



Mulk Raj Anand's Coolie : A Protest Against Discrimination

KEYWORDS

Class distinction, canvas, champion, protagonist, exploitation, protest, discrimination,

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ABSTRACT

Class and caste discrimination as rooted in the society at larger canvas have become the core themes of literary creations from the time immemorial. Mulk Raj Anand, who worked as a champion for socialistic cause through his fiction, has voiced against it by exposing its ugly and dire nature. Through Coolie Mulk Raj Anand registers his disgust against such distinction between the poor and the rich. His 'Coolie' portrays a powerful tragedy of an orphan boy, Munoo, who comes across painful experiences of exploitation and inhuman treatment at the hands of humans of rich class making his life more painful. The novelist puts Munoo before us as a victim of irrational systems and the inhuman cruelties of society. The novel takes us to different places and cities showing the inhuman treatment given to Munoo and how he copes with all circumstances alone. His small life seems to be a saga of sufferings. This paper presents Anand's protest against the ruthless exploitation of the weaker section of the society at the hands of the rich and discrimination thereof through this novel.

Introduction-

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the pioneering figures of Indian novel in English. He is not merely a creative writer with a strong social commitment and concerns but also a thinker. He is called the Messiah of the downtrodden, unwanted and the unloved humans. He voices for the most fundamental sentiments of man and social discrimination through his novels. It seems that he wrote to expose and denounce the society based on such distinctions of caste, creed and colour as well as the distinction between the rich and the poor. Coolie, his second novel published in 1936, is called a sequel to his first novel, Untouchable. This novel has wider and more varied canvas. It mainly exposes the distinction between the rich and the poor. It shows dissatisfaction with the society and anger against man's exploitation by man. It has power to move us with its presentation of a universal human tragedy. It can be called a classic example of the story of the underprivileged class of the society and of the oppressed people who cannot even make both ends meet.

Coolie is regarded as a powerful social tragedy of a common man, Munoo, caused by inhuman social forces of poverty, exploitation, cruelty and selfishness. Munoo, the hero of the novel, is presented as a victim of social forces like the tragic heroes of the great novelist John

Galsworthy. Munoo, driven by hunger, moves from place to place in search of livelihood and finally falls into the clutches of death. The novel takes us to different places and cities showing the inhuman treatment given to the poor orphan boy Munoo and how he copes with all circumstances alone. He is despised by the society, rejected by his relatives and oppressed by his masters. Forced by circumstances he passes through diverse situations- as a domestic servant in an urban middle-class family in Sham Nagar, as a worker in a small pickle factory and as a coolie fighting for work in the city market in Daulatpur, as a labourer in a cotton mill in Bombay, as a coolie and as a rickshaw puller in Simla. Before he begins his inglorious odyssey, Munoo is a sensitive and intelligent rustic adolescent, full of high spirits and zest for life. But poverty and hunger forced him to be apprenticed to life even at the age of fourteen. His birth-right seems to be the terrible

destiny of being a victim of exploitation. He could not forget the way in which his father suffered and his mother worked hard every day.

"He had heard of how the landlord had seized his father's 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 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 young brother-in-law Daya Ram and a child Munoo in her arms".(Coolie 11)

His father died of bitterness and disappointment as he was unable to pay the interest due to the landlord on the borrowed money. On the other, his mother's helplessness and tragic destiny imprinted on his mind. His aunt "beat him more than he beat his cattle".(Cl 11) In spite of these sad memories and ill-treatment at the hands of his aunt and uncle, Munoo is happy and self-complacent. However, his happy life comes to an end when he is asked by his uncle and aunt to go with them to Sham Nagar for seeking some job there for their livelihood.

Munoo's expectation are extremely modest. He is far from being ambitious in life. He only desires to live, to know and to work. He says: "I want to live, I want to know, I want to work".(Cl 218) Munoo, driven by the dire necessity of livelihood, appears in the urban world when he has to go to Sham Nagar with his uncle Daya Ram, a peon in the Imperial Bank, to work there as a domestic servant in the house of Baboo Nathoo Ram, the sub-accountant in the Imperial Bank. Unfortunately his ignorance of so-called urban ways brands him as a stupid rustic. Here he gets unbearable ill-treatment from Bibi Utham Kaur, the wife of Baboo Nathoo Ram. She underfeeds him, nags him and humiliates him to no limits. He is even beaten with a cudgel. From this first tragic encounter he learns his first lesson: "He was to be a slave, a servant who should do odd jobs, some are to be abused even beaten"(Rao 33) and that "there must only be two kinds of people in the world: the rich and the poor".(Rao 69) To get rid of these sufferings and countless abuses he runs away from there and boards a train with no definite place to go.

The second tragic encounter with social evil in Munoo's life comes when he happens to meet Prabha in the train. Prabha, who himself was a Coolie and an orphan like Munoo, is a Seth now having a pickle factory at Daulatpur in partnership with Ganpat Seth. Prabha takes him to Daulatpur and offers job as a labourer in his Pickle factory. He gets affection here. Prabha Dayal and his wife are kind enough to treat him affectionately. They feed him well also. He is, however, afraid of Ganpat's hellish and wicked behaviour with the workers. This job is also lost as the factory is closed down due to Ganpat's treachery in business. He goes to railway station to work as a coolie but the policeman drives him out as he has no license. The novelist seems to express her disgust at the exploitation of young orphan here by exposing the apathy of the high class or caste.

