian literature is replete with so many examples that prove that the theme of the picaresque custom occupies an essential segment which is often described in Victorian fiction, particularly in the narrative technique of Charles Dickens. When we turn the pages of history of English literature, we find that, The concept of picaresque writings developed from the tradition that was rooted in the Spanish novel Lazarillo de Tormes (1554). It was later brought in English literature mainly through works of Henry Fielding's Tom Jones (1749) and Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders (1722), presents the life of a marginalized protagonist whose journey exposes the moral contradictions and systemic injustices of society. This paper will focus on the

themes of picares in selected novels of Charles Dickens and Mulkraj Anand. The picaresque novel generally follows a picaresque, a roguish but attractive stranger who narrates his episodic adventures through a corrupt society. Dickens novels revolve around particularly within a contrasting moral framework, his novels frequently discuss picaresque conventions with a wandering protagonist, episodic structure, encounters with eccentric characters, which exposes both social injustice with movement through highly regarded and criminal spaces. Dickens accepts the picaresque mode to represent Victorian concerns. Treatment of children, institutional brutality, urbanization and class mobility was his main weapons on which he concentrated as novelist. He also focused on transforming the traditional rogue hero into an innocent or morally striving wanderer.

This paper examines how the theme of the picaresque is developed in two major works Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1837–39), *David Copperfield* (1849–50), and Mulkraj Anand *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936). Although these novels differ in plot, tone and structure but they share a familiar narrative dependence on picaresque movement as a picaresque protagonist whose characters expose the downfall of Victorian society. Dickens uses the picaresque technique to develop social and moral responsibility of Victorian society.

Oliver Twist is the Dickens most remarkable novel that largely deals with a traditional picaresque plot. When we plunge into Oliver's life we see that he is pushed into a unreceptive world that forces him to move from one place to another: the workhouse, the undertaker's institution, the streets of London, the thieves' den and the countryside. Each environment developed new dimensions in his characters. Each and every incident which Oliver faced exposes the extreme societal cruelty and reality of the Victorian society. As Robert L. Patten argues, "Dickens employs the picaresque structure not to glorify the rogue but to display the systemic corruption surrounding the vulnerable child" (Patten 112). Oliver does not choose exploration rather than he is pushed into it by the failures of institutions intended to protect him.

Oliver is morally unpolluted and inactive to fit the picaresque style, Dickens surrounds the novel with characters who are extremely involved basically known as genuine picaresques. The Artful Dodger highlights the urban model of London's criminal underworld. He throws light on the picaresque that how they can be resourceful survival in the world of criminality. Fagin, is a resourceful criminal who trains the children to live by stealing, dishonesty and other criminal activities. These criminal surroundings develop a thematic freedom where the picaresque merges with social reality.

Oliver Twist is Dickens's striking character that is innocent into the world of criminal. Dickens has observed the life of criminal and avoids Oliver to become picaresque. Although he is forced to live with the surroundings of rogues but still Oliver remains every time innocent. Critics such as Philip Horne argue that Dickens "inverts the picaresque by giving us a hero who resists his environment rather than adapting to it" (Horne 33). Oliver's refusal to indulge into the world of criminality exposes the cruelty and the situation that pushes other children into crime.

Dickens also exposes the administrative failures, the workhouse cruelty, the exploitation of the officials and also the behavior of the elite class people. According to Dickens picaresque character in nineteenth century novels are institutional that criticize the social structures, Dickens uses the picaresque journey as an investigative tool to critique nineteenth-century social structures. The theme of picaresque also finds its place in his another novel *David Copperfield*.

David Copperfield also represents the life of wanderers that merges the character of picaresque. The novel finally traces David's fate and hard work that he becomes successful writer and gentleman. David's life journey from one street of London to another makes his striking character to be considered as picaresque. His escape from Murdstone and Grinby's factory, living with different guardians and his encounters with different strange figures like, Peggotty, Mr. Micawber, Steerforth, Uriah Heep—creates theme of picaresque novels. According to John Jordan, Dickens "deploys mobility to reveal the vulnerabilities of childhood labor and urban displacement" (Jordan 76). David wanders from one place to another serves as a weapon for Victorian

society to demonstrate how life of children was difficult in the world where they were not treated with respect. It indicated society's failures to give healthy and better life to the children. Treatment towards children was harsh, even the officers of the workhouse were not inclined to serve their duty to protect freedom of childhood.

