

CASTE AND CLASS CONFLICT IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S: COOLIE

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Abstract:

The contribution of MulkRaj Anand shows his concern over the organized evil in the society which is the cause of the miseries of the outcaste downtrodden. This organized evil is the real enemy of the society. It deliberately denies the basic human rights to the unprivileged class. Caste system kills the human dignity by giving an unfair advantage to a certain class over the others on the basis of their birth which damages the homogeneity of the society. Anand wants to awaken the exploited, suppressed, dehumanized classes of the society. He feels that exploiting the proletariat has been our national sin which we have been committing for centuries together. They are forced to such a depth that they will sink lower and lower and cannot rise above. They have been pushed to such a lowly life that it makes them feel subhuman. Anand wants to uplift them from the deeps. The present study depicts the predicament of Munoo as a coolie and his social exploitation in the novel.

Keywords: *caste, class conflicts, discrimination, society.*

Introduction:

Mulk Raj Anand, a socially committed novelist, has produced a good deal of literature. He has written more than a dozen novels and about seventy short stories and a host of essays and articles on a number of subjects. His novels fall into two categories namely social and autobiographical novels. He focused his attention on the sufferings, misery and wretchedness of the poor as a result of the exploitation of the downtrodden class of the Indian society. Religious hypocrisy, feudal system, East-West encounter, the place of woman in the society, superstitions, poverty, hunger and exploitation are his common themes. The present study deals with novel namely, Coolie (1936), which deal with poverty, hunger and exploitation as their major themes

Mulk Raj Anand was one of the triumvirates who inaugurated the new section of writers of fiction along with R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Anand is a novelist of urgent social concerns and preoccupations, and the social impulse is at the heart of his writings. He is considered the Messiah of the downtrodden, the unwanted and the unloved. Even in a random reading of Anand's novels, the reader becomes immediately aware of such issues as the tyranny of the caste system, its injustice, and its social, moral and economic consequences, class conflicts, exploitation of various kinds of the poor by the rich, quest for identity, search for freedom, etc. Under colonial rule, a number of social and economic changes took place and as a result a feudal society was gradually transformed into a capitalistic one.

The class system in India has turned out to be a new kind of caste system. It is built on the cash nexus on which it thrives. It has created a society much more complicated and devious, and in some respects more rigid than the one created by caste.

Therefore, it has become a very powerful divisive force, far more damaging to social cohesion than caste, as it has tended to segregate people into the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. Coolie is one classic example of the story of the underprivileged class of the society and of the oppressed people who cannot even make both ends meet. Its appeal is so much innate, humane potential and wide extensive that has designed it purposive to be translated into more than 38 languages of the world.

It has earned for Anand a global reputation as one of the prolific and prominent English novelists. The story is told from the eyes of the narrator and brings to light the inevitable and hidden evils of the Raj, right from exploitation, caste ridden society, communal riots, and police injustice. The novel takes us to different places and cities showing the inhuman and degrading treatment that the poor Munoo gets at the hands of the socially, economically, and politically affluent and higher classes of Indian society and how he copes with all circumstances alone.

Anand was able to strike a chord in the hearts of the conscientious Indians with the beautiful and real to life portrayal of the downtrodden masses of Indian society, the so called have nots. Mulk Raj Anand was much appreciated and recognized for this novel and was one of those people who were highly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. And this influence is clearly seen in all his works including *Coolie*. True to his Marxist spirit, he always portrayed the real India, and more specifically the poor India. Though the novel is historically located in 1930s, it continues to enjoy the same contemporaneity in the present century India.

Munoo is the protagonist of this novel *Coolie*. Generally, the protagonists of the novels of Mulk Raj Anand are from dirt and dust; they are too meek to report against the evil forces which tend to suppress them and their like. These hero-antiheroes, no doubt, are endowed with certain admirable qualities of the head and the heart; but the cruel, irrational social forces hamper the proper development of these qualities.

The diligence, intelligence and sensitiveness of these characters are awfully suppressed that they can never gain confidence to wage a fight for their cause. They, however, do sensitively feel the torture of the unjust practices, but the reaction is limited merely to their acknowledgement of the social status which they are doomed to accept without a hope for emancipation. The knowledge of their helplessness against the establishment, social set-up, traditions, taboos and customs makes them writhe with acute mental agony.

They can do nothing but accept their faith. The summary lines of *Coolie* delineate a bohemian life saga of an adolescent hill boy Munoo. An idyllic life in the Kangra hill with friends and relations seemed to be short lived as Munoo's guardian and uncle Dayaram, at the instigation of his irate wife, drags the orphan to town to eke out his living. The orphan boy Munoo runs to avoid every place of cruelty in search of happiness and everywhere he is suppressed.

