

Unveiling the Issue of Class Conflict in Pre Independence Indian Society Through Mulik Raj Anand's Novel 'Coolie'

Gunjan Jain¹, Ph.D.

Abstract

Mulik Raj Anand is credited for establishing the basic forms and themes of modern Indian Literature written in English. The function of an artist is to hold the mirror to life –his own life as well as the life of the society around him. Mulik Raj Anand's own life and the influence of political and social conditions contemporaneous with the publication of his novels naturally have a bearing on the theme of social and political exploitation. He was the leading Indian author writing in English Literature, who depicted the lives of the poor people belonging to the poor section of traditional Indian society.

There is a human concern for the underdog in his novels, not just a preoccupation with economic determination. The subjects of his novels are untouchability, exploitation, poverty, wretchedness, labor problems, hunger, religious and other narrow fanaticism, the condition of women, economic insecurity, etc. He gained first-hand knowledge of the under-privileged particularly those of the Pre-Partition Punjab, therefore he developed the feeling of tenderness and sympathy for the downtrodden, which prompted him to portray their exploitation in his novels.

Coolie is a novel of pre-independence India that has chivalrously stood the test of time. It portrays the life of the urban people daily running race for survival. It gives a chilling picture of a poor boy, which gets into the obscurity of his own existence at an early age. The story is also about the development of a young boy who begins to learn about the world around him and attempts to make some sense of it.

The objective of the paper is to highlight the fight of an individual for self-identity and their existence in an Indian society.

Keywords: Mulik Raj Anand, Social and Political Conditions, Indian English Literature, Pre independence

The expanding of realistic novels during the nineteen-thirties had an inexorable impact of the Gandhian movement on Indian English Literature. The nation-wide movement of Gandhi not only inspired Indian English novelists but also provided them with some of the prominent themes, such as the struggle for freedom, the east-west encounter, the communal problem, and the miserable condition of the untouchables, the landless poor, the downtrodden, the economically exploited and the oppressed. The impact of the far-reaching change on the Indian social and political scene caused by the Gandhian movement can be perceived in K. S. Venkatramani's *Murugan*, *The Tiller* (1927) and *Kandan, the Patriot: A Novel of New India in the Making* (1932). The former reflects Gandhian economics while the latter reflects his politics. Then came A. S. P. Ayyer, whose novels like *Baladitya* (1930) and *Three Men of Destiny* (1939), although untouched by the twentieth-century models and set in ancient Indian history, is Gandhian in spirit.

Mulik Raj Anand known as the Father of Modern Indian Fiction in English had been associated with the struggle in the end of twentieth and beginning of the thirties. The overall atmosphere of Indian society was filled with the dirt of politics and infected with the effluvia of man's inhumanity to man. His love for humanity and concern for socially, economically weaker sections of society deal in common day-to-day problems of Indian villages. In his novels, he primarily focused on the class distinction between the rich and the poor, tea planters and the laborers, high caste Hindus and the dregs of humanity. This class distinction hampers the growth of individuals which ultimately results in social evils. Anand hates the social institutions which cause the cleavage between the different strata in the social structure. He presents simple and noble human beings trapped in the net of poverty and injustice. Anand holds the experience of the exploiters and the exploited:

¹ Global Education Department, Westminster International University in Tashkent Postal Address: Dr. Gunjan Jain 247/1 Thapar Nagar Lane No. 5 Opposite Radha Govind Enterprise Meerut 250001 (U.P) India

I could not, of course, sense the suffering of the poor directly because I had always been comparatively better off. Mine was the secondary humiliation, the humiliation of seeing other people suffer.... So, I sought to recreate my life through my memories of India in which I grew up, with a view to rediscovering the vanities, the vapidities, the conceits and the perplexities with which I had grown up¹. (Anand, Apology 77)

Mulk Raj Anand portrayed his heroes as pieces of trembling humanity and loved them before he sought to put them into books. Though they fight to come out of it they are unable to shake off the coils of social evils. Anand's novels are the symbol of protest against the pervading social evils in India. The realistic portrayals of the social and economic problems suffered by Indians because of the caste system and British colonial rule, Mulk Raj Anand is considered to be one of India's best writers.

