



MAJOR CONCERNS & THEMES IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S COOLIE

DR. RAJKUMAR M. LAKHADIVE

HEAD, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH,
MAHATMA BASWESHWAR COLLEGE,
LATUR – 413 512. [MAHARASHTRA] INDIA

ABSTRACT

Mulk Raj Anand's Coolie portrays the class distinction between the rich and the poor and also depicts the miserable condition, sad and pathetic life of Munoo, a young boy of the village Bilaspur. This is a human tragedy caused by the poverty, exploitation, hunger, selfishness, greed and cruelty. It is not the fate or Almighty who is responsible for the tragedy of Munoo, the hero of the novel, but it is the society in which he is brought-up. He is a victim of social forces in his life. He is like the hero of Galsworthy. He is the universal figure who represents the miseries and pathetic life of the poor and down-trodden. Social forces of exploitation and poverty determine the life of Munoo in the novel. The novel represents the Indian society.

INTRODUCTION

The novel *Coolie* gives glimpse of the country life, town life and the life in slums in an industrial city as well as on a hill place Simla. This novel is the representation of the miseries of the poor in the society. Even when Anand is talking of exploitation, as in *Coolie* for example, he is sometimes able to inject comedy into the narration. For instance, the bank clerk who is the first person to employ Munoo as a domestic servant wants the British boss to be well entertained. All kinds of lavish arrangements have been made and the idea is to impress the boss. Munoo, the domestic servant is required to play the role that has been planned out for him. But having just come from a village, he is unable to grasp the intent of the plan. Instead of the boss being impressed, almost the opposite happens. By bringing in the element of the comic twist, Anand deftly changes the plane of social analysis. Anand in his novels talks about the poverty, hunger, starvation, exploitation, degradation, poverty-stricken people, downtrodden and oppressed people, the social evils and inhuman cruelty.

DR. RAJKUMAR M. LAKHADIVE

1P a g e



While talking about the novel *Coolie*, we find that the theme of hunger, starvation, poverty, degradation, class consciousness, racial relations, capitalism, industrialism, communalism, racism etc. This novel deals with labour problem of textile mills and pitiable conditions of the domestic servants. This novel is the odyssey of Munoo, an orphaned village boy from the Kangra hills, who sets out in search of a livelihood. His several roles include working as a domestic servant in an urban middle-class family in Sham Nagar. In the bazar, in Daulatapur, as a labourer in a cotton mill in Bombay and as a rickshaw puller in an Anglo-Indian household in Simla - a job, the rigorous of which bring on swift consumption and an untimely death. This novel is a social tragedy caused by human cruelty, greed, selfishness, poverty and exploitation. Munoo, the hero of the novel, is a universal figure who suffers a lot due to the hunger, starvation, degradation, miseries of the poor and downtrodden, and the underdogs. Hunger has been an important theme in the Anglo-Indian fiction. The novelists have dealt with the degradation and suffering which hunger or starvation causes. In this novel *Coolie*, the theme of hunger has been realistically depicted, and the heroic struggle of the central figure Munoo against hunger and poverty raises him to heroic dimension. This novel too is the anti-hero novel. It makes an ordinary porter the hero of the novel. In this novel, the suffering of Munoo, the Coolie, attains epic dimensions and universal significance.

Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Coolie* has been described as a naturalist portrayal of life at its darkest moments, being that a central theme throughout it. Mulk Raj Anand tells the story of Munoo, an orphan boy from India who wants to venture out into the world, and goes through a series of jobs and experiences. Yet, the gist of the novel is Anand's analysis of the boy's inner fears, thoughts, and emotions, and the description of the darkest moments of Munoo's life up until the moment of his death. It is a naturalist rendition of a life story where darkness is perennial and where the bad gets worst. Yet, it is a masterpiece of a story to read given Anand's natural talent for storytelling and the richness of his description and exploration of humanity. In his *Coolie*, which follows the short life of a poor Indian laborer named Munoo, the dream of the machine begins during Munoo's childhood in the hill country and develops as he makes his way through a series of menial jobs while living in almost every region of India.