He is aged fifteen and he does various jobs at Daulatpur, Bombay and Simla. He dies of tuberculosis in the end because of poverty. Munoo is exploited greatly in one way or another, by one person or another. Munoo universally symbolizes the suffering of the oppressed and those taken advantage of. Suppression takes major role in *Coolie* to show how pathetic the lives of the Indian

people are under the suppressive forces. Through his saga of suppression, Anand shows the decline and upturn in the life of Munoo. Munoo's uncle and aunt consider him as a machine for obtaining money. Munoo willingly receives his role as a slave and agrees to go to town with his uncle. At fourteen, Munoo is forced to work in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, a worker in Imperial Bank in Sham Nagar. Munoo's romantic views are destroyed by the wife of Babu Nathoo Ram.

This lady is not good-natured and always abuses and curses him without any reason. Anand's Munoo is denied happiness. Munoo is humiliated for relieving outside the wall and abuse is showered on him. Munoo suffers physical and mental torture, and this shows suppression in the form of child labour. Even at the tender age of fourteen, he is not provided with the basic necessities.

Munoo is, in fact, a burning symbol of millions of unfortunate souls like himself – lost and bereft, abused and down-trodden. If Anand hints at the gradual break-down of the caste system, mainly through the British, in *Untouchable* and *Road*, he shows in *Coolie* how it is replaced by class system – an evil no less vicious than the former – an awful result of social revolution fermented by the twin forces of industrialism and the cash nexus.

Central to *Coolie* is Anand's humanistic faith that this class-consciousness born of money or social status can have crushing effects on those that are at the lower rungs. We can see in *Coolie* how the evils of poverty and cruelty crush a bud of youth before it could bloom to any extent. Daya Ram, Mr. and Mrs. Nathoo Ram, Ganpat, Chimta Sahib, and Mrs. Mainwaring too, have only contempt for Munoo. They slap him, kick him, and abuse him. Almost at every turn he comes across only pain and cruelty which make his life a painful saga of suffering. He is forced to become a sort of a purposeless vagabond with apparently no control on his destiny.

By studying all the above characters, we can say the main character who is Munoo who suffers because he is poor, he is coolie and all other coolies also suffer because capitalists and other rich Indians exploit them physically and economically. Munoo is the representative character in the novel. His longing to live, we can see in the novel. Right from the beginning we can say whether in village or at city, all persons who are responsible for the suffering of the character

Munoo are the same. Moneylender seized all property of Munoo's father and his mother. His father died of shock and Munoo became orphan. He worked in textile factory. There also capitalists exploited him. Anand depicted the real condition of downtrodden workers of the society. Anand also shown how a lady exploits Munoo sexually and because of extra work of pulling rickshaw and sexual exploitation, Munoo died. In *Coolie* Anand has shown extreme suffering of the characters like Munoo, Hari-Har and Prabh Dayal

Anand novel also illustrated his compassion and concerns for the poor of India. In *Coolie* he portrays the life of young Munoo, kshatriya by caste but a peasant boy who travels from his mountainous village through north India and eventually finds himself in Bombay. He is an orphan and so is forced to take whatever work he can in order to survive. He works as a servant, in a mine, a factory and as a coolie – black men who empty their bowels in the fields. In each of these situations Munoo is subjected to harassment, beatings and financial exploitation at the hands of employers, moneylenders, and his so called betters. But the story is also about the development of a young boy who begins to learn about the world around him and attempt to make some sense of it. This novel was written in 1936 and has a fictionalised account of a Bombay riot, which clearly represented Anand's thoughts on those agents who fuelled communalism in their desperate attempts to keep the country divided, but also to keep the poor and workers in their place. So the riot as witnessed by Munoo is deliberately engineered to break a potential strike through the use of communalised tensions between Hindus and Muslims.

It is Munoo's case in *Coolie* where Anand shows his consummate skill in the effective use of history and ideology to construct a highly evocative and extremely analytical metaphor from one of the most ordinary experiences of common life. He had done the same in the creation of Bakha, who has been ceaselessly pitted in the archetypal conflict between himself and the tyrannical society. Munoo has gone through different positions before embracing death: as a domestic servant, as a factory worker in Bombay, and finally as a rickshawpuller in Simla. It could be argued that *Coolie* is Anand's youthful romance with British socialism and Marxism; the narrative and the central metaphor of coolie challenge the European political and economic thought.

It must be noted that the last two stages of Munoo's journey conclusively show that the British colonial governance of India is largely responsible for the creation and perpetuation of slavery, poverty and suffering. It is at this Mulk Raj Anand point that one finds Anand almost aligning himself with Conrad's central thesis in *Heart of Darkness*: the entire issue of colonial imperialism turns out to be a nightmarish moral predicament in the figure of Kurtz.