In the way to representation of picaresque character in Indian context Mulkraj Anand, is not a conventional picaresque novelist. He adopts fundamental elements of the picaresque through the incident of its young protagonist, Bakha. Anand's representation of the picaresque form into an Indian sociopolitical context highlights an important fictitious innovation. The picaresque tradition allowed him to evaluate the caste structure through a character whose societal position absolutely matches the picaresque's function to reveal corruption and hypocrisy. Bakha's life journey of a single day depicts a powerful picaresque structure of children during colonial rule. It reveals the layers of caste violence, religious exploitation, colonial tensions, and social hypocrisy. His marginal position, wanderings, innocence, and conflict with multiple social institutions support him with the classical picaresque. Through the character of Bakha, Anand establishes the picaresque form to express the Indian subaltern understanding. He focus on transforming a European narrative mode into a vehicle for anticolonial and anti-caste social critique.

Alastair Niven opines that Bakha's marginality "gives the novel its moral center, for he becomes the lens through which caste becomes visible in all its cruelty" (Niven 63). Bakha's perception allows the reader to witness systemic oppression with a clarity unfiltered by privilege or power.

Anand's has depicted picaresque fiction is its episodic structure. The protagonist in this form of fiction moves from one place to another. Each episode exposes a new dimension of social reality. Untouchable unfolds entirely over a single day, but within this limited timeframe, Anand deploys a series of different episodes that mirror the picaresque pattern. Bakha walking up in the outcaste colony where is is humiliated by hindu caste on the street. The temple incident involving Sohini, his is visit to the British barracks, his conversation with the poet Iqbal Nath Sarshar and the most important Gandhi jee speech about the flood system. All these episodes helped in the development of episodic picaresque in untouchable.

In each episode Bakha is taught about new social institutions—religion, caste, colonialism, reform movements, and modern technology. Each episode mirrors the structure of classical picaresque novels where the roaming of the hero exposes society's corruption. Anand's breaks the narrative into separate encounters, to emphasizes that caste oppression is not isolated but structural, appearing in every sphere of life. There is not a single villain who Bakha but the entire machinery of society tries to humiliates him.

As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar notes, Anand's episodic method "creates a panoramic vision of social life through the eyes of a single outcaste boy" (Iyengar 241). Like the picaresque of European tradition, Bakha becomes the wandering witness whose journey reveals the entire moral fabric of society. Satire also played important role in is a central strategy of the picaresque novel. The picaresque innocently exposes the moral failings, hypocrisy, and contradictions of the social order simply by existing in it. Bakha's encounters with different intuitions function as sharp critiques of the caste system and its oppressive structures.

The temple incident significantly also demonstrates religious picaresque. Bakha's sister, Sohini is molested by the priest Pandit Kali Nath, later when this fact is revealed he then accuses her of "polluting" him and the temple. This highlights the absurdity and abuse implanted in caste and religious authority. Anand satirizes this hypocrisy by screening how ritual purity becomes a tool for exploitation. Bakha, is helpless and stands at the temple gate and he couldn't steps I the temple. He becomes the silent observer through whom the reader perceives the ugly misuse of religion.

When Bakha's accidentally came into contact with an upper-caste man he faced violent humiliation: "Keep to your caste, you dog!" the man shouts (Anand 44). This incident exposes the absurd brutality of caste rules, particularly bearing in mind that Bakha's physical touch is considered "polluting," while verbal and physical abuse from upper castes is normalized. Bakha's love for the British soldiers is another humorous

element. Though colonial rule itself is exploitative, the British appear cleaner, kinder, and more egalitarian than caste Hindus. This sarcastic dissimilarity exposes the failures of Indian social structures. Thus, through satire, Anand uses Bakha as a picaresque hero who exposes the hypocrisy of every social institution he encounters in a single day. Anand's portrayal of the picaresque hero as innocent, susceptible, and morally sympathetic. Bakha fits in all these forms.

Bakha's innocence makes him an ideal lens through which the cruelty of caste society becomes visible. He never responds with violence, nor does he harbor resentment toward those who dehumanize him. His longing for dignity, symbolized through his fascination with British clothing and cleanliness, shows a desire for self-worth rather than rebellion. Bakha's struggles internally. He struggles with shame, fear, fatigue, and longing for respect, all of which contribute to his identity as a modern picaresque hero. Anand writes: "He was tired, very tired, but it was the tiredness of the soul more than the flesh" (Anand 78). This introspection distinguishes Bakha from the traditional picaresque hero and aligns him with twentieth-century literary realism.