In his childhood Anand liked and freely mixed with poor peasant and underdog. The abject misery and helplessness of the peasants filled him with utter disgust. He became impatient and grew critical about the very foundation of Indian society. He began to question everything in our background to look away from the big houses and to feel the misery of the inert, disease-ridden, underfed, and illiterate people around us.²

Coolie placed Mulk Raj Anand among this century's finest Indian novelist in English. The novel illustrates his compassion and concerns for the economically backward section of India and exposes the miserable conditions of the coolie in India. The theme of the novel revolves around the problem of the tragic exploitation of poor people by the modern capitalist society.

Munoo, a protagonist represents the miseries of the poor and the downtrodden section of the Indian society. The story is told from the eyes of the narrator and brings to light the unavoidable and hidden evils of the British rule in India like exploitation, caste-ridden society, communal riots, and police injustice. The novel projects the inhuman and degrading treatment that Munoo faced at the hands of the affluent and higher classes of the society and how he overcome all circumstances alone. The novel gives glimpses of the life of people living in country, town, and in the slums of the industrial city as well as in the hills of Shimla in Indian society.

The story began in a hilly place, develops in Shyamnagar and Dalautpur, gets momentum in Bombay and ends in Shimla. It presents the various experiences of Munoo at the hands of different exploiters in four different places. Thus, it is only the exploiters that change and the exploited remain the same. The novel portrays four tragic episodes which make Munoo's life tragic:

- As a servant in a Bank Clerk's household
- As a worker in a pickle factory in a feudal city
- As a factory worker in an industry in Bombay
- Lastly as a servant of a half-caste woman at Shimla –present a sequence of events suggestive of the abject condition of a hapless, illiterate Indian.
- In each of these situations, Munoo is subjected to harassment, beatings, and financial exploitation at the hands of employers, moneylenders, and his so-called betters.

Anand portrays the life of a Kshatriya, young peasant boy of fourteen years Munoo, with daring spirit and adventure who travels from his mountainous village through North India and eventually finds himself in Bombay. Being an orphan in order to survive he is forced to take every kind of work for his survival. He treated life with a great sense of adventure and excitement. He used to graze the cows and play with his friends in the fields or sit under the Banyan tree and enjoy the fruits of all seasons. He was aware how the landlord seized their five acres of land because he failed to repay the debt, reason being his father died of shock and his mother was a penniless beggar to support his brother-in-law Daya Ram and a child Munoo. In spite of these bad memories and the ill-treatment by his uncle and aunt he was leading a happy and contented life.

Munoo's happy life ended when his uncle Daya Ram who was working as a peon at the Imperial Bank of India wanted to take him to Shyam Nagar, a town ten miles far from their village, because he believed that Munno was grown enough to earn his livelihood. He was condemned to live a miserable life indeed, and the horror of it was accentuated by the necessity to keep moving from place to place. He was being exploited by his own uncle who treated him as a burden and at the school-going age forced him to work as a domestic servant in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram his boss, sub accountant in the bank. Daya Ram exclaimed with white teeth flashing while taking Munoo with him:

Walk quickly! Walk quickly! You son of bitch. (Anand, Coolie 4)

Munoo is forced to walk bare foot by his uncle who is more concerned to reach office in time and less about the pain of the child walking along with him:

Get up, obe you illegally begotten! You have been the bringer of disgrace to me! Get up or I will kill you! (Coolie-6)

Munoo wipes off his tears and followed his uncle in the torrid heat driven by the strong desire to live his life independently. He was made clear in the beginning itself about his position as a servant in Babu Nathoo Ram's house, his uncle Daya Ram bursts in anger at the house of his boss to give his impression:

..... *you are their servant and they are big people.*
*join your hands, you pig, and say I fall at your feet to Bibiji! (Coolie -12)*

Munoo joined his hands, but he had hardly said, "I fall....." Bibi ji retreats and exclaims in a hard, rattling voice:

Oh baby! You have eaten my life! You can't rest even while I am talking business to anyone! May you die! May your liver burn! May you fade away! You of the evil star.... Now what is the matter with you? What do you want? You... (Coolie 13)

