

MULK RAJ ANAND'S COOLIE: AN EPIC OF MISERY

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*Anand's **Coolie** is a unique and original in many ways. It has been called a great epic of misery. It is twice as long as the **Untouchable**. The novelist depicts a series of painful adventures of Munoo, an orphan village boy from the Kangra hills. Munoo, the protagonist of the novel, is exploited always. One way or the other way, by one person or another, he is exploited. He is an orphan boy hardly fifteen years old. He is ill-treated by his uncle, Daya Ram and aunt Gujri. He is taken to the town of Sham Nagar and employed as a servant by Babu Nathoo Ram. He moves from home to towns and cities, to Bombay and Simla sweating as a servant, factory-worker and rickshaw driver. His plight resembles the grim fate of the masses of India. After a series of events, he got weaker and caught T.B. In a pathetic situation, Munoo died in Simla. The novel is remarkable for its humanism. The rich and the privileged have little or no consideration for the underdog he is a discarded victim of the social system. Like Bakha, he accepts the inevitability of his fate. Tired of struggle for existence and poverty, he is terribly afflicted with T.B. he dies at the age of sixteen. The novelist presents the theme of exploitation of the underprivileged in depth in **Coolie**.*

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Mulk Raj Anand is one of the three great Indian writers of fiction, writing in English. He, being a novelist of the common man, has both extensively and intensively dealt with the oppression, exploitation and victimisation of the lowest, the poorest and the weakest in the society. He noticed how the poor people in India lay groaning under pressure of poverty. On his impressionable mind was also indelibly imprinted how the very life-blood of the poor, simple, illiterate people was being sucked by parasites like the landlords, the money lenders and the religious priests. The life and the humiliating conditions under which lay crushed these low down trodden victims of the inexorable social, economic and political order that existed in Indian villages was the subject Anand chose for himself. Anand is always accused of being a propagandist. He, himself, feels annoyed with such judgement being passed on him. He is a real postcolonial writer who presented a realistic picture of postcolonial India. He is concerned with social problems and eradication of the evils in modern society. He gives voice to the peasants, workers and suppressed members of society. Anand's characters,



generally, come from socially and economically backward classes. He felt that it was his mission and duty of life to focus the attention of his readers on the innumerable wrongs, injustices and the injuries that were being continuously perpetrated on these young unfortunate underdogs of Indian society. Anand is a crusader against injustice of every time. *Coolie* (1936) is one of the classics of Indo-Anglian fiction. It has been called the *Odyssey* of Munoo; for, as in the *Odyssey*, Homer he has related the heroics of king Ulysses, so in *Coolie* Anand has related the adventures and misadventures of Munoo (a hill-boy who is dragged into the plains in the falls hope of going to work and seeing the world) as he moves from the North to the South, and then back again to the North. Monoo belongs to a high caste but poor class. The fact that he is worse sufferer than Bakha testifies to the grim reality that caste is no insurance against economic exploitation. *Coolie* is a panoramic novel having a much wider canvas than Anand's first novel, *Untouchable*; and much large number of characters. The novel portrays in artistic terms a yawning gap between the haves and have-nots, the exploiter and the exploited, the ruler and the ruled. Money becomes the measure of the status of an individual in society. Though Monoo of *Coolie*, is a Kshatriya by birth yet his genteel birth fails to lift him from misery, because he belongs to the wealth less class. The novels revolves round another social evil of no less magnitude—the system of class. Munoo is the protagonist in the novel. He is a poor orphan boy hardly fifteen years of age. After the untimely death of his parents, Munoo inherited poverty and squalor from his exploited father. His mother dies of hunger and exhaustion before her time. Munoo belongs to Kangra hills of Himachal Pradesh. He is taken by his uncle to be a servant in the semi-anglicised house of Babu Nathu Ram, a sub-accountant in Imperial bank in Sham Nagar. Munoo is forced to leave his idyllic village in the Kangra valley so that he may work and stand on his own feet. Though he is ill-treated by his uncle, Daya Ram and aunt Gujri, he is happy in his native village of Bilaspur. He is considered old enough to begin his living and is taken to the town of Sham Nagar and employed as a domestic servant by Babu Nathoo Ram at rupees three per month which amount is paid Coolie to him, but to his uncle. Before coming to this place, Munoo is the leader of the village boys, like Bishan, Bishamber and Jay Singh, the son of a village landlord. Jay Singh is his rival for the leadership. In the company of his friends he grazes his cows all day, sits under the shade of a large Bunyan tree to enjoy the fruits of the season. But here, his happy idyllic life is coming to an end. Despite all the sad memories and the ill-

treatment of his aunt and uncle, who considers him a burdon, Munoo is happy and contented. In the very beginning, Munoo is told about his position in society:

Don't forget to do your best for the masters. You are their servant and they are kind people. (p.14)

Coolie is an innovation of the picaresque technique. V.S. Pritchett remarks:

*Coolie has what the English novel has lost—the space, the immense variety of incidents and characters that were once in the picaresque novel.*¹

Munoo is subject to more rigidity and deprivation unlike the sweeper who is assured of his place in the society because of the indispensability of his work. The tone for Munoo's life is set by his aunt Gujri's shrieking call to him, followed by a volley of abuses at the beginning of the novel. His strenuous ten-mile march with his unsympathetic uncle, from Bilaspur to Sham Nagar to find a job, is just a prelude to his sufferings that are to follow. Babu's wife was a sharp-tongued shrew. She is short-tempered and swears and curses more horribly than even his aunt Gujri. Munoo is terrified at the torrent of curses that flow out of her. Munoo understands the meaning of the meaning of poverty. Poverty compels him to work as a servant at the age of fourteen. The novelist shows that both feudal and usurious system of capitalism combine to exploit Munoo's father. Munoo had heard how the landlord exploited his father:

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 the rains had been scanty and the harvests bad. And he knew how his father had died a slow death of bitterness and disappointment and left his mother a penniless beggar, to support a young brother-in-law and a child in arms. The sight of his mother grinding grain between the scarred surfaces of mill-stones which she gyrated round and round, round and round, by the wooden handle, now with her right hand, now with her left, day and night, had become indelibly imprinted on his mind. Also, the sight of her as she had lain dead on the ground with a horrible yet

sad, set expression on her face, had sunk into his subconscious with all its weight of tragic dignity and utter designation. (pp.2-3)

Munoo's experiences of humiliation started in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, Uttam Kaur, Nathoo's shrewish and vindictive wife. She curses this poor orphan:

'Vay, you eater of your masters! Vay, you shameless brute! You pig! You dog!' the storm burst on his head as, hearing no response to her call, she appeared at the door, saw him, and unable to bear the sight, withdrew. 'Vay, you shameless, shameless, vulgar, stupid hillboy! May the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence! May you die! What have you done! Why didn't you ask me where to go? May you fade away! May you burn! We didn't know we were taking on an animal in our employ, an utter brute, a savage! What will the sahibs think who pass by our doors every morning and afternoon! The Babuji has his prestige to keep up with the sahibs. Hai! What a horrible, horrible mess he has made outside my door!' (p.17)

Nathoo is a hen-pecked husband. Munoo is a mere servant and he has no right to play with the children or to laugh with others. He is at once sent to the kitchen and sat to work again. Bibiji angrily reminds him of his place:

Your place is here in the kitchen! You must not enter the sports of the chota Babu and the children. You must get on quickly with work in the house! There is no time to lose. (p.23)

He symbolises the suffering and misery of the down trodden and the exploited of India. He doesn't harm anybody but is himself harmed, maltreated and exploited, till death relieves him from his life-long suffering. Bibiji always kept Munoo engaged. One day when Sheila, Nathoo's daughter and her friend were playing. Munoo too joined them and he performed his monkey dance in order to amuse them. Sheila tries to drag him away. He bit her. For this, he

was mercilessly kicked and beaten by her parents. Munoo hates everyone except chota Babu and perhaps Sheila. Manoo's innocent art was interpreted as lecherous and lustful a further instance of his savagery and sexuality. In a fit of anger, Nathoo Ram showered blows after blows on this poor innocent boy with a thick stick. When Nathoo complains to Munoo's uncle, he instead of showing any sympathy with the boy, beats him mercilessly unable to bare this cruel, inhuman treatment, he runs away from his uncle and from his callous and inconsiderate mistress. He stealthily runs away from Baboo's house. He escapes from this prison and seeks temporary refuge in a train. He is discovered lying under the bunk by a passenger, Seth Prabh Dyal, who takes him to Daulatpur. In this phase of his life, we find that Prabh Dyal and his wife are kind to Munoo. The novelist narrates the warm and tender feelings of Prabh Dyal in glorious terms:

He felt very tender towards the boy. He had suddenly recognised a kinship with him, the affinity his soul felt for his unborn son. Only he tried to make himself believe that it might be possible to regard this completely strange boy as a son.

(p.64)

Sham Nagar episode is the first act in the tragic drama of exploitation based on class distinction. Prabh's wife Parvati is also fond of him and gives him motherly warmth. But here he is ill-treated by Ganpat, Prabh's partner in Pickle Factory. Thomas hardly says:

*Happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of pain.*²

In the course of time Munoo's happiness is gone when Prabh Dyal is reduced to beggary because of the villainy of Ganpat, his partner. Prabh's factory is sold out and Munoo has to work as a Coolie. Now he is a mere beast of burden—first in the grain market and then in the vegetable market. Prabh is insulted and humiliated by his creditors. The police are summoned. In Anand's novels, the police are depicted as merciless. Saros Cowasjee says:

*They appear as merciless, corrupt and sadistic: a ready tool in the hands of their masters be they capitalists as in *coolie*, imperialists as in *The Sword and the Sickle* or feudalists as in *The Private Life of An Indian Prince*.*³

Seth Prabh had a serious nervous breakdown and the doctors advised him to go to the hills if he wanted to save his life. Prabh had come to Daulatpur as a Coolie, and now he left the city with only a trunk and a bed. At the time of their departure Prabh and his wife Parvati wept bitterly. Munoo could get the free food at the temple of Bhagat Hardas. Free food was given by way of charity. There at the temple, he finds religious hypocrisy and corruption which prevails in the temples of India. He found a Swamiji embracing a young woman who has come to pass the night with him. And the old woman was a go-between who arranged this. Out on the streets again Munoo becomes a Coolie, facing desperate competition from other Coolies for a chance to serve as a beast of burden. Coolies are treated as vagabonds and are at the mercy of the forces of capitalism represented by the traders. Munoo goes to railway station. And there a kind-hearted elephant-driver comes to his rescue when he is given some trouble by a police man. This elephant-driver helps him to reach Bombay. His urge to go to Bombay is fulfilled. The elephant-driver wants Munoo:

'The bigger is city is, the more cruel it is to the sons of Adam,' the elephant driver said, crawling under the buffers of a train. 'You have to pay even for the breath that you breathe. But you are a brave lad.' (p.152)

Munoo's sufferings in Bombay form another chapter. Good and evil are thrown together and more often it is evil that gains upper hand. Life on the pavements or in the slums, service in the Sir George White Cotton Mills, collision with human sharks and Hyenas, the friendship of Hari and Lakshmi, the championship of Rattan, the descent into the red-light district, involvement in the labour trouble, and the Hindu-Muslim disturbances—this poor orphan experiences them all. At George White Cotton Mills in Bombay, Munoo finds that these giant mills have created the monsters of capitalists who virtually suck the blood of the workers. The exploitation of the workers is compounded by the corrupt colonial rule which spares none. Munoo feels like a trapped animal, weak and helpless. Even the trade union leader Ratan fails to ignite his ego. Exploitation and suffering have killed his natural instincts to react to fight and to claim his right as a human being. Another nightmarish experience awaits Munoo in Bombay. The Cotton Factory is nothing but another version of hell where innumerable children like him are condemned to sub-human existence. They toil with their

sweat and blood while the oppressors discuss the weather over a cup of tea. Munoo attaches himself to vagrant family in Bombay—Hari and his wife Lakshmi. He becomes one of the workers in that cotton mill. He lives in appalling working conditions in leaky straw-huts. They are washed away by the monsoon in dilapidated and unsanitary tenement houses. All the characters of higher and lower strata of society typify the wretchedness and misery, shams and hypocrisy, corruption and decay of Indian society. There are wicked characters like Ganpat and Jimmie Thomas and shrewish woman like Bibi Uttam Kaur and Lady Todarmal. There are also some good characters who helped Munoo like Prabh Dyal, Parvati, Chota Babu, Ratan, Hari and his wife Lakshmi. The various characters are either the exploited of the exploiters, the Europeans, the capitalists, and their helpers and supporters or the suffering poor, the coolies, the beggars and other pavement-dwellers, mere beasts of burden, kicked about from pillar to post. At last, Munoo's sojourn in Bombay terminates when he gets badly injured in a car accident. Mrs. Main Waring, the occupant in the car wanted a servant, and she takes him to Simla. She employs him out of boredom to be her rickshaw puller. She makes him her boy-servant and there are hints that he is exploited sexually also. 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. Munoo, worn out by heavy work, got weaker, caught T.B. He hastens to his grave and then to death completes his victimhood. Munoo is a universal, larger than life, figure, symbolising the suffering and misery of the down-trodden and exploited masses of India. Munoo wishes to belong to the world of the upper strata of society. His mistress is kind to him but her coquetry fires his adolescent passions till he crumples at her feet in an orgy of tears and kisses. Munoo fails to endure his illness for long and breathes his last in the arm of his friend, Mohan when he is hardly sixteen years old. His last journey is described by the novelist:

A downpour and he began to doubt if he would ever get well. He felt exhausted and lay weary and apathetic, looking at Mohan frank-eyed and helpless, clinging to him as if the mere touch of his friend's body would give him life.

'All right, Munoo brother, you are a brave lad,' Mohan assured him.

Munoo clutched at Mohan's hand and felt the warmth blood in his veins like a tide reach out to distances to which it had never gone before.

But in the early hours of one unreal, white night he passed away – the tide of his life having reached back to the deeps. p.282

The novel is a veritable sega of unending pain, suffering and prolonged struggle punctuated only occasionally by brief moments of relief and hope. K.K Sharma opines:

Coolie is a sincere protest against the emergence of a new world of money and exploitation and class distinction. It shows how Coolies like Munoo are completely beaten down by the curve of money, power in the Iron Age. ⁴

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