Picaresque novels frequently end without clear resolution. The picaresque hero hardly ever rises considerably in status; as a substitute, the ending usually offers uncertainty and the suggestion of continual wandering. Gandhi appears at the end of the novel as a figure promising reform. His message gives Bakha hope but no immediate change. The technological solution proposed by the poet Sarshar—the flush toilet—symbolizes modern reform. Yet it remains an idea rather than a reality. The novel closes with Bakha contemplating these possibilities: "A way seems to open before him" (Anand 158). This uncertainty reinforces the picaresque nature of the novel: the hero's journey continues, in progress, mirroring the slow pace of social change.

The picaresque tradition, also revolves around Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* (1936). It offers one of the most powerful picaresque narratives in modern Indian literature. Through the life and suffering of Munoo, the young protagonist, through life and suffering of Munno, Anand develops distinctly Indian picaresque hero whose wanderings from place to place throws light on the atrocity of colonial capitalism, caste domination, child labor, and structural poverty. I think Munoo does not influence society for personal gain; instead, he becomes example of the vulnerable child in an exploitative world. This paper analyzes the theme of the picaresque hero in *Coolie*.

Munoo is a typical Indian picaresque hero because he moves regularly through different social worlds. All the social world of Munno depicts the oppressive structures that describe colonial India. His journey is not self-determined. It is forced by economic worry. It makes *Coolie* mixture of the picaresque and the social-realist novel.

Munoo's picaresque journey begins from his village, when he is forced to leave his due to poverty. Munoo is forced by circumstance that he migrates to urban area for livelihood. When he is employed in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram it exposes the hierarchies of division, caste, and domestic violence. Anand's depiction of Munoo's misery at the hands of the Babu's wife and his continuous fear of punishment completely reflects the position of Munoo as a picaresque hero. As Narasimhaiah argues, Anand's picaresque hero "cannot even articulate rebellion; he is shaped entirely by forces beyond his control" (Narasimhaiah 202). This early episode establishes picaresque journey of Munoo's from one social setting to another, adds a new stage of the journey in the picaresque.

Coolie is structured in such a way that closely resembles the tradition of picaresque novel. The novel talks about the sequence of episodes, each time Munno meets with new employers, environments, and faces different forms of exploitation. Munoo's suffering at Nathoo Ram family reveals the degradation of child labor and the absence of sympathy for the poor and depressed. He is exploited as a servant, responsible for even minor mistakes. He is denied human dignity as being servant. Through these experiences, Anand highlights the cruelty of middle-class shaped by colonial modernity.

When Munoo migrated from Nathoo Ram family to Daulatpur, he enters into the world of industrial working class. Munoo was introduced by Daya Ram and the pickle factory to the world of urban exploitation. His employment into the textile mill depicts the growing capitalist economy of colonial India. The factory becomes a symbol of misery, pain and suffering for the laborers like Munno. The character of Munoo shows how colonial industry treats the picaresque hero. Munoo's service as a rickshaw-puller and servant in Simla describes

the colonial privileged society who becomes the culprit of creating picaro like character Munoo. Throughout the novel Munoo remains a picturesque object, he is given importance till when he is capable doing work. he become escape goat of capitalist who lacks humanity and responsible for creating wonderers during colonial rule. His physical collapse in Simla marks with the conclusion of systemic oppression. These episodic movements of Munoo mirrors the picaresque path and each path disclosing new layers of social hypocrisy.

Conclusion

Anand subverts the picaresque tradition to highlight the systemic nature of suffering in colonial India. As Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, "Anand transforms the picaro from rogue into victim, thereby intensifying the moral force of the narrative" (Mukherjee 146. Munoo dies of tuberculosis, symbolically consumed by the very forces he struggles against. Anands becomes sentimental with picaro and argues that, The picaro's doesn't conclude with escape or salvation but with a bleak sympathy from the oppressed. His death in Mrs. Mainwaring's house illustrates that there can't be charity ad they can never overcome structural injustice.

Mulk Raj Anand's Coolie one of the fine novel that presents the most poignant adaptations of the picaresque mode in Indian literature. Through Munoo's episodic wanderings, Anand exposes the nexus between oppressions of caste, class, colonialism, and industrial capitalism. Munoo truely fits the structural characteristics of the picaro, Anand reshapes the tradition by transforming the picaro into a helpless, innocent child whose suffering highlights the moral collapse of society. finally Anand's achievement lies in merging the picaresque form with Indian realities to produce a narrative that is both artistically compelling and socially transformative.

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