Munoo felt embarrassed and draw a comparison between his aunt and his Bibi ji and realized that his aunt was much better in treatment, as she never cursed or abused so much. He felt the strange emptiness in him, a kind of embarrassment:

.....*and in his heart, there was a lonely song, a melancholy wail, asking not pointedly, but in vague, uncertain rhythm, what life in this woman's house would prove? (Coolie- 15)*

Bibi Uttam Kaur, was an arrogant and suspicious hard-tempered lady with the habit of nagging and humiliating Munoo who regularly cleaned the vessels, sweep the floor, prepare bread, and lay the table, despite this, he was abused for no reason. Munoo failed to understand the reason master's superiority though he was convinced of his own inferiority as he was not allowed to join in the merrymaking of his social superiors and eat from a plate as they do. He accepted his position as a slave and tried to instill in his mind the notion of the brittleness from his master which, he was unable to bear who hates him for 'nothing', for no-fault. He was made the victim of ceaseless suffering and horrid humiliation.

Munoo felt the blood rushing on his face; his brain seems to be submerged in darkness. He wished he could disappear from the world somehow. For the first time in his life, he felt ashamed when he saw relieving himself in the open. Her voice raised from the first shock of unpleasantness, through the faint hiss of anger.

Vay, you shameless, shameless, vulgar, stupid hill boy! May the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence! May you die! What have you done! Why didn't you ask me where to go? May you fade away! May you burn! We didn't know we were taking on an animal in our employ, an utter brute, a savage! (Coolie 17)

His attempt at being a model servant seems to make no difference in the treatment meted out to him. Munoo's soul was slowly crushed. The happy child, curious wonderstruck, "*tracing the colors, the shapes and sizes of all things, enquiring into their meaning*" yearns for love, is stung by insults, and slowly settles into the routine of "domestic slavery" though not easily. Eventually, he arrived at the inference, for all this was that he was poor:

..... *There seem to be two types of people in the world. Caste did not matter. I am Khabtriya and I am poor, and Varma, a Brahmin boy, is a servant boy, a menial because he is poor. Caste does not matter. The Babus are like the Sahib logs and all servants look alike: there must be two kinds of people in the world: the rich and the poor. (Coolie 81)*

Being constantly facing embarrassment and humiliation the wild bird of his heart flutters every now and then with a desire for happiness. Before he runs away from Sham Nagar he has learnt the first lesson from the harsh school of the modern world:

He realized finally his position in the world. He was to be a slave, a servant who should do the work, all the odd jobs, someone to be abused, even beaten. (Coolie 33)

His soul surges up in rebellion and hate of which he has not thought himself capable. He was startled, but he could not revolt. One day he ran from the house and boards a train without knowing where he was going. On the train he met Seth Prabha Dayal who himself was an orphan and was a coolie, but now he was Seth, owner of the Pickle Factory in Daulatpur. Prabha Dayal and his wife take Munoo with them and employed him in their factory as he felt an affinity with Munoo because he himself was a Hillman from the hills of Kangra. When Munoo reached Daulatpur he looks at life with a sense of curiosity, fun, and excitement..... *there was a curious flutter of excitement in his heart, like thrills off ear and happiness which had filled him when he first laid eyes on Sham Nagar—the fear of the unknown in his bowels and a stirring of hope for a better life in the new world he was entering. (Coolie 81)*

Prabha and his wife were very kind to Munoo. They gave him food and shelter. Munoo's initial contact with industry of any kind was at Prabha's Pickle Factory.

It was dark evil life. He rose early at dawn before he had his full sleep out, having gone to bed long after midnight. He descended to work in the factory, tired heavy – lidded, hot and limp as if all the strength had gone out of his body and left him spineless ghost of his former self.(Coolie 81)

Soon Munoo gets accustomed to the Pickle Factory life. He had to work from early morning till late in the night in the dark suffocating atmosphere that was lighted up only by the geniality of Prabha for Munoo. Though everything in his life was smooth and well he was, however, afraid of Ganpat a young partner of Seth in business because of his bad behavior with workers. The parental care that he received from Prabha and his wife does not relieve him because of the malevolent presence of Ganpat who was originally very rich but owing to bad habits lost all. It is in the absence of Ganpat workers have a good time, they laughed and cracked jokes. It was during such time Munoo was dressed with hairs, but with the arrival of Ganpat Munoo brushed his hair unevenly so that he may not be abused. Prabha was a kind-hearted man but his partner was a real devil who does not spare even his partner. Ganpat's partnership with Prabha broke when he cheated him and spreads rumor as a result of which Prabha found himself bankrupt, he could not bear the shame of being charged bankrupt so he returned to hills, and Ganpat became Munoo's master.

