

Coolie: An Epic of Injustice and Exploitation

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Abstract

The nineteen-thirties were the most tumultuous years in Indian history. It was the time of Indian struggle for independence and everybody was effected by the impact of this even poetry, drama and novel too. So Anand could not remain uninfluenced by it. He suffered a lot so this made him hate imperialism. He was aware of the sufferings of our people from poverty and squalor. No one in India had yet written the epic on this suffering adequately because the realities were too crude for a writer like Tagore. Mulk Raj Anand a great Indian novelist draws our attention through his immortal characters Munno and Bakha, from real society. As a novelist he speaks on realism, conflict, humanism and exploitations. Anand wrote about real people whom he knew quite closely. Mulk Raj Anand awakens social conscience by his works. He arouses sympathetic feeling of readers for the oppressed and under-privileged, who suffer a lot.

Keywords: Realism, Social conflict, Humanism, Exploitation, Underprivileged

Indo-Anglian literature or Indian English literature is associated with Indian English writings and is a very important part of English literature in the present era. Indo-Anglian literature or Indian English literature or Indian writing in English is the literature, written by several well-known Indian writers in the various genres. It includes poetry, prose, drama and novel. Michael Madhusudan Dutt was the first renowned Indo-Anglian poet, who gave a new sky to Indian poetry in English language that had not originated in India. After Madhusudan Dutt there came many worthy writers and they also gave a new shape to Indian English literature. All are geniues in their fields and did the best for their readers. Some worthy names are: Toru Dutt, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Aurbindo Ghosh, Sarojini Naidu, Nissim Ezekiel, Kamla Das, A.K. Ramanujan , Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan , Mulk Raj Anand etc. All the writers of India gave a new direction, a new revolution and a new sensational world in their works. Poetry in India has a special place in all the forms of literature due to its deep intensity of emotion and passion. But we can't deny that in India the novel or fiction also has a remarkable place, because of its unforgettable creators whose writings are based on realism and have a social purpose. They wrote not merely for entertainment but for some sincere reasons. The Indo-

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Anglian writers of fiction wrote with an eye and hope. They choose matter from the real life. They all have the elements of Indianness, nationalism and patriotism, glorification of India's past and placing country above all and speak of the eastern orientation. According to Prof. C.D. Narasimhaiah,

The Indian novel in English has shown a capacity to accommodate a wide range of concerns: in Mulk Raj Anand a humane concern for the underdog or subalterns; in R. K. Narayan the comic modes as equivalent to the tragic in his evocation of mediocrity; and K. Nagarajun surprises by his sensitive handling of the human significance in the religious and stories he has at same time to use T.S. Eliot's words, 'altered' the 'expression' to accommodate distinct profoundly Indian 'sensibility' in different degrees. Bhawani Bhattacharya and Khuswant Singh in very different ways give us valuable insights in to the pathos of economic impoverishment, mal-distribution of wealth and human degradation caused by political upheavals. (14)

The wider canvas of Indian English literature can be seen by a study of characters of various writings. The range has been more widened by inclusion of untouched themes. In this regard we can see the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, whose novels are a rich and perfect model of real India of post colonial period. So far as the themes of novels of Anand are concern, they are: social problems, domestic problems and problems related to human relationship etc. Anand occupy the similar position in the realm of Indian writings in English as in fielding, Richardson, and Sterne in English literature. He stands as a strong pillar in the field of novel writings. He wrote in English on Indian themes; Indianness is the common characteristics of his writings. His works reflect a close affinity between Marxim and humanism. He said, 'I believe in man'. This is how he defined humanism. He kept redefining humans, he never compromise terms of ideology even at the risk of being called a propagandist. Anand was a humanist in literature. He was a liberal humanist not a doctrinaire Marxist. He was the founder of the progressive writings. Anand's humanism is the chief motivating force behind his novels. In the description of humanism he is compared to the great novelist Charles Dickens, who points the life of downtrodden very effectively. K.R.S. Iyenger's comment does full justice to the kind of novel Coolie is. Iyenger writes:

If Untouchable is the microcosm, Coolie is more like the macrocosm that is Indian society: concentration gives place to diffusion and comprehension, with several foci of concentration. Coolie is verily a cross-section of India, the visible India, that mixture of the horrible and the holy, the inhuman and the humane, the sordid and the beautiful. The general effect is panoramic, good and evil being thrown together as in actual life. There is no time for us to pause, to think, to judge, for we are constantly shifted. A new situation engulfs us at every turn, and new cruelties and absurdities whirl round us. Village, taluka headquarters, district headquarters, Presidency capital (Bombay), the

national summer capital (Simla)-this is a progression indeed, but only spatially, for the human situation hardly alters wherever we may be. Munoo is the exploited one all the time; and his fate is typical of the fate of millions whose only distinguishing badge is patient sufferance. (120-121)

Anand awakens social conscience and arouses sympathetic feelings of his readers towards the oppressed and sufferers. Anand's passion and compassion for humanity is boundless. It is his religion. His commitment to humanism constitutes the very foundation on which his novels are built. *Coolie* is the great example in which Anand beautifully presents the hard realities of lower class people through a boy named Munoo. Philip Henerson correctly observes:

Coolie takes us into a world in which the comradeship of man exists only among the very poorest people. With nothing to hope for, their common humanity is all they possess. The relationship between Prabha (at heart a coolie), Munoo, and the other factory employees (all hill-men) is one of humaneness. At the other end of the scale we have Ganpat (the frustrated son of a well-to-do-broker), the Todar Mals (essentially Nathoo Ram gone successful), and the police—more a symbol of British oppression than of British justice. Their world is a world of hysteria, one devoid of restraint and self-respect... (168-169)

Coolie is a great work of Anand where exposes the hard realities of an underprivileged society. The central theme of this fine work is the exploitation of the poor and the subalterns by the forces of capitalism, industrialism and colonialism. Anand through Munoo, a poor and helpless orphan presents these evils. Munoo is a fourteen years old boy who is unable to find even his fundamental rights to life and happiness. He is exploited and made to suffer till his death. Munoo is not only victim of such exploitations. Anand has made an attempt to bring out all types of exploitations and denial of life and happiness of lot of poor, everywhere in India. According to him the lot of the poor is equally wretched and miserable whether in rural or urban India.

The novel opens when Munoo, an orphan is living an idyllic life in his village. He is quite happy with his friends through he is ill-treated by his uncle and aunt. This simple and rural community is not free from capitalistic exploitations. This exploitation becomes the destiny of Munoo. At a very early age, 'Munoo had heard of how the landlord had seized this 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 the 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 child in arm.' Anand's *Coolie* is significant for exposing the sufferings and realism of poor and working class in India of the thirties. The conditions of life of the working class in this country have considerably improved in present era, but unemployment is certainly a big issue in our times. In this regard *Coolie* is a mirror, a realistic work that depicts the misery and the wretchedness of the common people especially

of the town people and cities. *Coolie* also brings before us the conflict between labour and capital. This theme is as relevant today as it was in those days and it, has, in fact, become even more acute, more pressing and more complicated.

Coolie tells an interesting and eventful story through actions and evokes excitement. Munoo's reactions to every experience of his life are discussed in detail. There is plenty of appealing dialogue and many descriptive passages. *Coolie* is also known as a novel of protest. Anand protests against the capitalist exploitation of the poor and the underprivileged people in the country, but he never lets his work a source of propaganda. He merely gives us pictures of the suffering caused by poverty and unemployment, leaving the readers to draw their own inference. He in a very beautiful way puts across the message of denial of the right to life and unjust social system through the pathetic story of Munoo. His poverty compels him to do apprenticeship at the age of fourteen and to be exploited by his uncle. His only wish is that 'I want to live, I want to know, I want to work.' In his short life, his first encounter with the urban world was in the house of babu Nathu Ram. The lady of that house Bibi Uttam Kaur humiliates him in various ways. From this Munoo learns his first lesson in the harsh school of the modern urban world. Now he has realized finally his position in the world. In Daulatpur he is well treated by Prabha Dayal and his wife, but their partner Ganput frequently beats him and abuses him. When Prabha Dayal is ruined by the treachery of his partner Munoo works as a coolie. There too he finds the cut throat competition and exploitation. Coolies of that time were paid extremely low wages and made to carry excessively heavy loads and were abused too. This exploitation is presented on a much larger and more terribly in the Bombay phase of Munoo's life. There ill-paid, ill-housed, under nourished and bullied laborers are broken fully both in body and mind as Munoo finds in his friend Hari and in his own youth too. From there Munoo goes to Shimla with Mrs. Manwaring, as she wants a servant. She makes him, her boy servant, ricksaw-puller and there are hints that he is exploited sexually too.

A deep rooted feeling of inferiority to the superior people who live in bungalows and wear Angrezi clothes makes him weep without murmur. His lot as a ricksaw- puller was tough as a result of which he dies of consumption at the age of sixteen. All these things are presented in this novel *Coolie* by Anand. He also throws light on capitalism, colonialism and industrialism to show how these forces exploit Munoo and his like. There is also a presentation of the fires of communal hatred by caused politicians, who have their own axe to grind. Anand in *Coolie* tells about how the colonial rulers exploited Indians. They not only degrade the Indians by their contact but also ill-treated them. The policeman, the symbol of British Raj, beats Munoo and scares him away from the railway station. Prabha Dayal, a respectable man is mercilessly caned at the police station for no fault of his. Prabha Dayal is a symbol of British cruelty and inhumanity rather than of British justice, and the Englishman who slaps Munoo merely for looking at him. The head foreman of cotton mills, a thoroughly repulsive character is presented as 'massive man with a scarlet bulldog face and a small

moustache with his huge body dressed in a greasy white shirt, white trousers and a greasy white polo topee. He refers to Hari as a ‘stupid bullock’ and he certainly treats the factory workers as if they were animals. He kicks, beats and abuses them at will. Saros Cowasjee remarks on it:

The evil that one sees in his poor is the direct result of capitalistic exploitation and the indifference of the British Government towards the lives of millions of its subjects. The same cannot be said of the rich, their greed is needless. There is a lot of difference between Prabha’s creditors fighting among themselves to recover whatever they can and the coolies vying with each other to earn a few annas so that they might live another day. (169)

Thus Anand has given us a faithful picture of the exploitations of the underprivileged and the misery which was the lot of the poor in pre-independence India. The treatment is elaborate; the subject has been studied from various angles and in various societies. The evils, the injustice and the inhumanity of colonial rule, have been also exposed. The degradation caused as a result of contact with the west also brought out. For this K.R.S. Iyengar praises it and calls it: ‘a prose epic of modern India.’

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