

## Exploitation of children as depicted in the novels of Charles Dickens, Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy

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### Abstract

Literary works reflect the picture of society in its various forms. Children form an integral part of society and literature provides a vivid portrayal of exploitation of children. They suffer from physical, psychological, social, emotional, sexual and economic exploitation which distort their innocence and happiness. In the works of Dickens, Anand and Roy, we get the picture of the various forms of exploitation of children throughout the world.

**Keywords:** exploitation, society, children

### Introduction

Art is a reflection of life. Art presents various shades of characters and events that one may come across in life. Literature, being a form of art portrays life. Throughout the ages, literature in its variegated form has spoken of several social, political, economic, physical and psychological issues. Issues related to exploitation in the aforesaid spheres have also found their place in literary works.

Exploitation refers to the act of treating people unfairly in order to benefit from their efforts or labour. It means utilisation of another person or group for selfish purposes. Exploitation of children thus refers to unfair treatment meted out to children for any benefit. Exploitation of children includes using children for servitude through physical labour or personal, sexual gratification. Children also suffer from psychological exploitation, when they have to pass through traumatic phases either in school or at home. They even suffer from social exploitation through caste discrimination or gender biasness. Children are even economically exploited when they are not paid their due wage for any work they are engaged in. For them, childhood is not in a bed of roses. Theirs is a world of bleak desire, endless torture and utter despair.

This article presents various types of exploitation faced by children as depicted in the novels of Dickens, Anand and Roy.

### Psychological Exploitation

Psychological exploitation means exploitation by creating mental pressure on an individual by making him or her pass through severe psychic trauma and destroying the mental ability. This involves destroying the imaginative faculty of the children. Their cognitive development takes place only through accumulation of facts and figures. Their individuality is subdued under complex concepts imposed upon them. Their psyche finds no scope of development. They are made to go through rigid calculative and mathematical procedures without any access to emotional aspects. Dickens' *Hard Times* gives a vivid description of psychological exploitation of children under the dominative predominance of Gradgrind and Bounderby. They emphasize imparting only factual education. In this system of education, fancy and imagination have no place. Louisa and Thomas, children of Gradgrind and their

classmates have to memorise only facts and figures. Thus Dickens aptly says that the education system aims at 'murdering the innocents'. Thus, only mechanised education system aims at killing the creative ability of the innocent students by entangling them with complicated norms, rules and facts. Creativity is not welcomed by trainers or teachers. Thus a teacher should implant only facts in the minds of the students:

"You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. 'Stick to Facts, Sir!'"(1)

She is threatened to be turned out of school unless she segregates herself from the Circus Troup. She is addressed as "girl number twenty" and is perfected that her name is Cecilia and not Sissy. When she fails to provide a factual definition of a horse, she is castigated for her inability. The students are not allowed any freedom of speech or expression. The education system aimed at demolishing young minds instead of nurturing any recreational aspects like a circus fails to create any impact on the 'eminently practical' mind of Gradgrind. The when his children try to peep through the canvas of the circus to get relief from boredom, they are chided by him. Thus cognitive development takes place only through accumulation of facts without any space for aesthetic explorations.

### Physical Exploitation

Physical exploitation involves severe physical torture, abuse or making one work for a terribly long period in unhygienic conditions for any benefit by the employer. Physical exploitation leads to serious physical disorder in the victim. Children often suffer from physical exploitation. Child labourers, either in factories or domestic servitude, have to work for long hours. They have to carry out heavy tasks, that involve immense strenuous effort. this results in physical disorders in them.

Dickens' *David Copperfield* discusses the evil effects of Industrialisation that created a demand of labourers--even

children were found to work in factories. In this novel, David, the protagonist is to work in a warehouse of a factory in suffocating atmosphere. In *Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand, the protagonist Munoo is beaten whenever he is engaged in work. He receives physical torture all through his life. He is ill-fed and taken to task by his first employer Babu Nathu Ram. He is insulted and humiliated and treated as untouchable. He is beaten for minimal faults. When he goes to work at the pickle factory, he has to work in the dark 'underworld of the factory, which was full of smoke and intense heat of blazing furnaces'. He had to work for hours together without sufficient sleep and rest. Even at Shimla, working at Mrs. Mainwaring's place, he had to undertake strenuous labour by pulling the rickshaw. He enjoys pulling the rickshaw. He enjoys pulling the rickshaw for her while she goes for shopping from one shop to another. He gets infected with tuberculosis, yet he moves on, being enchanted by her passionate moves towards him. His excessive physical strain ends his life.

