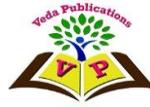


RESEARCH ARTICLE



## MULK RAJ ANAND AS A VOTARY OF THE DOWNTRODDEN IN *COOLIE*

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Article Info:

Article Received: 22/07/2014

Revised on: 04/08/2014

Accepted on: 29/09/2014

### ABSTRACT

Social inequalities have been an ugly reality in the history of most civilizations of the world. Authority is wielded by the rich who ruthlessly use their economic power to exploit the poor, compel them to be subservient, erode their sense of self-respect, kill their spirit, deprive them of their rightful share and push them into the abyss of abject self-pity and despair from which their only escape is through death. Many writers the world over have rendered this ugly and unsavoury reality in their works to rekindle the dying humanism and compassion. Mulk Raj Anand is one such votary of the downtrodden who has tried to rouse the consciousness of the public against such injustices and atrocities by vividly portraying them in his novels. Located in pre-Independent India, *Coolie* highlights the ill-treatment and cruelty meted out to the economically vulnerable segment of society both by its fellow countrymen as well as its British masters.

**Keywords:** *Homelessness, Poverty, Hunger, Exploitation, Deprivation.*

## INTRODUCTION

Indian English Literature refers to the body of work by writers in India who write in English but whose native language could be any one of the numerous languages of India. It is frequently referred to as Indo-Anglican literature. These Indian writers who chose the medium of English wrote on a variety of themes. Raja Ram Mohan Roy highlighted the malpractices and cruel customs prevalent in the socio-religious culture of Bengal at the time and advocated pioneering reforms in societal and religious practices; Sri Aurobindo re-interpreted myths as a way to attain spiritual humanism; Dhan Gopal Mukherjee wrote children's stories, a genre which still remains a field much under-explored; Gurudev Rabindra Nath Tagore with his huge body of work is an integral part of the Bengali consciousness and Bengali landscape. He not only spearheaded the Bengali Renaissance but also put literary expression from India on the global map by becoming the first Nobel laureate from India. Others like Toru Dutt, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Sarojini Naidu also used English as a medium of expression and paved the way for many Indian English writers who went on to secure for India a pride of place in the literary scape of the world.

Indian Writing in English began to be seriously noticed and discussed only with the arrival of a few novelists in the 1930s like R K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao who overcame the hurdles posed by a language foreign to them and evolved a distinctive style of their own that carried the hues and flavours of the Indian ethos. Amarjit Singh in his essay titled *Contemporary Indo-English Literature: An Approach* included in the book 'Aspects of Indian Writing in English', edited by M. K. Naik writes:

*"...in all Indo-English writing, there is a hiatus between the cultural experience that is expressed, and the language chosen to express it. The writer may exploit this gap to his advantage in his work to... achieve a quaintness that will make his work stand out in the midst of both Indian and Western literatures..." (p4)*

The work of these novelists centres around issues like nationalism, freedom struggle, social reform,

individual consciousness. It reflects Indian culture, tradition, and history. R K Narayan uses simple language and subtle ironic humour to explore the oddities, idiosyncrasies of human nature in his portrayal of the socio-comic aspects of an ordinary Indian's life which gave his work a universal appeal. Raja Rao's work, though comparatively less, centres around the philosophy and message of Gandhi in the context of the prevalent social evils. Mulk Raj Anand's novels highlight the evils and inequalities present in society, the trials, and tribulations of the less fortunate. Through his works like *Untouchable* and *Coolie* he gives graphic descriptions of the daily struggle for existence of his protagonists, their tale of woe, sweat and misery to awaken public consciousness and initiate social reform while retaining the distinctive Indianness of his novels through ample use of Indian words and phrases that help us to relate immediately to the atmosphere and the situation.

