
**HUMANISM IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S NOVEL
(WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO COOLIE)**

Sandeep Kaur*

Dr. Kailash**

INTRODUCTION

Coolie is described as an “epic of misery,” “the epic of modern India” and “the Odyssey of Munoo.” This novel is a sincere protest against the emergence of a new world of money, wage-slaves, distinction of class and status and man’s haunting loneliness. His brief concern in the novel is to project the lot of poor coolies, who are always taken for granted by the rich people. The coolie’s like Munoo are completely beaten down by the curse of money power in the Iron Age. “Money is the great God, and in novel after novel Anand repeats that there are two types of people—the rich and the poor. In the final analysis, money decides both caste and class; it also decides one’s political affiliation.” [1]

The introduction of machine increased production but it gave birth to the problems of employment, slum areas, lust for wealth and conflicts between the labor and the mill owners. Anand discovers the life of coolie, a real world of shocking miseries. The crushing weight of machine-civilization causes a fearful conflict of master-servant relationship. Even the primary emotions of love are adversely affected.

Mulk Raj Anand, as a humanist, accepts life with all its inherent weaknesses, vices, virtues, sufferings and pains. Fed up with the life, his characters may run away from their homes. Coolie is the story of a hill-boy, Munoo, an orphan village boy, who moves from the hill-village to the town, from town to the city and then up to the mountains. The movement of the hero from one place to another also gives Anand an opportunity to present a wide panorama of the Indian Social life, his purpose being social indictment. Thus, the novel not only provides a panorama of the physical highlights of India, but also of her society in all its variety, including its grinding poverty and wretchedness.

*Research Scholar, Department of English, Monad University, Hapur (U.P.)

**Assistant Professor, Department of English, F.C. College for Women, Hisar (Haryana)

Anand is a novelist with a mission, his is a novel of “human centrality” and the form which he chooses is quite adequate for his purposes. His novels are organic wholes, the form and content are fully integrated, and they are inseparable parts of a single whole. In *Coolie* he gives a comprehensive view of the contemporary Indian society. He criticizes many evils and injustices prevailing in it. He concentrates on the seamy side of life and depicts the misery, depression and degradation of the poor. The poor are hungry and sick, and weak and helpless at all places, whether in small towns and villages or in big cities. They have no sense of self-respect or dignity, they are incapable of holding their own or asserting themselves, and they have to cringe before the more affluent people for right to live. They are driven from pillar to post and are compelled to live a sub-human life in most unhygienic conditions, having been rendered to this wretched state by the combined forces of Colonialism, Capitalism and Industrialism.

At the very beginning of the novel, Munoo, an orphan from Kangra hills, sets out unwillingly, in search of a livelihood. He tells his playmate, Bishambar: “My aunt wants me to begin earning money.... My uncle says that I am grown up and must fend for myself.” [2] When he tries to “earn money” and “fend for himself”, his very first contact with realities shatters his dream and aspirations. His several roles include working as a domestic servant in an urban middle-class family in Sham Nagar, as a worker in a pickle factory, and as a coolie in Bombay and as a rickshaw-puller in an Anglo-Indian household in Shimla, a job which causes his untimely death by slow consumption in the prime of his youth.

Mulk Raj Anand views man as man, neither as angel nor as devil. That is why his characters are neither purely good nor absolutely bad. No character ever achieves perfection. His characters are a natural and credible product of good and bad. For example, the hero of *Untouchable*, Bakha is largely a picture of passive suffering, yet sometimes he comes out with his anger and even shouts for justice. On the contrary, Munoo is completely a passive character; he doesn't act but is altogether acted upon by society. Both, however, share a naive, warm-heartedness, a sense of gratitude for the least show kindness to them, and a desire to emulate “the Sahib.” His profoundest urge makes him appear all so universally human: “When will I grow up and be a strong man.” [3] Anand shows Munoo, caught in an existential dilemma: he is an orphan and so alone and free to decide what he is to do, and where he is to go, but the circumstances in which he is placed, are such that he feels trapped and finds no way out. “He is essentially an ineffectual pawn on the chessboard of destiny?” [4]