In the opening scenes of the novel he is displayed in a rural setting, happily running around out of doors, grazing cattle, eating fruit stolen from the trees, and hopping from tree to tree "like a monkey". (*Coolie*: 10) But as a young orphan he is forced to go to work in town, leaving his village, his school, and his dreams about life: "He had dreamed, of course, of all the wonderful things which the village folk spoke about . . . he was especially interested in machines such as he had read about in the science primer of the fourth class. But he had meant to go to town when he had passed all his examinations here and was ready to learn to



make machines himself.”(9) The machine in this passage marks not only the fantasy of a young boy, but also the potential of upward class mobility and entrance into a commodity culture that would bring “all the wonderful things” of the town to Munoo. It also seems to promise access to a more advanced economy, where he could use his education to build machines rather than function as a monkey or machine himself.

In his first job as a servant, Munoo’s worship of the machine becomes deeply ironic as it points out his lack of experience with modernity and leaves him open to ridicule. The narrative displays Munoo’s naiveté through a tone limited in perspective and focalized through Munoo. When the lady of the house turns on the gramophone, Munoo wanders in from the kitchen, dripping utensils in hand: “He felt emboldened. He wanted to hear the music, to see and touch the singing machine . . . ‘how lucky I am, he thought, that there is a wonder machine in the house where I have come to serve.’”(29) Munoo’s naiveté guides the narrative here, which can only hint at what he does not understand. He gets carried away by the music and begins to dance around on all fours like a monkey, hoping to display his agility and amuse the children in the family.

The potential for power in *Coolie* arises from another direction — that of language, which Anand highlights as both a tool for disenfranchisement and a potential vehicle for freedom. For the woman who calls him a monkey, the word functions as a performative that casts Munoo into a subhuman category as soon as it leaves her lips. No degree of narrative irony can change her power to determine Munoo’s future within the plot of the novel or to thwart his aspirations toward full humanity. In other places in the narrative, the word “coolie,” hurled like an epithet, works in a like manner by casting the workers into a category inherently separate from others, almost like the untouchables, and merging them into a collective identity. Those whose status allows them to employ the word “coolie” in this fashion wield it at will, creating unreachable gulfs between themselves and the workers.

Anand’s love for the underdog also informs and shapes *Coolie*. His sympathy for the downtrodden and venom against the ruthless oppressors again result in a novel which marks both his achievement and failure as an artist. The contemporary capitalistic system with its gaping disparity between the haves and the have-nots is the target of Anand’s bitterness in *Coolie*. Anand lashes at the role of the British their Indian sycophants in creating a gulf between the rich and the poor. Like a true Marxist, Anand cries for justice and fairplay for the exploited labourers. He introduces some savior characters to bring home his ideology. The novel *Coolie* concentrates on social evils which issue from an inequitable economic system. The protagonist in the novel is passive, intimidated victims though Munoo is an ‘iota’ ahead of Bakha [protagonist of *Untouchable*] as he takes the initiative to escape from the causes of his suffering. The novel *Coolie* has a very wide canvas with a large variety of people painted



in various hues. Anand adopted the stream of consciousness technique to reveal the thoughts and emotions of his scavenger protagonist. In this novel, Anand chooses expansion and variety in preference to economy and compactness to bring to light not only the intensity of the tyrannical class consciousness but also the universality of the problem. Anand wants to reveal that no part of the country is free from the shackles of caste prejudices. Every town, village and metropolitan city is a prey to the evil of class disparities.

Anand also traces the strains and stresses which are the result of the growing economic structure and expanding commerce. Because of the change in the economic pattern of the society, people have thrown their spiritual heritage and idealism overboard. The monetary considerations are predominant in society. The curse of poverty renders a person absolutely misfit among those who enjoy a sound economic position. Whatever potential is left in a poverty-stricken coolie goes waste because he develops an inferiority complex which cripples his mind terribly. The intention in choosing the character Munoo is to expose the evil of the class disparities. Anand chooses Munoo, a coolie whom he personally knew, and who worked in a pickle-and-jam factory in Anand's neighbourhood in Amritsar, to serve as the protagonist of his prose epic. Munoo has the ambitions and desires, but he is thrown from pillar to post like any hero of a picaresque novel. Destiny plays a significant role in determining the actions of the hero, but he himself too tries to escape to a new world when the circumstances at one place become too oppressive. His life is a blend of conscious efforts on one hand and destined results on the other. Munoo shuttles from one place to another and whatever he goes, he finds the plight of the coolies to be the same. They are exploited and maltreated. Munoo suffers economic exploitation at Sham Nagar, Daulatpur, and Bombay. At Simla, he is victim to the sexual exploitation of a Eurasian lady. The change of place in no way means the change of fate for the coolies. Only the exploiters and their modes of exploitation change.

