

## M. R. Anand's "Coolie": A Problem Novel

\*Manisha Choudhary

\*Assistant Professor, K. L. P. College, Rewari (India)

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### ABSTRACT

*Coolie is the second novel by Mulk Raj Anand written in 1936. Through its protagonist Munoo, a fourteen years old orphan boy, the novel depicts the exploitation of children by the elders. Although written against the background of Colonial India. The significance of the novel does not lessen even after independence. Child labour is a problem which has taken its roots in society because of the poor mentality of the wealthy class. No law or constitution could prevent this evil. Mulk Raj Anand presents Munoo as the protagonist of the novel who suffers the exploitation by his elders and employers. Like Charles Dickens, Mulk Raj Anand expects to effect social change through the realistic portrayal of the poison of child labour which makes children face pain and suffering.*

*Thus clearly Coolie is an anti-child labour novel which is a burning issue in India today.*

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#### \*Corresponding Author

Email: [sumitgiroh89@gmail.com](mailto:sumitgiroh89@gmail.com)

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### INTRODUCTION

"Coolie is a fine literary evocation of a traditional social malaise."

#### Evangeline Manickam

Mulk Raj Anand is one of the most famous novelists among the Indo-Anglican writers. Whose writing career covered nearly four decades with immense output? Anand as a sincere writer highlighted in his novel the burning social problems in very simple terms. He wrote novels with missionary zeal to portray the sufferings of the downtrodden at the hands of the native rich people aware of the fact that they were subjected to double salvery in the form of casteism and poverty.

Coolie has a very simple plot structure. The action begins when fourteen year old orphan Munoo, has to leave his village home to earn his living in the town. The novel develops while; Munno goes from misadventure to misadventure to untimely death. First, he works as a domestic servant with a family in Sham Nagar. After this painful experience, he runs away to Daultpur to work with Parabha Dayal. When his master's business fails and he goes bankrupt. Munno is left alone to earn his living as a coolie in vegetable market and railway station. Next he moves to Bombay where he becomes part of the masses trying hard to earn their living in the big city. Finally accidentally he reaches Simla, the hill station where he works as the rikshaw puller of an Anglo Indian Lady, Munno is only sixteen when he dies of tuberculosis. In his death Anand evokes a reader response similar to Dickens' evocation at the death of little Nell in the "Old Curiosity Shop."

#### WHAT IS A PROBLEM NOVEL?

A problem novel is a novel written with the specific purpose of discussing a special problem. This problem

discussed by the novelist is definitely related to society. The evils that have taken roots in our social system are the burning issue discussed by a problem novelist. Taking the Indian society as background there are many more evils which can be discussed than other countries like poverty, class struggle, caste discrimination, child labour, women exploitation superstition etc.

When we approach Mulk Raj Anand's novels from this point of view; these social problems are depicted by him vividly and realistically. Most of his novels like Untouchable, Two Leaves and a Bud, Coolie, The old woman and the cow etc. have these social problems as their themes.

#### THE PROBLEM DISCUSSED IN COOLIE

Coolie an international best seller is Anand's most popular novel next to Untouchable. While Untouchable gave life to the evils of caste discrimination in society; Coolie on the other hand depicts the evil of child labour, the exploration, cruelty and abuse of children that have taken deep root in the socio economic soil of our land.

Mulk Raj Anand is the angry young man who can not tolerate exploitation of one man by another man, or of one class by another class. After seventy years of independence we must admit with shame that very little has changed in the lives of the poor in India, and a coolie, a novel of yester years written during the British Raj, could well be a socio-literary representation of India's struggling millions today.

While child labour law exists and the Indian constitution bars the employment of children below the age of fourteen. It is well known that the daily plight of millions of children is no different today than that of Anand's Munoo in 1936. N.G.O world vision of India's fundraiser. Pamphlet depicting the faces of needy children of national flag appeals:- "They

too need their independence, “and describes the life of Mini that closely parallels that of Munoo, only younger; eight years old, orphaned, working as a domestic servant, beaten, never paid- a real life character who lives out the life of Anand’s fictional Munoo.<sup>3</sup> Anand portrays the child labour problem not of single profession but of many fields where children are exploited, abused and mistreated by the adults. Before he begins his inglorious path of struggle Munoo is a sensitive and intelligent boy full of high spirit and zest for life. His ambition was to be an engineer and work with machines. But poverty does not allow him to full fill his long wished desire and he is compelled to become a servant. His only prayer is

“I want to live, and I want to know, I want to work”.<sup>4</sup>

The ancient times tells us that the life of an individual was judged by the caste in which he or she was born, but Coolie explains a class which is categorised on the basis of money or wealth. Munoo the protagonist of novel, is Kshatriya by caste, still he suffers greatly, He realizes,

“There are only two castes, the rich and the poor and the irony is that there is no connection between them. The capitalists treat the Coolie as if they were mere cattle.”<sup>5</sup>

Society not only mistreats such child labourers but also prevent others to show any kind of sympathy towards them. Ganpat always rebukes Prabha Dayal for being kind to the boy, in the same way the Mistress at Sham Nagar chides Prem Singh when he shows sympathy for the boy. In the last phase of Munoo’s life when Mrs. Mainwaring shows sympathy for the ill boy. Dr. Major MERCHANT prohibits her from visiting Munno.

#### TREATMENT OF THE PROBLEM BY ANAND

After going through the novel, one realizes that Munoo experiences many kinds of plight in his brief lifetime. A domestic servant, a factory labourer, an independent coolie, worker of cotton factory and in the end a rickshaw puller these were the jobs he was compelled to do at the age of fourteen. Thus in the novel the plight of all kinds of coolies is shown, which Munoo experiences in quick succession.

A Coolie is proverbially a poor wage earner who has no status, no position and no joy in life. “Literature is not the mere statement nor simply the pleading of a cause however

worthy. Literature is a creative art written by literary creative artists,” says A.C. Word.<sup>6</sup>

Through the method of direct narration of the omniscient writer and through the dialogue between the various characters, Anand succeeds in bringing out the pathos and poignancy in the life of Coolie.

#### ANAND’S ART IN RELATION TO THE PROBLEM

Mulk Raj Anand seems to believe in the dictum of “Art for the sake of humanity “instead of “Art for Art’s sake. “For him writing novels with definite purpose was a form of patriotic activity. His purpose of writing problem novels was like that of Charles Dickens and Galsworthy, to focus the attention of the reading public on the miseries and hardships of the poor underdog of Indian society.<sup>7</sup> The purposiveness of the novel can be seen from the title also which defines all kinds of human labour. No subject however ugly and unclean it seems is repulsive for Anand. The only criterion of his choosing a subject is that it should focus the problem. Misery and humiliation of the unfortunate victims of different kinds of exploitation.

Mulk Raj Anand does not care much about the plot construction of his novels. Coolie has a very diffused and rumbling plot structure. Munno the protagonist combines in himself five kinds of Coolies. The realistic depiction of Indian Society does not allow the author to have a complex and well constructed plot.

Anand depicts the tragedy of the orphan boy Munno not entirely with pain and tears, readers some time notice a glimpse of joy to remind them that these poor people also have the same zest for life as they (readers) have.

#### CONCLUSION

The novel Coolie can unmistakably be read under the heading of a problem novel. It vividly and very realistically portrays the evil of child labour in spite of the fact that the constitution has provided safety to children and laws have also been introduced to abolish it. But a social problem as it is, it can never be abolished until the mentality of the people is improved. It is all up to the adults how they behave with children especially with poor and orphan children.

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