He, unlike his counterpart in the other novel, Bakha, is cornered by inferiority of caste, but rather by his socio-economic degradation on other scores. Mulk Raj Anand seems to say that poverty is the main reason of the frustration and degradation in the human life. As it was depicted in *Untouchable* that caste matters but in *Coolie* Munoo says: “Caste didn’t matter, I am a Kshatriya and I am poor, and Varma; a Brahmin, is a servant boy, a menial because he is poor. No, caste doesn’t matter. The babus are like the Sahib-logs and all servants look alike, there must only be two kinds of people in the world: the rich and the poor.” [5]

It is poverty that derives him to drudgery for his livelihood at the age of fourteen. His image of the city “where there were beautiful things to eat, beautiful clothes to wear and beautiful toys to play with [6] is shattered simply because he is a destitute and has to get employed in the house of Baba Nathoo Ram. Here begins a whole succession of painful social hurts and indignities for him. Bibi Uttam Kaur, “Seemed to hate him for nothing.” [7] He is underpaid, underfed, and humiliated by her by torrents of curses upon him such as this one (when he has in ignorance relieved himself before ‘their house):

Vay shameless, shameful, vulgar, stupid hill-boy!
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? Why we did not know we are taking on an
animal in our employ, an utter brute, a savage!
What will the Sahibs think, who pass by ours doors
every morning and afternoon. The Babuji has his
prestige to keep up with the Sahibs. Hai, what a
horrible, horrible mess he had made outside my
door! [8]

Whether he is at fault or not, she is always ready with her torrent of abuses-and curses. Nathoo Ram is not bad at heart, but he is a hen-pecked husband. To bring out fully Munoo’s spiritual anguish, and to enlist our sympathy for him, the novelist gives us his “stream of consciousness”, as one day he sits scrubbing utensils and we get a peep into the tortured soul of the poor orphan: “He realized finally his position in the world. He was to be a slave, a servant who should do the work, all the odd jobs, someone to be abused, even beaten.” [9]

Munoo is a passive character. He took for granted his identity. It never occurred to him, to ask himself what he was apart from being a servant and why he was a servant. Like every child in the world, like most grown-ups, he had been blinded by the glamour of greatness, glory and splendor of it, into which forgetting that he -was condemned by an iniquitous system always to remain small, abject and drab. What kept him chained to the wheel of coolie's destiny was his ignorance about the potentialities of his makeup. He is slapped and abused when a tea tray is slipped from his hands in the presence of Mr. England. After a few days he complained to his uncle, but his Uncle Daya Ram gives him a beating and throws' him out of his lodging. Munoo comes to realize, though as yet not clearly, that life for him is going to be nothing but a painful drama of exploitation of a child. He somewhat begins to understand his position in the world. He realizes that he is destined to be a slave, a servant, and gain a first insight into his uncle's dictum that "money is everything." Now he at least knows that his lot is wretched because he has no money and that money is the basis of all happiness. Mulk Raj Anand says that all the innocent people are deceived by the crooked people in the society. Prabha and his wife, who are kind hearted and provide shelter and shows affection on Munoo, are deceived by his partner Ganpat.

M. R. Singh rightly defines out another social criticism implied by Anand in the episode of Mr. England's visit:

Mr. England, the chief cashier of the Imperial Bank of India, Sham Nagar, typifies the average British reaction to the Indians in those days. He is embarrassed by the obsequiousness of his subordinate, Babu Nathoo Ram, and his visit to his latter's' house (where he is invited to tea) turns out to be social disaster, owing to woeful ignorance of each other's way on the part of both. [10]