Munoo was troubled with the loss of his first parents. He realized that he cannot work in the Pickle Factory so he left the place. Life in the factory proved as unrelenting as ever. He was left alone in the world with no art and craft to earn his living. He tried to earn his living as a coolie in the shop of a grain merchant and after that as a railway porter, but here too he could not succeed as he did not have the license to work.

You have no license! You son of a pig, you were deceiving me! roared the policeman.

I have seen you lift bundles here for a month, you base-born!

.....I will put you in the lock up..... Get out of here! The policeman said, hitting Munoo on the bottom with his baton. Get away from here, you lover of your sister! Government orders: no coolies are supposed to work here with out a license! (Coolie 139)

Poverty compelled Munoo to be apprenticed to life at the age of fourteen. His expectations were extremely modest. His only prayer was, "I want to live, I want to know, I want to work." (Coolie 183)

Munoo wanted to run away from the modern world which was fearsome for him. He ran till he reached the Mall road broaden with shops and malls on both sides which was an entirely different world for him. This life projects a strong comparison between the life of people living in poverty and the high-class people. He walked on the roadside enjoying himself and was attracted by the beating of the drums advertising a circus. He decided to go to the circus and enjoy the show. He was able to enjoy the show without the cost through a hole in the tent with the help of the elephant mahout of the circus. Munoo wanted to join him but because of not being trained he cannot get the job of mahout. The mahout persuaded Munoo to go to Bombay with the circus team. As the train arrived, he was guided by the mahout to reach the station unnoticed. As the train moves from North to South he saw the surroundings with great wonder and finally, it came to a standstill by an out-lying platform of the huge central station. His heart lightened for a moment with joy with the view of the sea for the first time in his life. With the help of mahout, another Good Samaritan, Munoo reached Bombay.

Bombay, far from being the city of his dreams, proved nightmarish, but disillusionment is inevitable. He became aware of the truth of the mahout's statement:

The bigger the city is, the more cruel it is to the son of Adam----- you have to pay even for the breath that you breathe. (17)

While reaching Bombay his excitement was converted in to a devastating fright. While walking down the pavement he was shocked to see at the edge of the foot-path in a corner a coolie lay huddled, pillowing his head on his arm, shrinking into himself as if he was afraid to occupy too much space. Munoo's heart sinks at the recognition of the laborer lying about so precariously. *So, even here the coolies sleep in the street!* He suddenly realized. Now he realizes the words of a coolie in *Danlatpur, that in Bombay one could earn anything from fifteen to thirty rupees a month. (163)*

To his horror Munoo realized Bombay:

..... A land of cruel contrast, where the hybrid pomp of the rich mingled with the smell of sizzling grease in black frying pans ; Bombay land of luxury and lazaroni where the lies of benevolent patrons were shown up in the sores and deformities of the poor.....(Coolie 270)

Munoo continued to walk with a grim fear where he will sleep at night. Coincidentally he met Harihar with his wife Lakshmi and two children. Harihar works in Sir George White Textile Mill and helped Munoo in getting job in the textile factory.

Munoo's first impression of the mill as the novelist records was that of fear:

Munoo's heart contrasted as if some inner instinct had gathered him into a knot, so that he might remain safe against the disintegration of filth and dung outside. (270)

Wherever he went there was pain, struggle and hopelessness. Every day he woke up early morning to rush to factory for work where countless lads like him were condemned to subhuman existence. Working conditions were similar as those which he experienced in the pickle factory if not worse. Chimta Sahib the English manger beat and curses the coolies freely, the deafening noise of the machines, the stench of cotton and oil and unbearable heat of the summers, days in Bombay were even worse than anything he had experienced until now. He suffered after he started job at Sir George White Cotton Mill in Bombay.

