

## COOLIE: THE ODYSSEY OF MUNOO

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Coolie, as a sequel to Untouchable, is the second novel by M.R. Anand that appeared in 1936. Like Untouchable, it is a novel that deals in the social issues of contemporary India. The novel is a reflection of sufferings, exploitation, deprivation and tragedies of a man. A man, living in society, is compelled to abide by, or to suffer, or to be benefitted by the prevailing trends, conditions, practices and lifestyles of people in a society. The novel reflects these practices and their impacts on human lives that is symbolized by Munoo. Munoo, the victim of the circumstances under the contemporary social conditions undergoes various phases of his journey, makes the theme of the novel.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Coolie, Odyssey of Munoo*

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Coolie* is the odyssey of Munoo, an orphaned village boy from the Kangra hills, who is unaware of the evil forces of the society in which he is born and is living. Innocence and simplicity is dominant feature of his character. He does not know the way of the world. In the words of Cowasjee, "The magic of the book is in Munoo's innocence, in his naïve warm heartedness, his love and comradeship, his irrepressible curiosity and zest for life" (qut. in Varshney 63). He is born in a poor family. His father dies of feudal exploitation and mother of poverty and hunger. As an orphan, he faces domestic exploitation at the hands of his uncle and aunt. Munoo is ill-treated by his cruel aunt who keeps beating, abusing and scolding him because she thinks that he causes financial burden upon the family. They consider Munoo old enough not only to earn his own living but also to support their family. He is compelled to move from place to place against his will in search of a livelihood. Firstly he is sent to work as a servant in a middle-class family in Shamnagar, a small town. At Shamnagar, due to his curiosity and juvenile buoyant spirit he often puts himself in trouble. The class discrimination and disparity starts. Munoo cannot enjoy the right to join in the merry-making of the family members due to class-distinction. He is not allowed to eat from a plate as his social superiors do. He is prohibited from using the flush-lavatory and consequently has to release in open: "he wished he could disappear from the world somehow, for the first time in his life, he felt ashamed to be seen relieving himself in the open". Though he makes all possible efforts to please his master but a little mistake or even no mistake causes a lot of humiliation. He has a monotonous daily routine but he is treated by the family members as an animal and an instrument of amusement. In one of such entertaining act - in the role of a monkey he bites the daughter of his master. Nathoo Ram, the master considers it as a sexual assault on his daughter and beats him mercilessly. This behavior of Nathoo Ram is representative of cruelty to the people of the weaker section of society. Munoo is innocent. He never intended to play with or bite the daughter. He was compelled to perform an act of amusement and play in order to please the members of his master's family. On the other hand, he is misunderstood by his Master

Nathoo Ram. Nathoo Ram kicks him with his boots. Without going into the depths of the incidents, without knowing the truths behind the act; and without finding the fault, Nathoo Ram performs an inhuman act.

This is the curse to humanity in the contemporary society. A deprived person has no say in his defense. He is simply bound and compelled to bear the harsh cruelty of social practices adopted by the members of the affluent class. Munoo can no longer bear the cruelty and slips out from Shamnagar. In the early stage of his life, he is made aware of the social discrimination. So Munoo comes to the conclusion: "...there must be only two kinds of people in the world; the rich and the poor" (*Coolie*, 56). The rich are always exploiters and the poor always exploited. Anand in all its varied nuances wants to show that exploitation is same everywhere. It is not the religion, race or caste, but only cash and class that matters.

After leaving Shamnagar, he meets Prabha Dayal, owner of a pickle factory. His wife Parbati takes him to Daulatpur, where he finds a respite for some time. In the pickle factory, he works bleak airless like an inferno that is lighted up only by the geniality of Prabha and motherly Parbati. The partner of his master, Ganpat is a very cunning and shrewd person; he cheats his partner Mr. Prabha Dayal; eventually the factory is dissolved. Poverty and suffering are added by villainy and evil. Prabha Dayal, once the owner of the factory is reduced to a coolie and Munoo is thrown on roads. After the returning of Prabha Dayal to his native place Munoo is left alone wandering for a job here and there. Munoo, in search of a livelihood, reaches Bombay with help of an elephant driver who advises him : "The bigger a city is, the crueler it is to the sons of Adam. You have to pay even for the breath that you breathe"(*Coolie*, 148).

In Bombay Munoo meets Hari who arranges a job for him in the factory where he himself works. While working in the factory, Munoo faces the inner realities of the working conditions prevailing in the factories in general. The attitude of the proprietor is always self-oriented. In order to fulfill their selfish ambitions, they always try to go to any extent in any direction- right or wrong. Industrialization, on one hand provided luxury and comforts to human; on the other hand, it killed the human values in humans. Machines were invented to manufacture instruments that make the process of life easier and comfortable; simultaneously at the cost of human blood of the workers in those factories. Even the genuine human rights of the workers were denied. They lived in shambles, in poor hygienic conditions, sans the basic fundamental amenities required for the minimum degree of a common human life. This is the curse of industrialization.