Anand has repeatedly said that he wrote *Coolie* in response to Kipling's *Kim*. Kipling's hero Kim, a child-hero, can knock down the giantized figure of a pathan and become an active pillar of the colonial empire. It should be remembered that both Kim and Munoo are orphans. But Anand's Munoo is a realistic hero, a tragic hero, a "hero-anti-hero"; he is fashioned after the English romantic child-hero whose innocence has been violated and whose direct confrontation with the life of continued exploitation, starvation and poverty proves to be fruitless and unproductive. After completing the full circle of his journey, Munoo finally comes back to the hills; Mrs. Mainwaring, a Eurasian, brings him as her servant to Simla, where he works as her rickshaw-puller. Essentially a hillboy from Kangra valley, Munoo travels to Daultpur and from thereon to Bombay and has had varied experiences, ranging from a domestic servant to a factory worker to a coolie and to a rickshaw-puller. It is during his work as coolie where he encounters challenging problems of a fierce and ugly competition with other coolies and is finally hurt by a car driven by Mrs. Mainwaring. In the story, Munoo receives inhuman and repelling treatment from his Indian masters, the foreign mill owners in Bombay and his compatriot coolies.

Thus, Anand presents a vivid picture of human misery – poverty, exploitation, hunger and disease. Munoo's experience as a child-servant is as disgusting as his other experiences. Indeed, the story of Munoo is a study in human suffering. It should be remembered that Munoo, being a Kshatriya by birth, does not carry the same baggage of untouchability as does Bakha. But Anand has successfully shown that his sufferings result from the combined forces of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and feudalism. Since the confrontational life in Bombay is centred on his direct experience as a worker, a labourer and a coolie, Munoo now knows the meaning of poverty, suffering and wretchedness. One of the most

moving scenes in Bombay is the existence of pavement-dwellers and of poor workers who live in hutments with dirt, filth and unsanitary conditions around. Anand's caustic irony in portraying the work of the rickshaw-pullers to transport the British sahibs and memsahibs up and down the hills in Simla only sharpens the centrality of the meaning of the metaphor of coolie – "For India was the one place in the world where servants still were servants..." The souls of the rickshaw-pullers loudly echo human cruelty, exploitation, subjugation and social injustice. The incantation uttered by the Bombay coolies, "We belong to suffering! We belong to suffering!", is fully reverberated by the destitution and misery of the rickshaw-pullers of Simla.

Anand puts the entire issue of the exploitive use of labour in a direct moral context: "Old Gandhi refused to ride in a rickshaw as, he said, it hurt his soul to have to be borne in a carriage driven by human beings". Finally, Munoo dies of tuberculosis in Simla – unsung and unknown but freed from the life of wretchedness, abuse and poverty. Whereas Bakha's world of desire remained repressed, Munoo's unborn dream-world was permanently buried in the earth. Did Bakha and Munoo fight for an established cause? What are Anand's motives in creating these two universal archetypes? Can the Bakhas and the Munoo's of the world ever recover their lost human dignity within the Indian Mulk Raj Anand space and outside of it in other spaces in the universe? Is Anand's objurgation of casteism, capitalism, feudalism, colonialism and imperialism inspired by his optative vision of hope in man's ability to reconstruct a new social order? It must be understood that both Bakha and Munoo are sufferers and not rebels, that the novel *Untouchable* had the blessings of Mahatma Gandhi and a laudatory introduction by E.M. Forster, and that the novel *Coolie* was received enthusiastically by almost all British liberals. It must also be noted that, whereas Bakha's work as a sweeper cannot be valued and negotiated primarily because of the politics of Hindu casteism, Munoo's work as a servant, factory worker and coolie is fully negotiable in the context of material production. These two novels alone had given Anand the status of a revolutionary novelist. Anand fought persistently and uncompromisingly for equality, liberty and justice, and for the basic human needs in the newly emerging civil structures of colonial India and post-independence India. In fact, Anand maintains that the new humanism must include the fundamental human values of "the Buddhist

karuna or compassion," bhakti and truth and a deep commitment to the ideal of human dignity. Can one's sense of social and public good and, hence, of social justice be directed by one's sense of moral good and the truth of the human condition?

Anand shows his concern over the organized evil in the society which is the cause of the miseries of the outcaste downtrodden. This organized evil is the real enemy of the society. It deliberately denies the basic human rights to the unprivileged class. Caste system kills the human dignity by giving an unfair advantage to a certain class over the others on the basis of their birth which damages the homogeneity of the society. Anand wants to awaken the exploited, suppressed, dehumanized classes of the society. He feels that exploiting the proletariat has been our national sin which we have been committing for centuries together. They are forced to such a depth that they will sink lower and lower and cannot rise above. They have been pushed to such a lowly life that it makes them feel subhuman. Anand wants to uplift them from the deeps. Munoo endures his social exploitation for quite a long time in the novel.

The salient feature of *Coolie* is Anand's description of social realism in the character of the coolie Munoo, registering a strong protest against greed, inhumanity and selfishness in different forms, throwing into focus the forces industrialism, capitalism, communalism and colonialism crushing the individual in the society. In the variety of characters from all classes of society and its variety of episodes *Coolie* has acquired an epic quality.

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