

Social protest in Coolie

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Mulk raj Anand is pioneer of Indian novel written in English. His three novels *Untouchables* (1935), *Coolie* (1936) and *Two leaves and a bud* (1937) were produced in quick succession, and being the product of what he called “the pink decade”. *Coolie* is a sequel to Anand’s first novel. The canvas of the novel is wider and more varied. *Coolie* is truly a picaresque novel, an epic of thousands of “coolies” in India. Criticism of society is prevalent essentially in all literatures. Mulk raj Anand wrote to denounce the society based on all kinds of distinctions- of caste, color, creed, and last but not the least, the distinction between rich and poor. Munoo, the central character of the novel, is the poorest of the poor. The novel mainly focuses on the distinction of rich and poor. Munoo, to begin with, is a child, and that too an orphan, whose parents died in utter poverty, leaving him nothing to fall back upon. He was hardly fourteen when he was engaged in the domestic help by his uncle and aunt. The novel opens with his aunt calling for him to hurry up as his uncle is shortly to depart for the town of Sham Nagar where the boy is to be engaged as a servant in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, a clerk in the Imperial Bank of India, where his uncle worked as a peon. His name is Munoo but his uncle alternatively calls hi Mandu, a child servant, in the hills and the Punjab. No wonder munoo has already become Mandu in his uncle’s house, as he gazes cattles. As a Novelist with a mission of reorganizing society in a way that would be of lasting benefit to all classes of people, Anand is not against work, but labor that takes away the play of one’s childhood, or aspirations of one’s youth or the dignity of one’s old age. Munoo is engaged as a servant as if orphans and the poor were destined to work as slaves. Ispo facto, the social set up as sketched in the novel, is a slave order. He is not the only child servant but there are many more “Munooos” working in the neighboring houses. It appears as if servility is fated. His uncle is a slave to clerk, clerk to chief cashier and chief cashier to the manager of the bank. Anand is not against order in any society, but he protest against slavery which people accept as given.

Incidentally, India was a slave country when the novel was written. Many of the coolies in Bombay are from hills. In reply to Munoo’s question as to how the town people get their food in absence of fields, his uncle said: *They earn money by buying wheat which the peasants grow and by selling of flour to the sarkar, or by buying cotton and making cloth and selling it for profit. Some of them become “babu” who works in the offices, like the babu in whose house you are going to be a servant.* India has always been and stills an agrarian country. Because the hills are not agriculturally viable, coolies flock from hills to work in towns. This novel is mere not a story of one coolie, but all those who in their poverty are reduced to this status. It is thus about all the coolies, however different their religion or caste.

Coolie thus is a generic term for all those menials- whether they work as domestic servants or carry load or work in factories or even pull rickshaws. Munoo does all the jobs of a coolie and is therefore representative of all coolies. Other kind of discrimination is not shown in the novel except slavery. Anand is particularly protesting against the rich. Society, as Anand visualized, did not originate from the Hobbsian war of one against all, but rather from instruct of social sympathy, particularly in a family. Munoo was also loved by his aunt; she would take him into her lap as did Prabhati, and later Luxmi. It is true that egoistic instinct in human beings grow stronger than social sympathy. Munoo’s aunt had yet no child. She wished to love him as her own son. But her desire to have her own son made her push Munoo to servitude. Prabhati and Prabha thought of adopting the boy, but they, guided by the original instinct, did not bring themselves to adopt Munoo. Same is the case with Gujri, she would like to have her respective son rather than adopt Munoo. Mrs. Mainwaring, being a liberated woman, wanted to flirt that with Munoo’s body but had reservations regarding his status as a servant. There is always confusion between egoism and altruism, especially in Indian society. It is a rare practice that any of the society is developed to an extent to regard social ties on the family lines. There are lines of social discrimination even in the British society. It could not accept Mrs. Mainwaring unto its fold. Her complexion was dusky, as her mother was an Indian washer woman. This is another level of discrimination. Mrs. Mainwaring was crying for acceptance by the English. She called England her ‘home’. And for the same reason she married an English man and later on when her husband was arrested, she divorced him to marry an

Indian Muslim. Munoo too likes Mrs. Mainwaring is a victim of romance of the color of skins. He was completely spell-bound when he saw her white skin.

It is a curious fact of racial and social discrimination that the higher order, the rich, the higher caste people, are romanticized by those who are the victim of same order. Munoo's sense of wonder in this regard is inexhaustible. He is never disillusioned. He thinks of them as super human and this makes him long to be of their kind, he thinks that he is fated to be a poor. Thus, the divide between the rich and the poor, as of the race, color and creed, he feels is infallible. Nevertheless, Anand is not as hopeless as munoo is. He believes that with the development of intelligence mankind will be able to realize that the whole society is a big family. But Anand is not a naïve optimist. He knows social consolidations other than the family are difficult to sustain, and they are indispensable. Anand seems to think that the problem of social cooperation in an industrial society is primarily intellectual and moral, and same are the thoughts of F.R Leavis and T.S Eliot. Anand's protest against the society based on discrimination is, therefore, not violent. A classless society is a new concept sought to be established in the existing structures of caste, color, and creed. Anand thus protested against human thinking which is muddled because of the co-existence of the old. Munoo is a victim of social apathy because society as a whole has yet to enter the positive stage of mutual sympathy. Anand is a sociologist and historian of society. The world according to Munoo is divided into two classes- the rich and the poor. To be poor is as bad a stigma to be lowly born. In spite of his tender years, supple body and dark eyes; he is still regarded as an untouchable. He is far apart from rich just because of his poverty. He is an untouchable in the class conscious world. He is to be a slave whether the country is rural, or urban, feudal or modern. Munoo equally grows conscious of his own status. Unfortunately we have inherited this metaphysical thinking that nature does this or that, that laws of nature are good etc. from the days of enlightenment. Rousseau and Romantics then carried it over into their social contract, 'natural right', the sovereignty of the people. Derrida calls this privileging of nature over culture "an ethic of nostalgia, for origins, an ethics of archaic and natural innocent". Such privileging creates a center-the privileged position, as, for example, of rich over the poor, resisting the freeplay between the two. Anand in his novel *Coolie*, protest against this privileging of the rich.

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