Munoo remains a victim of the society evoking our sympathy. He does not become a symbol of the rising force of working class in India. To picture Munoo as a victim was true to the main revolutionary stream of the times. Anand also highlights the potential play of language in *Coolie* that can escape from literal meaning and the power of those who wield it to produce subservience. The matter of the uncontrollability of words and the impossibility of restricting their meaning, even within the multiple power hierarchies surrounding them, plays a crucial role in this novel's alternative political logic. This is what Derrick Attridge, echoing Derrida, has identified in the Joycean context as "the remainder, that aspect of language's functioning, which in spite of its necessity is often repressed from our consciousness." (66) Sound often takes the place of semiotics as the focus of language use, with the result that another level of play complicates the social terrain of the novel. The first three paragraphs of *Coolie* each begin with the repeated utterance of a version of its hero's name "Munoo ohe Munooa oh Mundo" (7) turned into a musical mantra — much like the schoolboys' shouts of



“stephaneforus” in *Portrait* (153), marking them as “remainder,” language use that escapes semiotics and the control of the user — and that has the potential to confuse or resist conventional discursive authorities.

Here the political importance of a linguistic remainder emerges as the workers begin to take on force through their appropriation of a mode of meaning-making not within the purview of conventional systems of discursive power, whether in English or the Indian languages. This speech is, in many ways, the climax of the novel and one of its most moving moments, as we sense the potential for collective action among the disenfranchised crowds and see Munoo rise to real political engagement. Despite the fact that the authorities successfully break up the strike by pitting Hindus against Muslims, it unites the workers—or more broadly speaking, the coolies—as possessors of the remainder — of play, or the power of language outside the bounds of their British and Indian overlords. Anand is the champion of the cause of the downtrodden. In his novels, he reveals the inhumanity inflicted on the oppressed section of the society. As Premila Paul Sudhakar says : “In his novels, he reveals a triune intuition of the inhumanity of man, his exploitative nature and his possible redemption.”(Sudhakar, Premila Paul.1985: 2) Anand spent his first twenty years of life in Punjab. It is then he who observed the large scale of exploitation of the poor by the rich. Punjab is the locale of exploitation in all his novels.

Munoo has to face hunger and starvation in Daulatpur. Here Prabha Dayal’s partner, Ganpat ill-treats him. It is by his villainy that Prabha Dayal is reduced to beggary, the pickle factory is sold out, and Munoo has to work as a coolie - as a mere beast of burden - first in the grain market and then in the vegetable market. In the grain market, there is cut-throat competition between naked starving coolies for jobs at extremely low wages. The novelist gives us a harrowing account of the suffering of Munoo and other coolies in the grain market. His body is coloured like the earth. In the vegetable market, he is paid very low wages amidst stiff competition. Munoo next tries the Railway Station, but he is scared out of his wits by a policeman and runs away in terror till a kind-hearted elephant driver comes to his help and helps him in reaching Bombay. In Bombay, Munoo has to face hunger and suffering on an epic scale. The working conditions in Sir George White’s cotton mills are more horrible than those Munoo faced in the pickle factory. Mulk Raj Anand gives a touching description of the conditions of the people like Munoo in this novel. Life of Munoo and his compatriots in Bombay is hellish. They live in a semi-starved condition, they are semi-naked too. There is no provision for their shelter. They are exploited by Jimmie Thomas who charges from them a great deal of money as commission for their employment in the factory and also by the banya from whom they purchase their necessary goods on loan. They live a life full of constant insults, abuses and ill-treatment.