In *The Untouchable*, Bakha has to suffer physical torture at the hands of the high caste people. Cigarettes are thrown at him like one throws a bone to a dog. Jalebis are hurled at him like one throws wastes at a pig. He, along with other untouchables, is forced to live in squalor and darkness, confined to a single-room cottage, without proper drainage system.

### Social Exploitation

Social exploitation of children means exploitation of children in society. Society refers to a gathering of people living together in a more or less ordered community. They share the same geographical area and live in an interactive association with one another. It includes people of various occupations, religion and culture. It also includes schools, hospitals, civic bodies, hospitals, temples, neighbourhood and peer groups—any place or persons where people interact with one another. People suffer social exploitation when they do not get equal treatment and are subjected to illogical discrimination aimed at segregating them from a particular group or ousting them from any institution. Society impinges harsh attack on some people on the basis of caste, creed, religion or gender. Social exploitation refers to taking undue advantage of one's social position and thereby concerning him, depriving him of various civic opportunities. Discrimination on the basis of status or occupation has been prevalent since ancient times. When an individual or a group of individuals are not allowed to participate in any social function, or celebrate their own festivals with due respect, thwarted if they go to any temple or place of worship, wells or market places by any authoritative body or person, denied access to education or any respectable vocation, abused for carrying on any so-called disreputable occupation, molested or ill-treated in society, then it can be said that the concerned individual or group is suffering from social exploitation. People enjoy themselves making use of their hapless condition. Children, along with men and women suffer from social exploitation. This section of the article deals with social exploitation of children.

Children exploitative situations in social set ups like school, neighbourhood and religious places and social gathering. We come across such ignominious circumstances faced by protagonists of Charles Dickens in British English literature and Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy in Indian English literature.

Dickens' presents the exploitation of children in school by the

headmaster and teachers in *David Copperfield* at Salem House School. David's step-father, Mr. Murdstone separates David from his mother and sends him to Salem House School, a boarding school in London only to get rid of him. Mr. Creakle was a heartless headmaster, who derived pleasure from beating the boys. David was sent with a placard by Mr. Murdstone 'beware of him because he bites'. This makes David's position in school vulnerable. Mr. Murdstone, out of his egoistic complex attempts to take revenge on him. He sends him to school when other boys have left for vacation only to get him tortured by Mr. Creakle. After the death of his mother, David was all the more neglected by Mr. Murdstone and was sent to work at the warehouse of a firm "Murdstone and Grinby". There also he had to face inhuman working conditions while washing bottles and labeling them.

*The Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand pictures social exploitation through the lives of Bakha and his sister, Sohini, children of a scavenger. Bakha, almost a youth in his teens, is treated contemptuously for being a scavenger. Being a sweeper, he is treated as an untouchable. He is forced to live in a colony of outcastes. His life is subjected to utter misery imposed on him on the basis of his social stratum. He has to tolerate abuses from the villagers like Havaladar Charat Singh:

"Do you know you are responsible for my piles? I caught the contagion sitting on one of those unclean latrines!"(7)

People hold him responsible for their physical problems. As they were considered outcastes, they were denied access to civic amenities like wells and places of worship. The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well. If they did, the water would be considered polluted. Even who held a considerably higher position among the low castes used to hurl abuses at those who were lowest of the low castes. Gulabo abuses Sohini as 'prostitute' and 'illegally begotten'.

They were deprived of education because 'schools were meant for the babus, not for the lowly sweepers.'(30). They were not allowed to take part in games either, lest their touch would "pollute" the high caste students through the trainers. People walking along the road would consider their standing on the road as impure and thus make vile comments:

"Keep to the side of the road, you low caste vermin! ...Do you know you have touched me and defiled me? ... Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself."(38)

Bakha has to shout his arrival near market places and temples to avoid coming in close proximity of high caste people: 'Posh, posh, sweeper coming.' On another occasion, when Bakha gets too deeply moved by the rhythmic chant during prayer, his 'hands joined unconsciously, and his head hung in the worship of the unknown god.'(52). At once someone cries out "Polluted, polluted, polluted."(52). Bakha is forced to get down from the steps of the temple with so called pure priests hurling abuses at him:

"Get off the steps, you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service. You have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony.