He moves towards another tragic event when he starts for Bombay by train with the elephant-driver in circus to test his lot and get him food. By chance Munoo meets Harihar who works in factory. He helps him to get job in Sir George White Cotton Mills in Bombay. As M. K. Naik puts it, "the factory is a huge octopus with its numerous tentacles clutching the labourer in its deadly grasp, slowly paralyzing and poisoning him".(41) His exploitation by the trader continued here also along with other workers. The coolie's wage cut and continuous exploitation leads to strike in the mill. These suffocated and exploited workers' strike turns into Hindu-Muslim riots. Helpless Munoo has to become a witness of communal murder and senseless killings. Ill-fated Munoo gets distressed and speaks his agony in the words:

"Am I really ominous?... My father died when I born and then my mother, and I brought misfortune to Prabha, and, it seems, I have brought misfortune to Hari now. If I am ominous, why don't I die?(CI 217)

These words of Munoo move us. H. A. Singh aptly says, "The cotton mill exposes the exploitation of the labourers while Munoo finds himself one of the herds of anonymous workers. Anand's novel reveals the evils of capitalistic social system".(35) Economic stress leads to demonic feelings when Mohan tells a coolie who has mortgaged his land: "Then come with me and we shall kill the landlord one day and get your land".(CI 311) He reflects Anand's view, "It is my object to make you realize that if you work, you should have a share in the things that you produce with the sweat of your brow".(CI 311) His feeling of revolt comes in the words; "you will let them kill you, you are all ignorant slaves. How can I drill any sense into your heads".(CI 311) Anand seems to stir all hearts to protest against such economic exploitation and class distinction.

The last blow comes to him when he is knocked on Bombay street by car of Mrs. Mainwaring, an Anglo-Indian lady. She takes him in her car to Simla. He is broken mentally and physically. He works here as a pageboy and a rickshaw puller. He accepts his present lot silently. It can be said that it is a deep-rooted feeling of inferiority to superior people who lived in bungalows and wore Angrezi cloths. Due over exertion as a rickshaw-puller, he becomes more weak and dies of consumption at the age of sixteen. His premature death catches the reader's attention on the unjust exploitation and the ills of the economic system.

The cold treatment to Indian workers by those people who have the means to do so is really heart-rending. Munoo is the victim of this exploitation at different places by differ-

ent people. The novelist seems to expose that the Indian worker is at the mercy of the exploiters whether in the village or city. The most glaring aspect in this novel is the economic exploitation of the poor class. Anand would like to expose and justify his dissent that there are only two kinds of people in the world- the rich and the poor among whom there is no connection.

"The rich and the powerful, the magnificent- and the glorious whose opulence is built on robbery and theft and open warfare, are honoured and admired by the whole world and by themselves. You the poor and the humble, you the meek and the gentle, wretched that you are swindled out of your rights and broken in body and soul: you are respected by no one and you do not respect yourself". (CI 266-267)

So K.Venkata Reddy aptly says, " Coolie is a sincere protest against the emergence of a new world of money and exploitation and class distinction".(12)

Anand has portrayed poverty as a curse to human beings which boost the morale of the rich to become inhuman towards the man of their breed. A child, Munoo, is heartlessly crushed by the heartless exploiters. His small life seem to be a saga of suffering caused by pain and cruelty and by those who could give it. Through Munoo, the writer wonders, "what am I-Munoo?"(CI 46) This brings the feeling that Munoo is not an individual only, an object or rather a means to the exploiter's end. Anand says, "The bigger a city is, the more cruel it is to the sons of Adam... you have to pay even for the breath you breathe".(CI 177) We come across apparent class distinction also when Nathoo Ram's daughter tells Munoo that the latter is a servant, therefore he must play with her. Anand strongly censures such inhuman relationships which make the sufferers mentally submissive losing his voice of rights. H. A. Singh rightly says, "The main concern of Coolie is the anathema of the new caste system on the basis of riches which can corrupt the man to the level of subjugating his fellow beings. Munoo serves as a symbol of Anand's dissatisfaction with a society which crushes social and economic morality".(36)

Conclusion-

Thus, Coolie is a kind of powerful indictment of modern capitalistic society and its tragic exploitation of the poor. Anand seems to protest against human thinking, which is befuddled because of the co-existence of the old. The novelist puts Munoo before us as a victim of irrational systems and the inhuman cruelties of society who meets pain and cruelty at every mode making his life more painful. Anand seems to arouse anger in the reader against the ruthless exploitation of the weaker people through this novel. He also seems to register his dissent against the privileging of the rich and depriving of the poor. But Anand's protest is not violent because it is against the society based on discrimination. He desires a classless society. Therefore, we can say that he champions the socialistic cause in his fiction. He works as a sociologist and a historian of society through his writings. He ridicules the system with an ardent hope of transformation in which genuine human feelings are generated. However, for such social transformation, protest is necessary to move the existing wrong social order.

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