

A Brief Study of Coolie

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Abstract – Coolie is a study in destitution, or to use Peter Quennell's words: 'India seen third-class—a continent whose bleakness, vastness and poverty are unshaded by a touch of the glamour more or less-fictitious, that so many English story-tellers, from Kipling to Major Yeats-Brown, have preferred to draw across the scene.' The novel relates a series of adventures in picaresque manner, only the hero is no rouge but himself the victim of the world's rogueries. Unlike Bakha, the negative hero of Untouchable it is not his place in the old caste system that is questioned because he belongs by birth to the second highest order. What is questioned is his place in the new caste system, on the basis of cash nexus, that the Kalying has established.

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"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 affiliations."¹

Anand with this philosophy moves from the pathetic in **Untouchable** to the tragic in **Coolie** (1936). Whereas the problem of Bakha is particularly Indian, Munoo's is of universal nature. Bakha's experience is limited in time and space, but Munoo's struggle for survival takes him through the cross-section of the whole country. As S. C. Harrex points out, "Whereas catastrophe for Munoo is a series of personal disasters, punctuated by moments of tragic illumination and leading to inevitable doom."²

After **Untouchable**, Anand again records the plight of the miserable have-nots in his very much successive novel **Coolie**. It is a panoramic novel, having a much wider canvas than his first novel **Untouchable**. If **Untouchable** is the microcosm, **Coolie** is more like the macrocosm that is Indian society: concentration gives place to diffusion and comprehension with several foci of concentration. **Coolie** is verily a cross-section of India, the visible India, - that mixture of the horrible and the holy, the inhuman and the human, the sordid and the beautiful."³ **Coolie** could be regarded as social tragedy of a common man. Anand's Munoo is essentially a tragic character who inspires pity but no horror and is not raised to the status of a hero, but invests him with dignity. Anand does not romanticize the protagonist but exposes the social forces of tragedy, capitalism, industrialism and communalism, as they are seen operating in the robot-ridden modern society. What makes **Coolie** a powerful social tragedy is in the artistic treatment of the cruel, inhuman social forces of poverty and exploitation which are responsible for the tragic denouement. The premature

death of the protagonist, an innocent child, becomes all the very tragic. Munoo becomes acutely aware of his predicament at some point or other in his life and begins to search for the meaning of life and destiny. A sweeper is at least assured of his place in society because of the indispensability of his work. The **Coolie** has no such assurance and lives under the perpetual threat of losing his job. As the class system has proved more divisive, Anand's attack is correspondingly vehement.

Coolie, described as an "epic of misery", "the epic of modern India," "the odyssey of Munoo" and "a tragic drama" with five episodes, further confirms Anand's position as one of the most interesting revolutionary writers of our time. The socio-logical concern of Anand in his fiction is no longer primarily limited to caste, but the general issue of poverty, exploitation, social and economic parasitism and moral corruption are presented in more representative contexts. So, **Coolie** has a power to move us with its presentation of a universal human tragedy which is the result of exploitation of all kinds prevailing in the society. It is one of the great novels with hunger, starvation, sufferings and wretchedness, sickness, disease and degradation that hunger causes as. its theme, Anand serves to illustrate and develop the central theme of the exploitation and suffering of the poor in a capitalistic society. The treatment of the theme Anand's compassion for the underdog invests the novel with great power, but at the same time his artistic control over his material does not slacken him.

Anand universalises the individual tragedy of Munoo, following the anthropological dictum that the 'proper study of mankind is man'. Munoo is presented as victim of irrational systems and inhuman cruelties of society. **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. He is an archetype of downtrodden, the sum and substance of whose life-story is always the same, i.e. unendurable suffering and perpetual apathy. At the tender age of fourteen, Munoo was imparadised from his village and launched on the whirl-pool of experiences and is finally swept away to his doom. Munoo's life is tragic in the extreme means he is exploited by almost everyone and everywhere. The poor orphan is forced to leave his idyllic village in the Kangra hills- Before the beginning of his Inglorious odyssey, Munoo is a sensitive and intelligent boy full of high spirits and a zest for life- He was "a genius at climbing trees. He would hop on to the trunk like a monkey, climb the bigger branches on all fours, swing himself to the thinner offshoots as if he were dancing on a trapeze, and then, diving dangerously into the space, he would jump from one tree to another."⁴

But this paradise is snatched and his happy idyllic life comes to an end because his aunt and uncle are of the view that he is quite grown up and so must start earning his own living. At this time, he was old enough to understand the meaning of poverty. Poverty compels Munoo to be apprenticed to life at the age of fourteen. Anand shows that both feudal and usurious systems of capitalism combine to exploit Munoo's father. "He had heard how the "landlord had seized his five acres of land because the interest on the mortgage covering the unpaid rent had not been forthcoming when the rains had been scanty and the harvests bad. And he knew how his father had died a slow death of bitterness and disappointment and left his mother a penniless beggar to support a child in arm."(CL. 11)

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 the heap of utensils and we get a peek 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, some to be abused, even beaten." (CL. 11)

"He was condemned by an iniquitous system always to remain small, abject and drab." (CL. 28)

"There must be only two kinds of people in the world the rich and the poor." (CL. 33)

When he was going to city with his uncle, "he had dreamed, of course, of all the wonderful things which the village-folk spoke about when they came back from the town." (CL. 35) 'But all his dreams are shattered when he is ill-treated by a shrewish and vindictive housewife, Bibiji, Uttam Kaur, wife of Babu Nathoo Ram, the sub accountant in Imperial Bank of Sham Nagar. The experiences of his humiliation started in this house. He is shocked and learns his first lesson in the harsh school of the modern urban world.