From personal tortures, he falls prey to the exploitations of the capitalistic economy. The mill was presented as a colossal system of brutal exploitation, and its deadly clutch was hard to escape for laborers like him. The British authority did not provide them with proper wages, accommodation or job security. What they earned by their daylong toil was too meager to meet their basic requirements. Once trapped in this vicious system, freedom and dignity seem to be most unattainable for workers like Munoo. The novelist depicts the helpless creatures and their infernal miseries:

.....they (the workers) were broken, dispirited, docile and reticent, and they only stared blankly through dim brown eyes, or mumbled a conventional phrase, in a meek and holy manner: "never mind brother, this is the will of God".(Coolie 210)

Munoo, Hari, and other coolies continued to work in the factory and faced the suffering patiently committed by their employers. He was not happy with the state of affairs happening between the management and the workers and wanted to be away from this. The cotton mill in Bombay exposed Munoo to the full force of modern capitalist machines. The factory was a huge octopus with its numerous tentacles clutching the laborers in its deadly grasp. The ill-paid, ill-housed, undernourished, and bullied laborers were broken both in mind and body. The chief concern of the management was not the wages or well-being of the workers but the maximum profit can be earned. Munoo realized the danger and took to his heels because he was being a victim of usury and insecurity, poor wages, bad housing condition, callous exploitation, and general ill-treatment .

The novel highlights the cause and effect of migration through the predicament of Munoo. Poverty forced people of the villages to migrate to towns and cities in search of their livelihood. Whether children take up the employment to support their family, but they are exploited and paid unreasonable earnings in proportion to their work. The novel highlights the loss of precious childhood, the hardships, and privations experienced by the employers motivated by greed for gain, selfishness, heartlessness. It also explores the problem of rigors of child labor, the exploitation, cruelty, and abuse of children that took stubborn root in the socio-economic soil of Indian land.

One day he went towards the Malabar Hill and began to climb the slope on which the bungalows of Sahibs were located by the palm trees. He moved up tired, hungry, dazed sweating under the heat of the sun. He while contemplating the scene stood in the middle of the road and was suddenly struck by the car of an English lady and was rushed to the hospital with that lady. Munoo was completely shattered, a physically and mentally broken boy. He is just a boy for Mrs. Mainwaring just the right servant. She was an Anglo Indian and promiscuous from the beginning, as she was married, divorced and married several times. The novelist had given a realistic account of her carnal desires in the following words:

Her warmth, her ardor, her intense capacity for desire must have been due to the blood of her pagan Indian grandmother in her, her curious coldness of mind, the frigidity which had once made her jump into a bath of ice water in order to quell the passion of her body, was conditioned by the European Christian doctrine of sin. (Coolie 286)

In the later course of the novel Mrs. Mainwaring aroused Munoo's passion and wanted to enjoy physical pleasure with him. She found Munoo a boy with small little face and with sensitive eyes. She had a fascination for sensual enjoyment. Due to the basic contradictions in her nature and split personality she could not develop integrity of character, and started treating Munoo as her husband.

Why didn't the world understand how the woman gives herself in love, in hate, in pity, in tenderness, in playfulness and in hundred different moods?..... Then she looked at him with a flutter in her eyes.... Beautiful boy, lovely boy. You only want a wife now. (Coolie 293)

Munoo felt happy and enjoyed his life as he was accustomed to this way of living. It was one of his duties to pull rickshaw whenever Mrs. Mainwaring wanted to go to market for shopping. The task of pulling rickshaw puts a severe strain on his lungs, he coughed frequently and blood comes out when he spits, his face turned pale. After examined by the doctor his case was found complicated and severe one. He was moved to a hospital on the slopes of Chotta Shimla. Mrs. Mainwaring was kind to him and frequently visited him, brought gifts of fruits and flowers for him. She regrets that she had overloaded the poor boy.

Only Mohan a rickshaw puller and his friends remain true to him up to last, they visit him daily. In spite of all possible medical treatment his condition deteriorated and one day in the early hours he breaths his last in the lap of his friend Mohan. Munoo died at the age of sixteen and thereby ends his struggle for existence.

