

Examining Class and Caste Conflict in Anand's Coolie

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ABSTRACT

Mulk Raj Anand, one of the pioneer writers of Indian writing in English of the nineteenth century is notable for his depiction of the poor castes in traditional Indian society. Anand is not a writer of imagination but of reality. The novel 'Coolie' exposed the hypocrisy, snobbery and ostentation of the high class people. In other words, the novelist has drawn our attention towards the pathetic condition of the marginalised. Here, my paper will illustrate how the term 'Dalit' not only confines itself to a particular caste but tends to encompass all the oppressed and marginalised ones in the society. Further, we will also discuss how the social hierarchies in India's vast heritage leads to the exploitation and subjugation of the underdogs in every stratum.

'Coolie', first published in 1936, a time when India was struggling for freedom, an era of transition from tradition to modern, is highly critical of British rule in India and India's caste-system. The novel revolves around a 14-year old boy "Munoo", and his predestined tragic end due to poverty and exploitation. Anand in this novel tries to break the traditional way of life. Unlike Charles Dickens, Anand focuses on whole class rather than aiming on one hero. Therefore, he names his novel on a class and not Munno (hero of the novel), whereas Dickens novels focus on the protagonist as in 'Oliver Twist' & Nicholas Nickleby

Being a member of 'Progressive writers Association' his novels aimed at transforming the Indian society in order to achieve true liberation and democracy. They sought to inspire people through their writings, advocating equality among all and attacking social injustice and traditional norms prevailing in the society. There was an urge for 'critical spirit in writing' instead of a passive acceptance of traditional ideas. The purpose was to avoid the romantic and unrealistic contexts and reflect issues of importance to society. His writings are speculation of the evils deep rooted in a multi layered class system. They advocate a critical spirit with the intention of examining institutions so that they can be transformed in the direction of being 'progressive'.

Coolie is a term attached to an unskilled labourer whose prime work is to load and unload heavy baggage of higher class people. In the novel, the term coolie encompasses the all the downtrodden and oppressed class people who are exploited by the upper class in return of some money or sometimes even for free. The novel is quiet realistic in its approach as it manages to unveil the dark reality of a country where one's birth guarantees one's trajectory in life.

The novel presents the life of an orphan Munoo, a hill boy from Kangra hills, despised by society, rejected by relations and exploited by his masters and lastly receives a tragic end. Munoo experiences all the negative aspects of the world at such a tender age. His journey from innocence to experience is shown through the ideologies of suppression and empowerment. The novel begins with the protagonist, Munoo studying in class 5th in a rural school of Bilaspur situated in the Kangra hills on the banks of river Beas. He is

taken by his uncle Daya Ram to a town Sham Nagar, in order to earn a living and, is appointed as a domestic servant in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram. But after being mistreated by his owners, he questions himself,

"what am I - Munoo? 'He asked himself as he lay wrapped in his blanket, early one morning. I am Munoo, Babu Nathoo Ram's servant' the answer came to his mind. (P. 34)

After the humiliating experience at Nathoo Ram's house, Munoo runs away and boards a train with no definite destination to go to. On the train he meets Prabha Dayal, owner of a pickle factory. Prabha takes Munoo with him to Daulatpur and provides him employment. However, Prabhas' partner Ganpat cheats him, forcing to shut the factory and Munoo is once again left with uncertainties. He meets an elephant driver and joins him in Bombay. At first he is delighted with Bombay, but soon realizes that even here coolies sleep on the streets. Throughout the novel Anand points to the way the lower classes are exploited by those above them, with Munoo being the ultimate example. Proceeding in the novel, Munoo joins a cotton mill but soon is lost during a work strike. While wandering the streets, he is run over by Mrs. Mainwaring's car. As compensation, she hires him as a servant and takes him to Shimla. At this point the novelist provides an insight into another dimension; Mrs Mainwarings has English as well as Indian ancestry and longs to be accepted by English society. To fulfil her longing, she travelled to England and married a young Soldier. Her desire to be recognized as English can be associated with the privileges that accompany whiteness in colonial India, privileges that Munoo is denied. Eventually Munoo gets tuberculosis, vomits blood. Even then he feels he is not going to die, however his body succumbs and he breathes his last.

Anand clearly predicates destiny on the class. He subscribes to the naturalist point of view which posits the determining influence on the environment in the destiny of an individual. It is the class system that takes up a higher position than the caste system. An economically stronger person is given an honourable position than the weaker ones. The child Munno, despite being intelligent and joyous his aspirations dies an untimely and cruel death because of the class he is born to. It seems that a person's birth only

justifies the tragedies he has to go through. Nothing can charge the predetermined fate of the lower class souls. The unjust hierarchies and insidious relationships of the society wiped out the life of an innocent child. Anand portrays the life in pickle factory realistically contrasting it with the life of coolies outside. As in the novel, narrator says,

"Thus they worked from day to day in the dark underworld full of the intense heat of blazing furnaces...

Only the sweat trickled down their bodies and irritated them into an awareness that they were engaged in a strenuous physical occupation." (P110)

Coolies in India are treated the same as animals, oxen, asses and horses. He through his sweat and blood makes the capitalist work progress, however increased progress leads to increased exploitation and dehumanization for them. To draw a similarity between man and beast, Anand quotes in the novel -

"The square courtyard was crowded with rude wooden carts, which pointed their shafts to the sky like so many crucifixes crammed with snake horned bullocks and stray rhinoceros-like bulls and skinny calves bespattered with their own dung pressed against these were the bodies of the coolies, coloured like the earth..." (37)

Through these lines the harsh reality of society is unveiled. The courtyard first belongs to the animals; Coolies 'earth coloured' bodies are pressed against the dung plastered hides of the animals. It depicts how, through necessity and indifference society placed man at the bottom below the animals. The entire novel focuses on the class divisions in our society where an individual's identity is

determined by his economical strength and social status. If an untouchable suffers under a social system, a coolie suffers under a capitalist system. The coolie is more exploitative than an untouchable since he has nowhere to go; he is underpaid, overworked and so lives in constant dread of losing his job. The words of Hari, when a half naked woman explains him about her husband's demise,

"He has attained the release" ,we will rest in his place. (190)

This outlines the fact that for them, Death is a release from the sufferings of the world. They find their own life unbearable and thus for them there is no middle path, there is only the Rich and the Poor. Their mere existence as a human is questionable. The inhumane treatment that they receive is the result of capitalism and industrialisation that purports to hire cheap labour.

'Coolie' draws its strength from the then prevailing social background, British Imperialism, transforming the traditional economy of India into an industrial economy. Colonialism forced India into a new economic structure that crushed humanity in order to maximise profit. It also gave rise to the class system and this mechanism of theorizations was employed by the middle class to the lower classes of Indian society. The lower classes, particularly the coolies fell prey to this new and even atrocious stratification that carried both caste and class sentiments This racial and class hierarchies imposed by British colonialism made life Peloponnese for Coolies, and they find their release only in death, as finally in the novel Munno is freed from all his pains by eventually resting in peace.

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