Get down, get away you dog!”(53)

The comment “our temple” suggests the temple is open to only people of high castes. The worshippers shout at Bakha’s ‘impudence’ of standing on the steps of the temple. When Bakha goes to a local gathering of people having come to attend Gandhiji’s lecture, he is conscious of not touching any person belonging to the higher caste.

Another novel, *Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand presents a heart-rending picture of Munoo, the protagonist’s, suffering from physical, social and psychological exploitation. Munoo, an orphan of fourteen is sent to work as a domestic help of a Babu, working as a peon in a bank. He has to serve food and given stale pancake to eat. He spends sleepless nights. He has to defecate near the wall outside the house and has to face the wrath of the Babu and his younger brother. Munoo suffers from maltreatment by his mistress. He is called a ‘good for nothing pig’.

She even asks him not to look at her working because she will get defiled. He is rebuked for joining the laughter of his superiors and is prohibited from joining the sports of the Chota Babu and the children because his place is in the kitchen and to perform domestic chores. He has to spend a miserable life in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, tolerating an array of curses, off and on. Anand here draws a vivid picture of harsh reality. Even Nathoo Ram’s daughter pushes him treating him just as a servant. He is made to work very hard throughout the day and is beaten for the least fault. Munoo craved for love and sympathy. When Munoo is unable to carry a tea-tray and the cups get shattered, he is slapped. When he returns to his uncle and complains of his ill-treatment in Nathoo Ram’s house, he is thrashed mercilessly by his uncle. Munoo then escapes to Daulatpur and starts working in a pickle factory. There again he has to suffer tortuous dominance of Ganpat. Munoo realizes from Sauda’s speech that there are only two kinds of people in the world; the rich and the poor, and between the two there is no connection.

Munoo’s saga of suffering enters into another episode when Mrs. Mainwaring takes him to Shimla as a servant where Munoo suffers from “a deep rooted feeling of inferiority to the superior people”.

### **Sexual Exploitation**

Sexual exploitation is the sexual abuse of children and youth through the exchange of sex or sexual acts for drugs, food, shelter, protection or money. It involves taking undue advantage of children with economic, social or familial instability. Downtrodden children are often found to work in public places to earn livelihood. These children are compelled to serve others for meagre amount of money to support their family. Their childhood lingers in the dark world of inhuman and tormenting employers. Childhood seems to be lost in a doldrum of poverty and insecurity, where the least ray of hope for refuge draws them into the maze of hypocrisy. They get entangled in horrible circumstances that churn them or at least blemish them sexually. Both in British as well as Indian English literature, one can get glimpses of the dark shades of sexual exploitation meted out to children.

In Anand’s *The Untouchable*, Bakha’s sister Sohini is given vile suggestions when she is engaged in cleaning the lavatory of the priest’s house. Sohini tells her brother:

“That man, that man, ... that man... made suggestions to me.”(53)

When she screams in protest, he comes out shouting that he has been defiled. Anand here presents the sorry state of the downtrodden scavengers who not only have to suffer molestation at the hands of the high caste people are also abused. The hypocrisy of the so-called high-station inmates of the society is attacked here.

The priest molests her while at work taking full advantage of her social instability and economic insolvency to satisfy his lust. Such sexual abuses make them and their dear ones lose faith in life as a whole and they lament their birth. Bakha says:

“So beautiful and so accursed! ... Oh God! Why was she born, why was she born?”(57)

In *Coolie* by Anand, the end of Munoo’s perpetual journey of agony and servitude in the house of Mrs. Mainwaring focuses on his attending on his mistress. Attracted by Munoo’s physique while at work, Mrs. Mainwaring asks him to wash his hands and come to her so that she could file his nails. She manicures him with a wild flutter in her eyes. Her coquettish movements and passionate is enough to arouse his passion. Munoo acts as her permanent rickshaw puller. He also has to fulfil her sexual urge. It is quite evident from his exhaustive looks which makes a coolie suggest him to leave the lady’s service. Here Anand provides an implication of Munoo’s compulsion of attending on her and also driving her rickshaw. His physical labour along with an illicit affair with his mistress makes him meet a premature death.