It is probable that the novel is product of the author's own experience of fulfilling his curiosity about the coolies and Indians in general. Munoo wanted to live, but the society does not allow him to live. He died of poverty, exploitation and hunger.

Humanism is the only solution of the problem. If the poor and weak people are treated humanely most of the problems can be resolved easily. Anand gives a heart-rending description of his mental state and all his activities in a unique way. There is enough of such human existence in the society but under the pressure of survival of the fittest these people are ignored everyday.

Coolie is an epic of misery. The hero of the novel Munoo is an archetypical figure, a true representative of toiling, suffering and starving millions of Indians. Through him the novelist has focused attention on the wretched plight of the teeming millions of India. It is a true picture of the exploitation of the poor and emerges as a powerful tragedy. Cowasjee also finds that, *Munoo is a most attractive character, with his warm-heartedness, his love, and comradeship, his irrepressible curiosity and zest for life*³. These attributes again demonstrate Anand's ability to bring out the positive human characteristics in people whom mainstream Indian society would rather ignore.

Coolie is one classic example of the story of the under-privileged class of the society and of the oppressed people who cannot even make both ends meet. The novel takes the reader to different places and cities showing the inhuman and degrading treatment that poor Munoo gets at the hands of the socially, economically, and politically affluent and higher classes of Indian society and how he copes with all circumstances alone. The social forces which are at work in bringing the tragedy of Munoo are beyond his control. He tried to adjust himself in every situation, however difficult or painful they might be and attempts to grow into a respectable man, but he failed. This failure is not due to any inherent flaw in him but the cruelty of circumstances and the evil in other men—the greed, selfishness and merciless of his fellow human beings. The privileged men of society treat him as if he were no more than an animal—a gorilla or a chimpanzee. He is forced to become a purposeless vagabond with apparently no control on his destiny.

Anand has written about the people who are exploited at all hands, are made to work hard, hardly get two square meals a day, grow sick, exhausted and die prematurely. It is a great moving novel from the pen of the greatest Indian Writer in English.

Anand is able to strike a chord in the hearts of the conscientious Indians with the beautiful and real-life portrayal of the down trodden masses of Indian society, the so-called have-nots. All the miseries are only due to the poverty and the earnest efforts to earn an honest livelihood and live a tolerably decent life are mercilessly crushed by the selfish rich who are concerned of their interest. The novel portrays the less distinction between the rich and the poor and depicts the sad and pathetic life of the people. It is a human tragedy caused by poverty, exploitation, cruelty, greed and selfishness. It is not the fate or the Almighty who is responsible for the tragedy in the life of poor people, but the society of which they are inseparable part; they are the victim of social forces in life. He comments:

*They were supposed to be sub human. They worked from dawn to dusk, old and young male and female for their masters and they were treated like dogs*⁴. (*Apology For Heroism* 74)

Mulk Raj Anand has unveiled many different layers of human experience in his novel. He attacks inhuman caste system, exploiting class system, irrationality of education, intoxicating religious bigotry and the torturing predicament of women. The novels bring into sharp focus the capitalist domination which cuts across caste, culture, intellectual and racial distinctions since money and power are the main factors. Anand said fifteen years after writing the novel that, *“the Catharsis of a book lies in the pity, the compassion and understanding of an artist and not in his partiality.”*⁵(Kamala Das 34)

Anand inaugurated a new era in the Indo-Anglian literature by choosing to depict the pathetic plight of the poor and underdogs. He rejects fate and points out that all these are man made and the result of the meekness of the masses. The trains to Assam serve as traps to transport the innocent coolies. This novel highlights the problems that the humble face in the society. The poor though virtuous are unable to outdo the social oppression and suppression. Their life is a tale of continuous suffering and struggle with no end in sight. The author lays emphasis on the human dignity and humanity. His uniqueness lies in his contribution to literature in his choice of the meek as the protagonist of his fiction.

Mulk Raj Anand focuses the search light of his perception bringing into perspective the possibility of a renewed vision of the poor, the helpless and the hopeless. He made people rethink about the social values and attitude towards the poor and needy, when the problem of poor was not the area of concern for anybody.

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