## DISCUSSION

Born in 1905 in Peshawar, Pakistan, Anand studied in Khalsa College, Amritsar. He travelled to England to study Philosophy from University College, London and did his Ph. D from Cambridge University. Upon his return to India, he was drawn into the Freedom Movement and was associated with the Indian National Congress. His literary career began with the publication of his first novel 'Untouchable' in 1935. Anand was a socially committed novelist. Through his novels and essays he highlights the themes of suffering, misery, wretchedness of the poor and the downtrodden people who are exploited by the rich and the upper-class people. Anand was a humanist at heart who wanted to bring about change in the lives of these unfortunate people. Religious hypocrisy, superstitions, poverty, hunger, position of women, etc are realistically portrayed. They bring to light the ugly reality of Indian society and register his powerful protest regarding the apathetic attitude of the authorities. They also set an entire generation of Indians thinking about these social evils and motivated them to take remedial action. Public opinion was mobilised against the upper caste and affluent people who oppressed and exploited the marginalised people in the name of religion, tradition, and privilege.

Published in 1936, a year after *Untouchable*, *Coolie* is Anand's second novel and has been translated into more than twenty languages thus testifying to the novel's universal appeal and the fact that the poor are exploited by the rich everywhere. Anand stands in the legion of writers like Leo Tolstoy, Munshi Premchand, Thomas Hardy, Chinua Achebe who have exposed cruelties in their respective societies.

'Coolie' depicts the tragic fate of a fourteen-year-old orphan boy Munoo who is subjected to cruel and inhuman treatment and dies prematurely due to starvation, exploitation, suffering and disease only two years later. His heart-rending tale of woes begins with the early death of his father who dies due to feudal exploitation when their meagre land was taken away forcibly and the subsequent death of his mother who dies due to exertion, hunger, and starvation. Her suffering and the final image of her lying dead forever impinged upon his mind.

*"...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 resignation."* (Coolie, p13)

The young boy Munoo is left at the mercy of the unsympathetic relatives who grudgingly take him in. Now Munoo does not have any place he could call home. He is treated unkindly by his aunt causing his young mind to be haunted by the death of his parents. Soon his uncle takes him to town to work as a domestic help in the house of Babu Nathuram, a clerk in Imperial Bank of India. Munoo is made to undertake the long journey of ten miles on bare feet which get blistered, but his own uncle Daya Ram showed no compassion. (The Coolie, p16). Nathuram's wife has an acerbic tongue and abuses him vehemently while forcing him to do hard work from morning till night allowing him no time to rest or play. Munoo would be either very tired at the end of the day that he could not even be awakened 'by a few digs in the ribs.' Or he would be so insulted that he would succumb 'to sleep, stifling his sobs and his cries.' One unfortunate incident scars his mind forever when he was unable to hold himself and not knowing where to go, he relieves

himself at the kitchen doorstep causing his mistress to hurl abuses at him. His uncle would collect Monoo's entire pay and once even mercilessly beat him up for disturbing his mid-day siesta for some food which he had come in the hope of getting at his uncle's house. The incident filled Munoo with a revulsion for his uncle and he longed to escape from the humiliating situation in his life. He realises the importance of money. He could understand how poverty emaciates a person. He would be haunted by his last remembrances of his parents just before they had died...

*'the hollow eyes of his own father looking down at him tenderly before he fell asleep for the last time... he could feel the warmth of his mother's lap as he had lain in it while she moved the mill stone, round and round, round and round, till she had languished and expired. How empty he felt without warmth now...'* (The Coolie, p74)

But his desire for life was so strong that he would spring back with an impetuosity that would always invite the ire of his superiors who would then subject him to ferocious beatings with their boots or with a thick stick.