The tragic drama of exploitation, initiated by the first and played out in Sham Nagar, is followed by Munoo's bitter experiences in Daulatpur and Bombay. After escaping from the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, Munoo gets into a train and is incidentally discovered by Prabha under a bunk. Prabha is a kind-hearted man. He takes Munoo to his factory. His wife Parvati grows fond of him. She gives him motherly warmth. Her life for Munoo is pleasing in the beginning owing

to the affection of Prabha and his wife Parvati. But soon, Munoo's benefactor falls a victim to the treachery of his shrewd partner Ganpat, who collects all the money from their customers and spends it recklessly on a dancing girl and drinking. He is left with only fifty rupees. Ganpat sets up his own pickle-making and essence brewing factory. He succeeds in spreading the rumors that Prabha is a bankrupt and the factory is running under a heavy loss, Therefore, Prabha's creditors come in large numbers to demand the money he owes them. At last, Prabha is arrested by the police. He is insulted, abused and beaten like animals. The policemen compel him to tell where he buried his money. The inspector of the police orders the sergeant, "Strike him! Strike him like this!" [11] The third degree methods of extorting confessions are openly practiced by policemen. We can say it is Ganpat's villainy that Prabha is reduced to beggary. The pickle factory is sold out. As Prabha has fallen ill, Munoo decided to work as a coolie in the grain market to earn something to help his master and his family. But he is shocked to find that there is a cut-throat competition among the starving coolies, each competing with the others for getting a job on extremely low wage. Anand gives us a harrowing account of the suffering of Munoo and other coolies in the grain market: They are reduced to the level; of beasts and are actually huddled with them:

The square courtyard, flanked on all sides by low and mud shops, flimsy huts and tall five storied houses with variegated cement facades, arches and colonnades was crowded with many crucifixes, crammed with snake-horned bullocks and stray rhinoceros-like bulls and skimmy calves bespattered with their own dung, as they sat or stood, munching pieces of straw, snuffing their muzzles aimlessly, or masticating the grass which they had eaten some hours before. Pressed against these were bodies of coolies, colored like the earth on which they lay snoring, or crouching round a communal hubble-bubble, or shifting to explore a patch clear of puddles, on which to rest. [12]

One of the greatest misfortunes of the laboring class is that in spite of willingness to work, they

get no work. Indeed bread is dear, while flesh and blood are so cheap.

After the departure of Prabha from Daulatpur, Munoo remains alone in the city. He has an urge to go to Bombay. When he lands in Bombay the elephant-driver warns him, “the bigger the city is, the crueller it is the sons of Adam You have to pay even for the breath that you breathe.”

[13] The working conditions in the Sir George Cotton Mills are worse than those in the pickle factory at Daulatpur. Ganpat turns into Zimmie Thomas, a tyrannical foreman who is wicked and shrewd - here Anand wants to make it clear that the capitalists mainly consider the laborer and coolies as sub-human with no right. “For them, the India labor is just a piece of poverty, a sub-human being, no rights and all duty, whose only utility is to be a serviceable tool.” [14] There is no security of tenure and retrenchment is always the ‘naked sword’ dangling over the head of the workers, for at the moment of crises brought about by depression Sir Reginald White guards against any loss to the share-holder. [15]

But he instructs the mills to go on short time, ordering “no work” for the fourth week in every month till further notice. “No wages will be paid off for that week,” says a notice, but the management having the welfare of the workers at heart, have sanctioned a substantial allowance. This change will take effect from May 10th (signed) Sir Reginald White, Bart, President, Sir George White Mill.” [16]

In this way, Reginald white subtly masks the exploitation involved by calling the poor recompense a “substantial allowance.” Anand’s description of the coolies in the mill makes most poignant reading: “.....in a corner a coolie huddled, pillowing his head on his arms, shrinking in to himself, as if he were afraid to occupy too much spaces.” [17] Munoo and Hari find some open space by the doorsteps of a shop, but are told by a moaning half-naked woman: “My husband dies here last night,” Hari’s response is quiet typical of this situation: “He has attained the release, we will rest in his place, we are not afraid of ghosts.” [18]

