

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 4 April 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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Untouchability-Man-made Discrimination among Human beings in Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*

V. Jaisre, M.A., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

The Poor and the Rich

That discrimination among human beings is not divine but man-made and it is pursued selfishly only for the welfare of the haves at the cost of self-respect, equality, status and freedom of the have-nots have been declared by many thinkers. Gandhi wrote that "God never made man to consider another man as an inferior being or an untouchable" (34). Thus the selfishness of those born rich in society leads to the untold hardships of those born poor. Such people consider themselves belonging to such a priority class and think that the poor are created only for them and for their comfortable living.

Our Lot in Human Arrangements

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People who consider themselves superior fail to realize that as God's creation, all human beings are essentially one and the same. Moreover, they always look down upon the inferior with indifferent attitudes, treat them as untouchables and keep them at distance. Though they were born innocent and good, they learn good and bad as they grow, and they also show the same in their attitudes and behaviour. Those who enjoy everything in life at the cost of others are not the people blessed with good attitudes. They become uncivilized in their behavior towards other human beings lower in status and position and such behaviour reflects only their state of mind. Richard Pettingar endorses the same view by citing the saying of Swami Satchidananda in his *Biography of Swami Satchidananda*:

No person is an untouchable during his sojourn on earth; nor is one human being inferior to the other in his status and his position.

Differences come, not with the work which man does, nor with the caste into which man is born, nor with the status which man occupies, but with the state of his mind (n.pag.).

As untouchability, born out of the caste system and sustained by it, is one of the persistent evils afflicting Indian society, many writers in Indian Writing in English have focused their attention on this social evil in their novels. They have also brought out the untold sufferings of the poor at the hands of the merciless master-cum-monsters of priority class in human form.

The Goal of This Paper

Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* has been taken up for study here, not to analyze the evils of untouchability among human beings but to identify the real untouchables among them. The

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people who are ostracized as untouchables in the society are not actually untouchables but all those who show loveless attitudes in their behaviour towards the ostracized are really untouchables.

Munoo and His Position in Life

Circumstances in which man finds himself determine his status and position in life. If the circumstances are favourable to him, he becomes someone superior and privileged in the society. If the same is adverse to him, he becomes unfortunate, and he is treated as inferior and underprivileged. Munoo, the protagonist of *Coolie*, becomes a victim of circumstances. Being parentless, poor and dependent is his status in the society. He has to depend upon his uncle Daya Ram and his aunt Gujri for his livelihood. But his uncle and aunt are also poor like him. Instead of caring him, they show their hatred and merciless attitude towards him in their words and deeds. His uncle is the one who is “completely hardened into cruelty by his love of money, by the fear of poverty and by the sense of inferiority of his position as a peon of a bank” (*Coolie*, 19). Hence, he considers Munoo as an unnecessary burden to him and his family. He also finds ways and means to drive him away from home. He forces Munoo to work as a domestic servant in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram at Sham Nagar.

Shedding Tears in Private

But Munoo’s life as a servant in a different place as he looks forward to is not better either. The cruel treatment meted out to him by the dominating lady of the house is beyond any limit of human consideration. She never treats him as a human being, and she always scolds him using all sorts of uncivilized words, “You eater of your master! You shameless brute! You pig!

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You dog!” (Coolie, 45). He cannot but shed tears silently over his misfortunes in life. However, there is no trace of evil in him towards his oppressors. Among the members of the household, there is one good soul in Chota Babu who is a doctor by profession. He is kind and sympathetic by nature and he has a soft corner for Munoo. He tries all his level best to make Munoo happy by treating him with dignity and love. It is only he who has cured Munoo of his physical wound caused to him during his fight with his fellow servants. But for him, Munoo’s life would have been entirely miserable at Sham Nagar.

Family around Munoo – No Help

Though Munoo’s uncle and aunt are like him in status and position in life, they do not have any good feelings towards their orphaned relative Munoo. Babu Nathoo Ram and his wife are fortunate enough to enjoy status and position in life but they are not good at heart towards Munoo because he is poor and inferior in status. Hence, their attitudes and behaviour to Munoo clearly show that they are only untouchables in the eyes of God. Munoo as an oppressed is not actually an untouchable because he does not entertain any ill-feelings such as hatred and anger towards his oppressors, and he reconciles himself to his wretched life as one of God’s ways. However, he does not want to be “a servant, doing all sorts of odd jobs and someone to be always abused and beaten for no fault of his” (Coolie, 29). He leaves the house of torture and boards a train to a destination unknown to him in search of a place where he can find people treating him as a dignified human being.

The World of the Poor and the Rich

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The world of the poor is entirely different from that of the rich in status and power. The poor are not self-centered and they always try to maintain very good relationship with others irrespective of their status. The feeling of comradeship and humanism of man for man exists only among the poor. Munoo experiences the same kind of feeling when he becomes a coolie and moves with the others of his same status with equal respect and dignity. He realizes that every coolie is a human being, and like any other human being in society:

He has eyes and hands, organs, dimensions, senses,
affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with
the same weapons, subject to the same disease, healed
by the same means, cooled and warmed by the same
winter and summer respectively as anybody else is (Coolie,32).

Since one man is not different from other man, there should not be any discrimination from one man to another such as one being superior and the other inferior. But the reality is very bitter with regard to human discrimination

Developing a Sense of Belonging

Munoo's acquaintance with Prabha and his wife Parvati gives him a sense of belonging, dignity and safety. They show their real love and affection to him as if he were their son. Being good, kind, sympathetic and generous, they show their real concern for him which can never be expected from the people of high caste and richness. When Parvati nurses him and takes care of him in time of his sickness, he finds in her his dead mother being alive. Like the evil-minded among the superior beings, Ganpat is wicked to the core among the inferior. There is no trace of

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any dignified attitude in him towards Munoo. Joining hands with the fate of Munoo, he spoils the happiness of not only Munoo but also those who are very considerate to Munoo. Because of his treachery, Munoo once again becomes friendless and finds himself in the street. He also comes across good people like the elephant driver of the circus company, Hari, a textile worker and his wife Lakshmi, Ratan, a Punjabi wrestler, Captain Mainwaring and his wife, and Mohan a rickshaw puller who love him as a dignified fellow being. Only those who treat their fellow beings as dignified irrespective of their status and position are the blessed people. All others who keep their fellow beings always at distance are the untouchables in the society.

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