Industrial houses have never been concerned about the welfare of the workers. They are self-oriented and possess a profiteering attitude. They care simply for the interest of the factory- owner. In this profit-making process of the capitalistic society the workers become a part of the system in a way that they are treated like machines as if they have no life, no need, no desire, no ambition; and as if they are inanimate objects.

We have glimpses of the darker side of human life and society in the novel. The so-called superiors live upon the so-called inferiors. The so-called mighty man lives upon the so-called weaker man. The so-called upper class makes use of the people and their abilities in order to survive. They are dependent upon the persons who serve them and who are exploited by them. This class conflict is a serious issue that is reflected through different events in the novel *Coolie*. Industrialization on one hand proved to be a boon to individual life; simultaneously it has proved to be a curse to social life. It has caused the growth of individualism decline of socialism. It has divided the society into two classes- the master or the owner class and the worker or the labourer class. It is due to this, that a change in the social structure is evident in society as the emergence of the exploiter and the exploited, the user and the used. Concept of use and throw is a dehumanized approach of humanity. Suck the blood out and let the body die. Use the body and kill the spirit. Such

attitudes are represented in the behavior of Chimta Sahib while dealing with the workers of the factory. When Hari raises voice against the exploitation of Munoo and inhuman behavior meted to him, he is terminated from the job. It results in mass agitation of the workers. Like an egocentric master Mr. Chimta Sahib also has an over developed ego. Instead of listening to the genuine demands of the workers and to pay a considerable attention to them he acts against those workers one sided arbitrarily. This stern action of reducing the working hours of the factory is fully against the normal interest.

Bombay far from Munoo's dream proves nightmarish. He is thoroughly disillusioned at the first contact with reality. At the corner of a footpath Munoo sees a *Coolie* lying huddled: at the edge of a foot-path in a corner a coolie lay huddled, pillowing his head on his arms, shrinking in himself as if he were afraid to occupy too much space. Munoo's heart sank at the recognition of the labourer lying about so precariously. 'So even here the coolies sleep in the street! he suddenly realized (*Coolie*, 179).

Munoo's exploitation in Bombay has a universal appeal; it is universalized. He is put to the cruel forces of capitalism. Like Hari, he is a victim of low wages, insecurity, horror, money-lending slum life and inhuman treatment. A child of fourteen is compelled to work for eleven hours a day on meager wages. Ratan, a co-worker protects Munoo from the exploitation but pays the penalty by losing his job. The tragedy of labour class is fully exhibited by Anand here. Not only capitalism and industrialism are the forces which exploit Munoo and his life but communalism too lends a hand. A workers strike is easily broken by casual rumours of communal disturbances which diverts the wrath of the labourers from the mill to the religious fractions among themselves. There are rival groups in the Trade-Unions, and owners play politics by dividing the workers by creating the communal riots. Munoo gets hurt and cannot return home. In the morning he meets another accident. Finally he is knocked down by the car of an Eurasian lady, Mrs. Mainswaring who takes him with herself in order to compensate her fault. Munoo recovers soon and starts working as a domestic servant and a rickshaw-puller. The strenuous work affects his health which turns into tuberculosis. Despite all efforts and possible medication one day he dies in the laps of his friend.

Thus we come across different phases of Munoo's life at different places. The novel is a social tragedy caused by cruelty, greed, selfishness, poverty and exploitation. Munoo, the hero of the novel is a figure of sufferings, pains representing the miseries of the down-trodden, and the underdogs on a universal scale. We find here the victory of the proletariat by self-sacrifice and suffering and as a study of child hood too, he compares the child-portrait of Dickens.

*Coolie* is a complex work of art, epic in dimension with a large number of themes and ideas. The central theme of the novel is exploitation. Prof M.K. Naik says: "The central theme of the novel is the tragic denial to a simple, landless peasant of the fundamental right to happiness. The terrible destiny of being a victim of exploitation is indeed Munoo's dubious birthright" (qut. in Varshney 53).

The social panorama, against which Munoo moves, gives Anand an opportunity to deal with a cognate theme-viz. the relationship between the Indians and the British during the pre-independence days- the relationship in which the element of exploitation is mixed with prejudice, misunderstandings and inhibitions on both the sides. Sir Reginald white, President of the cotton mill, Mr. little, the manager and Jimmy Thomas the foreman are exploiters. They are the symbols of callousness of capitalist. Mrs. Mainswaring shows a different aspect of this relationship.