In addition to capitalism and industrialism, communalism appears as a powerful tool of exploitation in this novel. The announcement that the factory would be on short work with immediate effect fans the fire of discontent. The communists fully exploit the situation by instigating the workers to go on strike. Political leaders with vested interests incite communal hatred and grind their own axe, which makes the destitute lose their jobs and sometimes even their lives. “Communalism too lands a hand.” [19] Saros Cowasjee is all praise for Anand for including the communal problem in the novel: In Indo-Anglian Fiction, Coolie is perhaps the

first novel to touch on this subject and it foreshadows the murderous riots that followed the partitioning of India in 1947.” [20]

The final act of Munoo’s tragedy commences when Mrs. Mainwaring, whose car knocks him down. She takes him to Shimla. Here, Mrs. Mainwaring treats him with almost loving care. Yet he is compelled to work hard to pull rickshaw uphill for long hours and so his energy is sapped, and he falls a prey to the deadly diseases of consumption. Munoo fails to endure his illness for long and at last passes away in the arms of his friend Mohan, when he is hardly sixteen years old: “In a dirage-like movement, Coolie ends with Munoo’s death as a result, medically of consumption, and naturalistically of the ills of society.” [21] The novel concludes with the words: “But in the early hours of one unreal white night he passed away – the tide of his having reached back to the deeps.” [22]

Mulk Raj Anand presents Munoo as a victim of irrational systems and the inhuman cruelties of society. What happens to this obscure hill-boy is by no means an isolated example of human suffering. Munoo’s destiny symbolizes the tragic situations of the poor and the underprivileged who in themselves are not responsible for their unalleviated suffering, but who are all the same victims of ruthless exploitation. Therefore, “*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.” [23]

As in the case of Munoo, the prevailing social order and new values created by the modern civilization sap the natural warm- heartedness and zest for life of an individual and lead to his tragic waste and suffering. Munoo is not able to redeem himself because he is made to think that people like him are born to suffer. He says: We belong to suffering! We belong to suffering! [24]

As a humanist, Mulk Raj Anand observes every situation very keenly and portrays it realistically, authentically and honestly. Above all, his approach is balanced and objective; he doesn’t allow himself to be overwhelmed by his compassion for the downtrodden, nor does he lose sight of both sides of picture. Anand also describes the redeeming side of good fortune that comes in the way of Munoo. For instance, Munoo becomes an object of sympathy and kindness of a childless couple, Seth Prabhu Dayal and his saintly wife Parvati: “... wonderful eagerness with which she came up to Munoo and without asking who he was, took him in her arms and patted him on his forehead.” [25]

Thus, *Coolie* touches the pathetic and sublime areas of human experience. The dehumanization

of mankind, loss of human values, and human decay are the main targets of Anand's attack. Anand is not a fatalist and through *Coolie* he has preached the doctrine of action. He seems to be suggesting that, "The poor must assert themselves, for it is only then they will get their rights and their lot will be ameliorated. But as C.D. Narsimhaiah observes, "an underdog's wits are powerless in the face of a complex machinery of economic and religious oppression." [26]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. *Ibid*, p.218.
4. *Ibid*, p. 47.
5. *Ibid*, p. 69.
6. *Ibid*, p. 11.
7. *Ibid*, p. 41.
8. *Ibid*, p. 28.
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10. M.R. Singh, *Coolie: A Critical Study* (Meerut: Loyal Book Depot, 1975), p. 47-48.
11. Mulk Raj Anand, *Coolie* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1983), 132.
12. *Ibid*, p.137.
13. *Ibid*, p. 12.
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15. *Ibid*, p.257.
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17. *Ibid*, p. 179.
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20. Saros Cowasjee, *Coolie: An Assessment* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 52.
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24. Mulk Raj Anand, Coolie (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1983), p. 247.
25. Ibid, p.123.
26. Ibid, p.16.