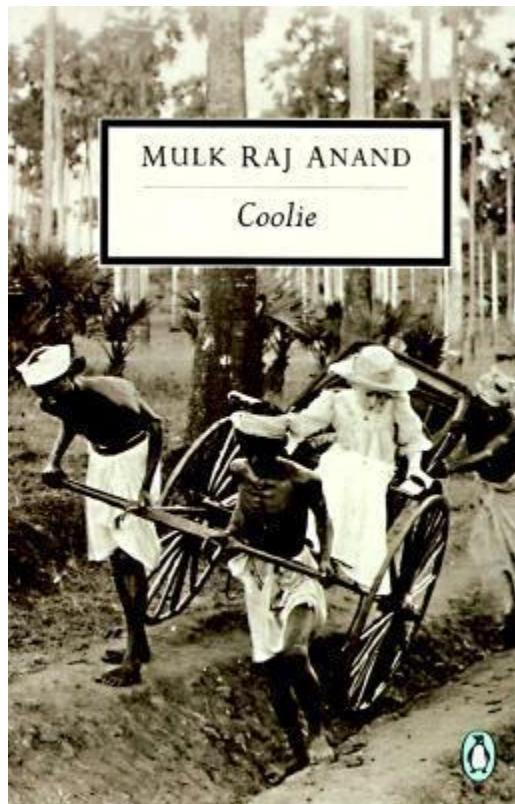


**Poverty and Exploitation Aided by
the Social and Political Structures
With Special Reference to MulkRaj Anand's *Coolie***

M. Sriprabha



Abstract

Coolie is a novel by Mulk Raj Anand, first published in 1936.^[1] The novel reinforced Anand's position as one of India's leading English authors.^[2] The book is highly critical of British rule in India and India's caste system.^[3] The plot revolves around a 14-year-old boy, *Munoo*, and his plight due to poverty and exploitation

aided by the social and political structures in place. Mulk Raj Anand was one of

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the triumvirates who inaugurated the new section of writers of fiction along with R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Anand is a novelist of urgent social concerns and preoccupations, and the social impulse is at the heart of his writings. He is considered the Messiah of the downtrodden, the unwanted and the unloved. Even in a random reading of Anand's novels, the reader becomes immediately aware of such issues as the tyranny of the caste system, its injustice, and its social, moral and economic consequences, class conflicts, exploitation of various kinds of the poor by the rich, quest for identity, search for freedom, etc. Under colonial rule, a number of social and economic changes took place and as a result a feudal society was gradually transformed into a capitalistic one. The class system in India has turned out to be a new kind of caste system. It is built on the cash nexus on which it thrives. It has created a society much more complicated and devious, and in some respects more rigid than the one created by caste. Therefore it has become a very powerful divisive force, far more damaging to social cohesion than caste, as it has tended to segregate people into the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots.

Key words: Have-nots, Downtrodden, Conflicts, Exploitation, Segregate

Mulk Raj Anand

Mulk Raj Anand is considered to be a doyen of Anglo-Indian literature. With him India has received an unceasing champion of the cause of poor and lowly whose writings arrest the critical attention of the learned people towards the inhumane, hatred and unjustified conditions of downtrodden and deprived of Indian society. His humanitarian approach and altruistic attitude have always impelled him to use his mind and art for the sake of social welfare. With his literary power and perspectives he has tried his best to spring up the healthy human

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values and radical social transformation in our human society in which the haves and have nots both can enjoy happily the bliss of human life on the same footings and fraternity peace, love and justice.

Coolie

Coolie is Anand's second novel. It came out in 1936. It is the story of a child labourer Munoo. The orphan boy Munoo runs to avoid every place of cruelty in search of happiness and everywhere he is suppressed. He is aged fifteen and he does various jobs at Daulatpur, Bombay and Simla. He dies of tuberculosis in the end because of poverty. In *Coolie*, Anand brings out his favourite themes of the varied nature of man, the power of money and brutal suppression. It gave wide recognition to Anand. Munoo is exploited greatly in one way or another, by one person or another. Munoo universally symbolizes the suffering of the oppressed and those taken advantage of. According to the novelist, there is a need for reestablishment of kindness. Anand not only makes a hero out of the boy but also gifts him with self-esteem. Suppression takes major role in *Coolie* to show how pathetic the lives of the Indian people are under the suppressive forces. *Coolie* has been called an epic of misery. It is the epic of modern India. The main theme is the suppression of the poor by the forces of colonialism, capitalism and sex. This theme is deeply studied with references to Munoo and others, who are prevented from enjoying their fundamental rights to live with happiness on earth. *Coolie* is different from *Untouchable* in that the author gives a wider canvas through the lives of coolies. *Coolie* has many themes and ideas that make it a masterpiece. Munoo, the central character of *Coolie*, is exploited all the time in one way or the other and his future is typical of the future of millions whose only common feature is patient suffering. The novelist brings into prominence the requirement of