Anand is concerned with the capitalistic nature of the white characters that belong to the class of oppressors. Being a realistic novelist, Anand does not make his protagonist a rising force or rebel against the capitalistic exploitation

but makes a victim of it. Being a child Munoo is not even aware of the nature of exploitation; so there is no question of rebelling against the exploitation. In *Untouchable* Anand has shown his protagonist as both a victim of and a rebel against the caste system but in *Coolie* the protagonist is only a victim of the class system.

*Coolie* is a panoramic novel, and as its action moves from the North to the South and then back again to the North. We get a shifting view of the hills, dales and rivers of India as well as of its forts, palaces, ruined buildings and other monuments of the past. It is a panorama not only of the physical features of India, but also her society in all its variety, its grinding poverty and wretchedness. In the novel we come across a cross-section of Indian society from the poorest coolie and the workers to the rich saukars and money-lenders; from the people of red districts to the police officials, from the clerks to the factory owners. We also come across woman like Mainswaring. Dr. Iyengar rightly says, "It is verily a cross-section of India, the visible India, the mixture of the horrible and the holy, the inhuman and the humane, the sordid and the beautiful"(qut. in Varshney 81).

Munoo the protagonist, is a flat and passive character who remains diffident and ineffective till the end. Riemenscheider points out "Munoo is not the common type of hero we expect to find in a novel. In his opposition to society he is passive while the society is active. Munoo does not build his own life which on the contrary, is built for him" (Riemenscheider 32). Munoo represents all the children who are subjected to tyrannies of social class system for no fault of their own. He is a symbol of child labour who is victimized by the exploitative capitalist system. He also symbolizes all those coolies who are the victims of industrialization, being beaten from Pillar to Post. S. A.Khan has said:

He is one among the millions of coolies tested and frustrated by myriad forces of class distinction, exploitation and dehumanization.....the story of Munoo is quintessentially the story of every exploited individual in India and the pattern of his life is intended to show the pitilessness that lies embedded in the lives of millions of people who are condemned to lead a life of an unending saga of social depredation" (Khan 30).

Munoo is made aware of the cash nexus but he is never after money. He is always in fear of losing his job. He becomes the victim of the cash nexus. Prabha is another projection of Munoo. Prabha also had been a coolie earlier but out of sheer hard work he becomes the owner of a pickle factory. Munoo also works hard; but too much work in his early childhood leaves him a victim of tuberculosis with no hope of recovery. Munoo is tortured mentally and physically both. He is the hopeless victim of exploitation everywhere. Munoo never shows unwillingness to hard work. He expects love and sympathy which he does not get even after sacrificing himself whole heartedly to his employers. In the every phase of life, he is always fearful of his masters. The first phase starts from his own uncle and aunt who had made his life miserable; in the second phase his life becomes hell due to his master's wife; in the third, his master's partner deprives him of the stable life he wishes to lead; his Bombay phase is full of exploiting forces that make him spiritually dead whereas his mistress Mrs. Mainswaring's act of exploitations lead towards his ultimate physical death.

Mrs. Mainwaring,, who comes in the last phase of Munoo's life, is a caricature of an Anglo-Indian lady split between two cultures. She suffers from inferiority complex about her origin. She is torn between the fear of sin and fascination for sex. This contradiction turns her nature into a strange perversity. She treats Munoo with utmost care but Anand gives a hint, by her strange attraction towards Munoo, Anand presents before the readers about the past of

Mainwaring,, which has a character which was full of her longing for sex and love. So when she meets and come across Munoo, a boy only of fourteen, she does not hesitate in arousing Munoo's passion. This part of her character is the symbol of physical and sexual exploitation. She exploits Munoo sexually to satisfy her sexual desires. A lad of only fourteen is sexually harassed which leads his ill-health. He gets severely ill and suffers from tuberculosis which leads towards his ultimate physical end. Premila Paul rightly says: "His aspirations, passionate longings and potentialities go waste before they could find fulfillment" ( Paul 53).

*Coolie* presents the victimizing force of *Untouchable* in a different form. The place of caste is taken by class. Anand thoroughly searches the stresses and strains generated in the Indian society as the result of the commercial, capitalistic forces from Europe. In *Untouchable* he deals with the Indian problems but in *Coolie* he takes into the consideration of universal problem. In this regard Premila Paul says, "Anand earnest interest in the welfare of the man in the particular and man in general is admirable" ( Paul 56).

In *Untouchable*, Anand deals with a gap between the high-castes and the untouchables; it is a case of caste conflict, whereas in *Coolie*, he deals with the widening gap between haves and have-nots; it is a case of class conflict. *Coolie* is a complex work of art epical in dimension with a large number of themes. The central theme of the novel is the exploitation of a poor boy by the different forces of the society supported by the Indian society rigidity. There are two types of exploitation in general- social and economic. The former, deals with social, sexual and domestic and later feudal, capitalistic and industrial exploitations. P.K. Rajan in his comparative study of *Untouchable* and *Coolie* says that the theme of both the novels is the same. He observes:

"It is an individual's quest for freedom in the social system of ruthless exploitation... the society of coolie is one in the chief form of exploitation is capitalist through the feudal exploitation still remains, Munoo in his quest for freedom is squeezed by the machinery of the capitalistic exploitation until he meets his tragic end" (Rajan 15).