On the next day of his arrival, he relieves himself in the drain outside the kitchen and thereby, unknowingly, lowers the social prestige of his masters. Bibiji raises a hue and Munoo is terrified at the torrent of curses that flow out of her which he has never expected:

"Vay, you eater of your master! Vay, you shameless brute You pig.' You pig. ... Vulgar, stupid hillyboy, ... May you die May you burn! May you fade away.' we didn't know we were taking on an animal in our employ, an utter brute, a savage." (CL. 37)

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.

Basically passive and incapable of analysing his situation like Bakha, 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. And, 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 make-up. He had suffered every day since he came to the house but now he had been slapped and abused most callously. Because he slipped with a tea-tray in presence of Mr. England. His heart was no longer in his work. When a few days later, he complained to his uncle, he refused to listen him and beat him most mercilessly. Munoo's expectations are extremely modest. The world is not his oyster and he wields no sword with which to open it. When Bibi Uttam Kaur under-feeds, nags and humiliates him, Munoo fails to dampen his high spirits completely, and it is finally his 'living vitality' and 'irrepressible impetuosity' which drive him away from the house, as while playing, he accidentally injures the small daughter of Bibiji. He runs away from Shan Nagar. As Anand says "whipped dog hides in a corner; a whipped human seeks escape". (CL. 45) he thought he could no longer bear the disgrace and humiliation he had suffered. Sham Nagar episode is the first act in the tragic drama of exploitation based on caste and class.

In the second, phase, Munoo is in Daulatpur, where Prabh Dayal and his wife are kind to him, but Prabh's partner in pickle factory, Ganpat, ill-treats him. Prabh's wife soon grows fond of him and gives him motherly warmth. Her life for Munoo is pleasing in the beginning owing to the affection of Prabh and his wife Parvati. But "Happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of pain." (CL. 56) Life becomes ugly and hellish because of Ganpat's wicked behaviour and it is Ganpat's villainy that Prabh Dayal is reduced to beggary, the pickle factory is sold out and Munoo has to work as a coolie- which means mere beast of burden- first in the grain market and then in the vegetable market. His poor and meek

personality is exploited here because in the grain market there is a cut-throat competition between the naked starving coolies, each competing with the other for jobs at extremely low wages. Anand gives us a horrifying account of the sufferings of Munoo and other coolies in the grain market. They are reduced to the level of beasts and are huddled with them:

"The square courtyard, flanked on all sides by low and mud shops, flimsy huts and tall five-storeyed houses with variegated cement facades, arches, colonnades and cupoles, was crowded with many crucifixes craned 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 the bodies of the coolies coloured like the earth on which they lay snoring or crouching round a communal huddle-bubble, or shifting to explore a patch, clear of puddles, on which to rest."⁵

The above passage is swiftian in its irony and in its piling of detail. And like swift, Anand uses a key-word to deliver the maximum punch the word here is 'pressed'. The courtyard belongs to animals, and the author describes them first pressed against them are the bodies of the men. The Implication is not simply that the two bubbled together, but that man has stolen into the animal world and carved out a niche for himself. The colour of their bodies mingles with that of the earth: perhaps an ironic fulfilment of the prophecy that the poor shall inherit the earth. After vegetable market, he goes to railway station, here he is again given some troubles by a policeman and he runs away in terror till a kind-hearted elephant driver comes to his help and enables him to reach Bombay. He yearned to go to Bombay, for he had heard of the marvels of that city, and how gold and silver were to be had there quite easily. Poor Munool his dream would soon be shattered.

Munoo thought of the generosity of the elephant driver who helped him and he asked himself that why are some men so good and others bad-some like Prabh and elephant driver, others like Ganpat and the policeman who beat him at railway station. Munoo's urge to go to Bombay is fulfilled and is overjoyed but all his enthusiasm and curiosity about Bombay prove ironical when he comes to understand and experience the "life in death" there. He is also warned by elephant driver, "The bigger a city is, the more cruel it is to the sons of Adan.... You have to pay even for the breath that you breath." (CL.137) He does not find the city much different from Sham Nagar or Daulatpur; only he realizes that life is more confusing in Bombay. The problems of the exploited remain the same; the change is only the scale. In the bigger factories, there is more ruthless exploitation and greater human misery. The working conditions in the Sir George Cotton Mills are worse than those in the pickle factory at Daulatpur. Ganpat turns into Jimmi Thomas, a tyrannical foreman who is wicked and shrewd. In this

episode, Anand wants to make it clear that the economic and political exploitation thus coalesce into one.

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