Anand draws attention to a cross section of society who are at the receiving end of exploitation at the hands of the rich and the powerful. There are half-naked women, grey-haired, dim-eyed and bent over with age and long years of toil written in the wrinkles on their faces, trying to eke out a living by making plates and bowls out of dried leaves. Anand sharply indicts the Indian society with its concept of master-servant relationship, its hypocritical notion of superiority of the rich over the poor while pretending to hold a higher moral ground. Munoo is compelled to escape from the house of Nathuram and for a brief period Munoo enjoys some respite in the form of Prabha Dayal, the owner of a pickle factory who takes pity on him and takes him home, but his partner Ganpat treacherously cheats him and forces him to return to his native village. Munoo now must find recourse for himself. He goes to the grain market to seek the back breaking work of a coolie. What follows is a vivid account with graphic details of the abject

condition of the coolies who lie in gutters trying to get a wink of sleep after the hard labour of the day. They toil like slaves the whole day, get meagre wages with which they can barely fill their empty stomachs and the largest fear that looms before them is the loss of work in the face of ample supply of workers who are willing to toil in return for paltry wages. Anand's vivid description of the scene where "...congested with the bodies of coolies, coloured like the earth on which they lay snoring or crouching around a communal hubble-bubble, or shifting to explore a patch clear of puddles on which to rest..." (Coolie, p 146) or "There were Lallas going about in fine starched muslins...(while the coolies were) copper-coloured men, wearing next to nothing swathed in patched-up rags..." (Coolie, p 149) is forever imprinted upon the mind of the reader. There are more coolies than there is work. This gives 'lallas' the opportunity to push the rates of wages even lower. Desperation is writ large on the faces of the coolies. They scramble, jostle with each other for back breaking work that would not even fetch them even a single square meal. Throughout the novel, the people wielding power hurl such a volley of expletives and filthy abuses that is utterly disgusting and shocking. This experience compels Munoo to seek out other options and he reaches Bombay where he finds work in a cotton-mill. Anand portrays the seamy side of life in a big city and the horrors of work in the factory and life in the 'chawl'. The exploitation here is even worse. The exploiters are not natives, but the white colonisers and the exploitation reaches a new low with the workers made to slog like beasts and allowed no time to recharge their energy. The women workers are even more exploited, newly lactating mothers are not allowed to nurse their babies. Their children who accompany them here frequently get accidentally injured by the machines. But there is no compensation. The oppressors have no humanity, they don't regard the workers as humans who have a right to a life of dignity. In such an environment, Munoo a lad of only 15 years has to work for eleven hours at a stretch. An agitation breaks out in the factory, workers go on strike. Somehow the workers are turned against one another in the name of religion. The situation escalates into communal riots that break out in the whole city between the Hindus and the Muslims. Munoo gets hurt and is knocked

down by a car. The owner, Mrs Mainwaring takes Munoo with her to Simla. He is back in the hills. Munoo recovers and starts working as her domestic servant and rickshaw-puller. Much too hard labour for a body much too young takes its toll on Munoo. The strenuous work deteriorates his already weakened health, and he succumbs to tuberculosis. TB was incurable in those days. Despite all possible treatment, Munoo dies a pathetic death, aged only sixteen.

### CONCLUSION

Coolie is a general term for all kinds of menial workers - domestic servants, load carriers, factory workers, rickshaw-pullers, etc. Munoo does all of these and is therefore representative of all the coolies. Munoo is a victim of child-labour at the hands of the rich and the powerful who try their utmost to extract everything from helpless people like Munoo. Being a child, Munoo has no awareness of his basic human rights. He does not even know that he is being exploited. He accepts his fate. He has no way of knowing otherwise since he was bereaved so early in his life and his life thence was a constant struggle from one meal to the next, thereby developing a neurosis of losing his job though that job did nothing for him. How many of us are caught in this quagmire? However, his innocence remains intact throughout. We chillingly realise that these people are not afraid of death, but of the gnawing pangs of hunger. Death offers a much-needed release from this kind of life. Economic vulnerability caused by acute poverty forces man to do anything to assuage the pangs of hunger. Through this novel, Anand protests the blatant and rampant cruelty prevalent in the Indian society which otherwise professes to be very upright, benevolent, and moralistic. For these heartless people, the poor are not really people. Coolie might be historically set in the 1930s, but the reality of poverty-stricken people remains the same.

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