

Child Labour In *Coolie*

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Abstract - Literature reflects the society that contributes the incidents, literary movements etc. Mulk Raj Anand is the most famous creative writer in Indian English fiction; he is compared with Dickens, Hardy, Tolstoy, MunshiPremchand and Chinua Achebe, who has contributed a lot about the problems of their respective societies in their works. Anand brings us the picture of real troubled lives of the suppressed Indians; in his novels we can see the living conditions of people like a sweeper, a coolie, a peasant, etc. *Coolie* is Anand's second novel, it came out in the year 1936. It is the story of a child labourer Munoo. The orphan boy Munoo runs in search of happiness to overcome his suppressed feelings. He is aged fifteen and he does various jobs at Daulatpur, Bombay and Simla. He has a tragic end like most of the poor man affected with the disease tuberculosis. In *Coolie*, Anand brings out his favourite themes of the varied nature of man, the power of money and brutal suppression. This paper focuses on the suppressed feelings and endless sufferings of the child labour.

INTRODUCTION

Child labour is another example of social inequalities that is rampant in the Indian society forcing an unlucky child forego its right to education and better living and involving itself in the drudgery of hard labour as a domestic helper and languish in loom factories, match industries and hotels. K.R.SrinivasaIyengar remarks: "Anand's notable marks are vitality and a keen sense of actuality. He is a veritable Dickens for describing the inequalities and idiosyncrasies in the current human situation with candour as well as accuracy" (356).

The overall impression of *Coolie* is that it is a sensitive and impressive work credibly portraying the tragic tale of a poor boy's hard and agonising struggle for survival and his ultimate defeat and death. S.Ramamurthy opines, "The evil of the capitalistic social system is exposed in *Coolie*. As the title indicates, the theme of this novel is the exploitation of the working class by the rich and capitalistic society"(45).

Munoo's uncle, Daya Ram, finds him a job in town, Sham Nagar. He is asked to get ready to go to town. He is moving towards a new world with his uncle. His uncle makes him walk miles and miles barefoot without giving the boy time to take rest. Munoo is employed at rupees three per month. The monthly salary of 3 rupees should be paid to his uncle and not to him. SarosCovasjee brings out the plight of coolies in a pathetic way: "The coolie-though apparently free to move about and choose his own

functioning under a system even more rigid. He has nowhere to go; he is often underpaid and over worked"(62).

In the ancient and medieval periods of India, villagers were thoroughly ignorant of what was going on in the town and cities especially in the capital cities where there would be large scale bloodshed out of their ambition, envy and animosity. Poor Munoo is no exception to this curiosity and fascination. He thinks deeply and comes to a conclusion that there are only two castes in the worlds, the rich and poor. "Money is, indeed, everything, Munoo thought. And his mind dwelt for the first time on the difference between himself, the poor boy, and his masters, the rich people" (69).

PrabhaDayal, who owns a pickle factory, himself once a coolie, understands the plight of Munoo. He, along with his wife, Parbati, decides to adopt him as their son. Philip Henderson says, "Coolie takes us into a world in which comradeship of man for man exists only among the very poorest people, with nothing to hope for, their common humanity is all they possess" (256).

The exploitation of the servants is rampant in the pickle factory. The basic needs of the labourers, water and food, are not supplied properly. Even the sunlight enters through the nail holes. It is a place of unhygienic. Anand describes the pathetic plight of the child labourers: "They worked from day to day in the dark underworld, full of the intense heat of blazing furnaces and dense malodorous smell of brewing essences... and plastered the bare toes of the labourers" (110).

Coolies in India are a beast of burden more manageable, less expensive. The competition that Munoo faces for the Grain Market shows the inhuman rush for the survival of the existence. Each coolie tries to compete with other in asking less money and promising heavier load on his back. But there is God's plenty and Lalaji, the master goes on refusing them all. In the night the coolies fight among themselves for a share of the market courtyard to rest their naked bodies. The way they rest their mortal bodies to spend night in the courtyard, is also a horrible picture of what man has made of man: "The bodies of numberless coolies lay strewn in tattered grabs. Some were curled up in knots, others lay face downwards on folded aims, others were flat on their chest, pillowing their heads on their

bundle of boxes, others crouched into corners talking, others still huddled together” (188).

The life in the pickle factory is inhuman. Hard work and low-wages dehumanise the coolies. Moreover, the treatment they receive from the factory officers is also disgusting. Back the factory, they have no space to lay their tired bodies to rest. They are homeless. Like gypsies they have no permanent abode. They use courtyards, shops, filmsy huts and footpaths along the dirty drains for rest. Flies, mosquitoes and other nocturnal insects are companions to him. The novelist’s comment in this regard is illuminating: “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” (137).

