

Mulk Raj Anand's Coolie: An Epic Of Misery**Nafsa Ajmi**Research Scholar
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Reading novels in Indian English writing written by writers such as Mulk Raj Anand is a sort of eye opening part of life. Anand's *Coolie* is a unique and original in many ways. It has been called a great epic of misery. *Coolie* marks a greater self-assurance in the art of Anand and a further deepening description of marginal living. It comprehends greater variety and deeper levels of degradation than does *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. Finally, he is forced to accept his existential condition as determined by his fate, his karma and accepts his class identity, for many others suffer like him. His plight resembles the grim fate of the masses of India. Tired of struggle for existence and poverty, he is terribly afflicted with T.B. he dies at the age of sixteen. 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. The novelist presents the theme of exploitation of the underprivileged in depth in *Coolie*.

The class system ensures that assimilation to a higher class is not possible. The bourgeoisie expand their class through institutions and ideology. But the reality of the working class in *Coolie* is that it itself is without demarcations. Thus the Coolies can move in and out of this class. There is no ideological barrier that demarcates/ brackets the working class. Anand himself refers to the striking mill workers as Coolies; the word means unskilled workers.

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Mulk Raj Anand was a distinguished writer, editor, critic, journalist and political activist, famous for his portrayal of the lives of the poorer castes in traditional Indian society. Born in Peshawar, now in Pakistan on 12th December 1905 and died on 28th September 2004 in Pune, India at the age of 98. 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.

Anand's *Coolie* represents the voice of the suppressed and exploited. The coolies as a class belong nowhere as Anand points out even the lower caste rejects and casts away the Coolies. *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. At the beginning of the novel, we find that Munoo, a boy of fourteen years age, is studying in class V in

a rural school in the village of Bilaspur situated on the Kangra Hills on the banks of the river Beas. In the company of his friends he grazes his cows all day. He finds time to sit under the shade of a large Banyan tree to enjoy the fruits of the season. His life in the village comes to an end when his uncle Daya Ram decides to take him to Sham Nagar, a town ten miles away from their village. His uncle, Daya Ram and aunt, Gujri believe that he is quite grown up and therefore should earn his own living. Munoo's father had died of shock and disappointment when he could not pay the debt to the landlord. His mother died working hard to support Munoo. Munoo's life in the village was hard and he could not forget the miserable deaths of his parents. In spite of these sad memories and the ill-treatment of his aunt Munoo is happy and contented.

Driven by the dire necessity of an independent livelihood, he follows his uncle to work as a domestic servant in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, a sub-accountant in the imperial Bank of Sham Nagar. But Munoo is badly mistreated by the Babu and his wife and receives no sympathy from his uncle. Munoo is held responsible for the loss of the letter of recommendation that his master sought from the sahib Mr. W.P England. After degrading the master's house, unintentionally, by relieving himself in front it and accidentally hurting their daughter while playing he cannot bear the abuse and beating and runs away and boards a train with no definite destination to go to. In the train he meets a man named Prabha Dayal, who is an orphan and was once a coolie. But now Prabha is a Seth, the owner of a Pickle Factory at Daulatpur and is in partnership with Ganpat Seth. Prabha takes Munoo with him to Daulatpur and provides him with employment in the Pickle Factory. Prabha feels some affinity with Munoo because they are both orphans and he himself was a hills man from Kangra. Anand introduces in *Coolie* a complex and exploitative world.

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.

Seth Prabh had a serious nervous breakdown and the doctors advised him to go to the hills if he wanted to save his life. 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.

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 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.

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.

The novel is a veritable segment of unending pain, suffering and prolonged struggle punctuated only occasionally by brief moments of relief and hope. It shows how coolies like Munoo are completely beaten down by the curve of money, power in the Iron Age. The characterization of Munoo is vivid, dramatic, and powerful. Munoo is cast in the mode of the archetypal, ironic, and perfect victim or scapegoat under the sentence of death. But the ironic focus is not sharp enough to be convincing. This is so because Anand attempts a naturalistic reproduction of the vast human landscape and develops an epic mood and scale. The coolie touches the pathetic and the sublime areas of human experience. Here, Anand explores the limits of pain central to the existence of the downtrodden.

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