The last phase in Munoo's odyssey of misery comes in Simla where he works as the domestic servant, rickshaw-puller and play-boy of Mrs Mainwaring. He is rebuked and harassed when he refuses to act as a playboy to Mrs Mainwaring. At last, he passes away in the arms of his friend Mohan when he is hardly sixteen years of age. Through Munoo, the novelist has told the untold story of the starving millions of India who are beaten from pillar to post, are overworked and insulted, and treated as beasts of burden, till they die prematurely of hunger, suffering and disease. Munoo is also the sufferer in this manner. Munoo is a universal figure, a larger-than-life character, one who represents the suffering and starving millions of the country. It is not one Munoo who suffers alone. But he is a representative of a thousand, rather an unnumbered lot who live a life of extreme poverty. To stress the universality of Munoo, the novelist has merely called the novel *Coolie* and has not named it after the name of the hero. The main theme of the novel is the exploitation of the underprivileged by the forces of capitalism and industrialism. These forces deny the right of happiness to a simple, landless orphan. Munoo at least dies of consumption. Mother India receives Munoo to her bosom with the words: "we belong to sufferin !/ we belong to suffering! my love."

Degradation is also one of the themes of this novel. The life-history of Munoo amply shows that Munoo never did anything. Things always happened to him. His tragedy, his squalor and disease, his poverty and poor state were probably all destined. He was like a piece of destiny on the chequer-board of life. Munoo himself is not a rogue but a victim of the world's rogueries. He has to beat from pillar to post. However, he accepts his fate with calm resignation and self-assertion. He begins to work right from the age of fourteen ungrudgingly. All his suffering is borne passively by him without any protest or gesture or revolt. His stay in the home of Babu Nathoo Ram as a boy-servant is one long tale of passive suffering. He is overworked, is constantly abused and is scolded for his faults, and is given only the most meagre food, hardly enough to keep body and soul together. He endures all this suffering with stoic calm and resignation. Even his humble wages of three rupees per month are not given to him. When he complains to his uncle, he is mercilessly beaten, and Munoo passively endures his beating also. When this suffering and humiliation is too much for him, he runs away from Sham Nagar. He does not assert himself, he does not speak out, but boils in anger. Few boys of his age would endure such suffering and humiliation so very meekly, almost like a dumb driven cattle.

Throughout this novel, we can find the degradation of the character Munoo. Due to his fate, poverty, orphanage, he loses dignity or the self-respect. Chance and fate play important roles and he drifts along entirely at the mercy of chance and accident. It is by chance that he is in the same compartment with Prabha Dayal, and under the seat on which he is seated. This is chance that brings him to pickle factory, where he passively endures the insults, abuses and kicks that are hurled upon his innocent head by Ganpat. When Prabha is ruined, he does his



best to earn an honest penny to help his noble master. But he allows himself to be pushed out of the grain-market by the other coolies, and in irate policeman scares him away from the railway station. He runs away as if in terror of his life. It is the chance and accident again which bring Munoo to a kind-hearted elephant driver who helps him to reach Bombay. Munoo against accepts passively what comes his way. He does not try to change the course of events by himself. He does not resist others suggestions either. Even his desire to go to Bombay is a result of change suggestion thrown out by another coolie. It is by chance again in Bombay that he meets Hari and his family at Victoria station. It is Hari who takes him to Sir George White's cotton mill, and Munoo passively agrees to work there. Chance has determined his destiny, and he passively accepts his lot. He lives with Hari and his family, and when their humble cottage is washed away by rain, he accepts the offer of Ratan to live in the chawl in which he is living.

It is apparent that Munoo has become the victim of degradation. He is helpless victim of the rogueries of the world. His main reason to be the victim of degradation is his helplessness. He is an underdog, his wits are powerless, his power is weak, he cannot face a complex machinery of economic and religious oppression. In the capitalistic society, people like Munoo have no option but to accept passively their lot. They have no freedom of choice. The plight of Munoo and his kind is the direct result of British rule and the industrial revolution, they introduced without paying sufficient heed to social reforms. Munoo's position in life raises the question of freedom in a capitalistic society. As Anand sees it, freedom to Munoo, as to millions of others, means no more than being beaten from pillar to post. Thus the central theme of the novel is the tragic denial to a simple, landless, peasant of the fundamental right to happiness. This tragic denial of life to Munoo is caused by his poverty, hunger, starvation and degradation also. Munoo is the passion not only of India but of mankind. Innocence is a dominant feature of Munoo's character. He becomes a victim of poverty and exploitations, man's greed and selfishness. In the beginning, he is excited about the life in the cities merely because he does not know the wicked ways of the world.

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