Anand discovers in the life of coolies a real world of shocking miseries. A life that of Munoo, deprived of its courage and healthy passion cannot produce anything creative. Even the best moments of Munoo’s life marred are by thought: “We belong to suffering, We belong to suffering, My love” (247).

When the labourer is not paid well, his wages will not meet the maintenance of his family. And when his employers enjoy enormous advantages at his cost, humanity suffers. Society should have gone on well, had the workers been well paid and not mercilessly exploited. Anand has been personally affected by the sufferings of the labourers in his life. He projects their tribulations with avowed purpose in his creative works for the whole world to witness. Moreover, to justify their purposes and strengthen his natural sympathy towards the working class, his vision has been sharpened by the principles of Marxism and communistic ideals.

The important message of the novel is made evident through Munoo’s experiences in Daulatpur and Bombay. Anand’s social criticism focuses on the exploitation of the poor by rich. Everything that happens in the pickle factory at Daulatpur and in Sir George White Cotton Mills gives ample evidence to the economic exploitation.

Munoo’s life in Bombay comes to an abrupt end on account of the involvement in a car accident. The person responsible for this accident is none other than an Anglo-Indian lady, Mrs. Mainwaring, who takes the boy all the way to Simla not out any sympathetic and humanitarian outlook but as necessity because she is in need of a boy servant.

Munoo has done nothing to deserve his fate. Bakha suffers because he is born an untouchable but Munoo is a victim of the evils of an exploiting economic social system. Both the

heroes are passive characters who do not act, but are acted upon by society. Munoo is ultimately destroyed by the blind social forces. His death is a powerful plea for social change. *Coolie* is clearly a social tragedy in which propaganda and art are welded together to produce a good novel, a novel of social protest.

Through the character of Munoo, the novelist gives a graphic description of how the poor and downtrodden underprivileged are put to enormous suffering and humiliation at the hands of their employers like Babu Nathoo Ram and the sharp-tongued shrewd Bibiji, Ganpat in the pickle jam factory in Daulatpur and foreman Jimmie Thomas of the cotton factory. They have no compassion for the unfortunate people who come to work under them. The unlucky people like Munoo are treated everywhere as mere slaves or chattel.

Munoo, though born poor, would have developed into a healthy young man but for so many social pressures. He himself often says that he wants to live. It is not the death of a full grown man who has seen sorrow and joy, but that of a young boy who has not had a full share of everything in his life. His struggle for life, suffering and pain leave an indelible impression in the hearts of the readers.

If Munoo’s health is good enough to withstand the hazards of life, he would have been a better man and would have survived the disasters. Munoo though born poor would have developed into a healthy young man but for so many social pressures. Sinha opines “Anand places Munoo...as a defenceless figure in a predominantly hostile world. Society is the great destroyer of Munoo and his life” (33).

Munoo is an innocent child who might have grown into a man of potentialities but by circumstances nipped him in the bud. He is the victim of social forces. Anand goes on detailing the misery of Munoo. This tragic denial of life to Munoo is caused by his poverty which is sole cause of his tragedy. His harrowing experiences and his untimely death are symbolic of a similar fate of millions of such men in India as well as in the world.

Though Munoo is put to a lot of suffering and humiliation, the striking feature of the boy is that he never grumbles, his buoyancy of spirit always keeps him cheerful. There is in him the desire to live despite his hard life and this desire keep him going. Despite all the difficulties heaped on him one after the other he has never given to the idea of committing suicide. Even in Simla, when he is confronted by a dreadful disease, he is not afraid that he would die. With his ability to adjust himself to others, Munoo would have risen in life but for the force of the circumstances and the inborn cruelty of those under whom he comes.

Anand shows that suffering and pain are inevitable features of human existence but man can control pain and erode suffering by universal brotherhood, love compassion and equality. Had Bibiji treated Munoo with a little compassion and kindness, his tragedy might have been avoided. In his adventures Munoo meets not only cruel and bad people but kind and good fellows too. ChotaBabu in Sham Nagar, Prabha and his wife in Daulatpur, elephant driver of the circus and Ratan in Bombay show kindness to him. If he had met more persons like these, his lot would have definitely been different.

The sufferings of Munoo right from the beginning to end depict the fact that his survival spirit which drove him to various places. Unfortunately, he falls a victim to all the places. He is not treated as a human being but as a beast of burden. He is victim of exploitation. At the end of the novel, *Coolie*, the readers are left with no other option but to shed tears for the poor boy, Munoo.

Munoo has, thus, been hounded from pillar to post, undergoing unbearable humiliation, hardships and cruelties at the hands of the rich. The saga of his suffering is endless. Anand has therefore excelled in vividly portraying the hapless lot of the child labour. Before Anand, no attempt has been made to put in black and white, the endless sufferings of child labour. Anand excels in this endeavour.

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