Munoo's saga of miseries starts with feudal exploitations. As an orphan he faces domestic exploitation at the hand of his own uncle and aunt. Then his life becomes hell due to his master's wife. In a pickle factory he faces, industrial exploitation where he is compelled to work for eleven hours a day on scanty wages. In the cotton mill he faces colonial and capitalistic exploitation. He also faces religious exploitation in the form of the communal riot at the end of his Bombay phase. The communal riot can be called a form of capitalistic exploitation because the employers engineer riot in order to suppress the workers' strike. In the final stage he faces physical as well as sexual exploitation by his master's wife that leads toward his tragic end.

Though there is a law against the child-labour, but in the capitalistic society, children are openly exploited. They are compelled to work under inhuman and unbearable conditions, for long hours on meager wages. Anand, in an interview with Girja Priyadarshini had answered about the labour problem. He said that problem can be solved neither in the British capitalistic manner nor by resorting to communism. It can be only be solved by socialistic participatory democracy.

The outcome of the capitalistic exploitation can be easily judged by the plight of Munoo when he leaves for Simla. When Munoo leaves for Bombay he is not only physically but also mentally and spiritually broken. A fourteen year old boy feels defeated like an old man. This shows that Munoo, a boy of fifteen undergoes the sufferings of entire life within the span of two years, due to the industrial or capitalistic exploitation. Machines, which symbolizes industrialization is shown as a discarding force. Machines are compared with monstrous animals and devils- 'many headed many armed

chuckling machine God'. It is ironical that in *Untouchable* Anand looks at machine as a solution to the problem of caste conflict but in *Coolie* it is depicted as the cause of class conflict which becomes the tool of exploitation.

Machines are the ruthless means of exploitation of the poor. Their owners suck the blood of their users. In the Indian context the exploitation is multi-dimensional. The root cause of exploitation in the Indian context is poverty and hunger. The starving people are compelled to leave their native place in search of livelihood in town and cities where they live the life of homeless destitute. Poverty is thus the root cause of all the evils in the life of the protagonist. Munoo desperately fights for his survival in every phase of his life. The constant fear of poverty and hunger makes him accept various occupations at various places. He continues his weakening struggle for existence but he remains abject and drab. The realistic picture of poverty can be seen in Anand's depiction of the sordid life of the labourers living in the slums of Bombay:

The bodies of numberless coolies lay strewn in tattered garbs. Some were curled up in knots, other lay face towards on folded arms, others were flat on their chests....He had hardly gone three yards where he stumbled on a heap of patched quilt that half enclosed the rotting flesh of a leaper.

Considering Gandhian Influence on the novel, we do not find any Gandhian character in it. We get some glimpses of it in Seth Prabha Dayal. None else is sketched as a symbol of Gandhian philosophy however the entire novel can be called Gandhian critique of capitalism or industrialization. Anand is criticized for his pessimistic view in the novel. Being a realistic novelist he makes his protagonist die. His protagonist gets defeated in his system against caste-system. Munoo is a fight for survival, that illuminates the raw immediacy, the grim fate of the masses in Pre-independent and Partition India. Premila Paul writes about it: "But inspite of the tragic ending *Coolie* is not a pessimistic novel. The hope of humanity lies in people like Prabha, Ratan and Mohan" (Paul Premila). If we compare *Coolie* and *Untouchable* at the end, we come across a conclusion that survival of the protagonist in *Untouchable* is in sharp contrast to that of the *Coolie*. Anand comparatively shows here the destructive power of the two evils and suggests that one can survive the severity of caste but not that of money.

A.S.Desan, in his essay, "*Anand's, Art of Fiction: A Journey into Existential Humanism*" analyses the cause of Munoo's exploitation. He says:

Munoo's plight in *Coolie* is a symbol of social negation of life, love and natural affection. Death versus life is the predominant emotion of the artist in the novel. The reader is given to understand how terrible and tragic the divide between the rich and the poor is. The reiterated emotion is that the poor belong to suffering by virtue of the divide created by the power of money which, Munoo comes to realize as everything of life (Desan97-98).

Anand is aware that poetic justice is not meted out in life. However he is optimistic and has firm faith in human goodness. C.D.Narsimhaiah is of the opinion that "the death has ceased to frighten the poor, they are past fright, it is the life, that is threat, and death is a release" (Narsimhaiah 126).

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