In *God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy throws light on perversions in middle-aged men, leading to sexual abuse of children in order to fulfil their sexual urge. Esthappen, as a child becomes a victim of sexual abuse when an orange-juice seller, a pedophilic pervert offers him his genital to hold while he prepares the drink for him.

### **Emotional exploitation**

Emotional exploitation means attacking one’s emotions and feelings with harsh criticism, belittling, demeaning and humiliating an individual. It also includes teasing a child’s mental capabilities, refusing love and affection, shunning him or her from the family, punishing them or confining them to a claustrophobic set up at home or at school. Children are greatly affected by emotional exploitation. They are made to give up their emotions and feelings in a materialistic world. The spontaneous outburst of their emotions find no way out and are thus suppressed under a labyrinth of restrictions imposed on them by society or school. They are turned into heartless machines by mechanised system of schooling and upbringing. This destruction of emotions depicted in Dickens’ *Hard Times* and *David Copperfield*.

Children may also be affected emotionally through ignorance of adults regarding their physical, emotional or social needs, refusal of acknowledgement of child’s interest and activities, terrorising through excessive teasing, scaring, verbal threats, isolating a child from family and peers, not permitting him to play, extreme punishment, corrupting or having unreasonable expectations from a child. These disturbing situations faced by

children have been portrayed in novels of Anand-- The Untouchable and Coolie.

Thus, both in European as well as in Indian contexts, emotional exploitation torments children. This section of the article deals with the emotional exploitation as highlighted in the novels of Dickens and Mulk Raj Anand. In *Hard Times* by Dickens Louisa, the daughter of Mr. Gradgrind is married to Bounderby only for utilitarian purposes--strengthening of the relationship between Gradgrind and Bounderby. she is not allowed to befriend anyone. Even her rearing is done only on the basis of facts. She has no scope for amusing herself and her brother as a child:

"I can't play to you, or sing to you, I can't talk to you so as to lighten your mind, for I never see any amusing sights or read any amusing books that it would be a pleasure or a relief to you to talk about, when you are tired."(45)

Tom replies: "It's very unfortunate for both of us"(45)  
He wishes to blast off all facts:

"I wish I could put a thousand barrels of gunpowder under them (facts) and blow them all up together."(46)

Later, when she grows up, her father gives her the proposal of getting married to Bounderby. She marries him without any love or emotion for him. She accepts the proposal only to satisfy her father's interest. His father is happy to have prepared her as an emotionless dispassionate individual:

"I have confidence in your good sense. You are not impulsive, you are not romantic, you are accustomed to view everything from the dispassionate ground of reason and calculation."(86)

Louisa later laments of not having the scope of nurturing her emotions:

"What do I know father...of tastes and fancies, of aspirations and affections;  
...You have been so careful of me, that I never had a child's heart."(90-91)

She also adds that as a child she has never "dreamed a child's dream, never had a child's belief or a child's fear."(91)

When Gradgrind wants to know if Louisa has been offered any other proposal for marriage, she replies:

"Father, what other proposal can have been made to me? Whom have I seen? Where have I been? What are my heart's experiences?"(90)

Gradgrind's inculcation of facts subduing all emotions in his son, makes him indisciplined and he commits robbery. This shows too much restraint is destructive.

The starved imagination of the children deprive them of the glories of childhood.

In *God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy shows how caste discrimination prevents Ammu to nurture her intimacy with Velutha. though she marries, later on, she consummates her love for Velutha, after her divorce from her husband.

In Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*, we find the childhood

spontaneity of Munoo is destroyed under inhuman masters when he is sent to work in the town by her uncle to earn something for the family. There he is treated like a dog. He is forbidden from any amusement. He is not permitted to play with his master's children, not even laugh at any funny matter. Later when he goes to work for Mrs. Mainwaring, the lady's bewitching sexual approach creates turmoil in his youthful heart only to be smashed by the lady's whims.

### Conclusion

Thus we see that children suffer from exploitation in various forms in various places. Their exploitation ranges from physical and sexual to psychological, social and emotional. They are exploited by employers in workplace, parents at home and people they interact with in their society. In most cases, life does not give them any choice but to surrender, either in compulsion or to avoid any unwanted anomaly. This rejection leads them to a defective mentality, premature death, emotional vacuity and mental detachment with others. But they are to be retrieved from this slow yet continuous process of loss to avoid erosion of sweet emotions, disappearance of innocent smiles, destruction of dreams.

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