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reestablishment of kindness in the world lost in capitalism and colonialism. Munoo is a person with lot of problems. He creates pity in our minds but no fear. Here, Anand does not romanticize the character but renders the societal forces of catastrophe, that is, capitalism and colonialism, as they are found taking place in existing society.

Munoo

In *Coolie*, Anand presents Munoo, an eleven year old boy who is innocent and energetic. Through his saga of suppression, Anand shows the decline and upturn in the life of Munoo. Munoo's uncle and aunt consider him as a machine for obtaining money. Munoo willingly receives his role as a slave and agrees to go to town with his uncle. His pain and powerlessness can be seen through these lines:

‘My aunt wants me to begin earning money,’ said Munoo. ‘And she says She wants a son of her own. My uncle says I am grown up and must fend for myself. He has got me a job in the house of the Babu of the bank where he works in Shampur.’ (*Coolie* 2)

Being an orphan he should look after him. Daya Ram and Gujri behave as agents who lead the boy to suppression. At fourteen, Munoo is forced to work in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, a worker in Imperial Bank in Sham Nagar. Munoo's romantic views are destroyed by the wife of Babu Nathoo Ram. This lady is not good-natured and always abuses and curses him without any reason. Anand's Munoo is denied happiness. Munoo is humiliated for relieving outside the wall and abuse is showered on him. Munoo suffers physical and mental torture and this shows suppression in the form of child labour. Even at the tender age of fourteen,

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he is not provided with the basic necessities. One day, when the boy protested against Daya Ram, he was rewarded with thrashes. The boy's wail shows his poor condition: 'Oh, don't beat me, please don't beat me, uncle,' cried Munoo. 'I only want food.' (*Coolie* 47)

Munoo has meagre expectations in life. His face is swollen and tear-washed and this shows his utter submission to suppression. In another place called Daulatpur, we again see suppression. Munoo gets in a train that goes to Daulatpur. During the journey Munoo meets Prabha Dayal, who is very kind to Munoo because he is childless and treats him as his own son.

Prabha Dayal is completely unlike his partner Ganpat. While Prabha Dayal and his wife behave well to Munoo, Ganpat ill-treats Munoo. Prabha gained his present status by his effort to overcome difficulties. Prabha Dayal is ruined by the exploitation of his partner Ganpat. Ganpat was the son of a rich man who lost all his wealth and was helped by Prabha. But Ganpat cheated Prabha and made him without money by not letting Prabha the money that was obtained. After the bankruptcy of Prabha Dayal, Munoo and Tulsi try to get a job in the grain market. The unhygienic condition of the market clearly shows the dishonest and profit-loving mind of the ruling class. In the grain market, Anand shows the true picture of the oppressed people. A watchman shouts at Munoo and Tulsi: 'Go away, away from the precincts of this shop. Lalla Tota Ram does not allow any coolies to lie about near here. There is a cash box in this shop.' (*Coolie* 118)

Here, Anand shows suppression in its severe form. Lalla Tota Ram is a representative through which Anand shows the suppressing nature of merchants. The hardships of coolies who lie in the gutters trying to get a wink of sleep after

the hard labour of the day are portrayed by the author. In the market, there is cut-throat competition among the coolies and so Munoo and Tulsi try their best to succeed. The coolies rush madly in the direction of the shop and this shows their state of poverty and helplessness. They struggle to fill their empty stomachs. The coolies get only low wages. The author gives authentic picture of the oppressed. Anand reveals:

For there were swarms of coolies about. And, urged by the fear of having to go without food, driven by the fear of hunger gnawing in their bellies, they rushed frantically at the shops, pushing, pulling, struggling to shove each other out of the way, till the merchants' staves had knocked a hill man's teeth out or bled the sores on a Kashmiri's head. Then they would fall back, defeated, afraid for their lives and resigned to the workings of fate, which might single them out for the coveted prize of an anna job. It was not that the strongest of them were chosen and the weaker had to go to the wall. The caprice of any merchant boy decided their lot, or the shrewdness of the Lalla who could make them accept less wages for more work. (*Coolie* 126) The rural village of Kangra is not free from capitalistic suppression. Munoo has a horrible fate even from his early days as a child. Munoo is led to the path of suppression and endless suffering. Anand shows capitalistic suppression as it is. Anand shows the mortal fate of the victims under the treachery of landlords. A landlord gained for himself his father's five acres of land as his male parent could not return the landlord's money on account of bad harvests. The landlords showed them no mercy and left them destitute and his father passed away due to utter bitterness and disappointment. His mother was the next target of capitalistic suppression. She worked a lot to look after the family.

With love for wealth, the capitalist suppressers are hard-hearted and behave cruelly. They treat the coolies by using bad words.

Narrative of Life and Death

Coolie is the narrative of life and death of a coolie, Munoo, in a time span of two years. Anand is a reformer of the society besides being a realist. So, he preaches for the welfare of the many like Munoo. His tragedy is Anand's passionate appeal for change. Humanism is Anand's solution to this menace. This is expressed through typical situations and characters.

Coolie shows his belief in the essential dignity of man whether he belongs to the group of the rich or the group of the poor. In this novel, Anand chooses a poor boy, Munoo, as the hero, and he dominates this novel from the beginning to the end. To Anand, the pain and suffering form universal brotherhood, love, etc. Through *Coolie*, Anand expresses his belief in man's dignity whether he is rich or poor. Munoo's life is full of sufferings and in the beginning of the novel itself we can see how his aunt Gujri ill-treats him. Anand writes:

‘Munoo ohe Munooa!’ she called again, exasperated and raising her voice, this time, to the highest pitch to which, in her anger and hate, she could carry it: ‘Where have you died? Where have you gone, you ominous orphan? Come back and begone!’ The piercing soprano resounded through the valley and fell on Munoo's ears with the dreadening effect of all its bitter content. (*Coolie* 1)

If his aunt Gujri and Uttam Kaur had not ill-treated him, his tragedy would have been avoided. In the novel, Munoo meets cruel and bad characters besides

good characters like Prabha Dayal and his wife in Daulatpur, Chota Babu in Sham Nagar and Ratan in Bombay. Here is an example of the goodness of Prabha Dayal. When Munoo first met Dayal, the latter ignoring his partner Ganesh's advice, patted Munoo on his back and said: 'Come, come now, be a brave lad. Wipe your eyes. We will take care of you. Look, we are almost nearing Daulatpur!' (*Coolie* 64).

To Conclude

Munoo is, in fact, a burning symbol of millions of unfortunate souls like himself – lost and bereft, abused and down-trodden. If Anand hints at the gradual break-down of the caste system, mainly through the British, in *Untouchable* and *Road*, he shows in *Coolie* how it is replaced by class system – an evil no less vicious than the former – an awful result of social revolution fermented by the twin forces of industrialism and the cash nexus. Central to *Coolie* is Anand's humanistic faith that this class-consciousness born of money or social status can have crushing effects on those that are at the lower rungs. We can see in *Coolie* how the evils of poverty and cruelty crush a bud of youth before it could bloom to any extent. Daya Ram, Mr. and Mrs. Nathoo Ram, Ganpat, Chimta Sahib, and Mrs. Mainwaring too, have only contempt for Munoo. They slap him, kick him, and abuse him. Almost at every turn he comes across only pain and cruelty which make his life a painful saga of suffering. He is forced to become a sort of a purposeless vagabond with apparently no control on his destiny. By studying all the above characters, we can say the main character who is Munoo who suffer because he is poor he is coolie and all other coolies also suffer because capitalists and other rich Indians exploits them physically and economically. Munoo is the representative character in the novel. His longing to live, we can see in the novel. Right from the beginning we

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can say whether in village or at city, all persons who are responsible for the suffering of the character Munoo are the same. Moneylender seized all property of Munoo's father and his mother. His father died of shock and Munoo became orphan. He worked in textile factory. There also capitalists exploited him. Anand depicted the real condition of downtrodden workers of the society. Anand also shown how a lady exploits Munoo sexually and because of extra work of pulling rickshaw and sexual exploitation, Munoo died. In Coolie Anand has shown extreme suffering of the characters like Munoo, Hari-Har and Prabh Dayal.

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