

Depiction of down trodden in 'coolie'

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Abstract

Human Suffering is perhaps the most common theme of all literature and might seem too broad a category to be really helpful to literary discussion. In the case of Indo-English fiction, however, there does seem to be a good sense in focusing on a topic like "suffering" where opinion is likely to differ because of a diversity of culturally oriented view points. Mulk Raj Anand describes human suffering in 'coolie' in terms of social injustice and class inequality.

Coolie paints a ghastly picture of the lot of Indian peasants, who, uprooted from their soil, lose their way, enter a wider and crueler world, suffer countless indignities at the hands of affluent and powerful men, and eventually die premature and tragic deaths. This paper attempts to study the theme of the exploitation of the underprivileged which is presented in depth in Coolie.

Keywords: humanism, exploitation, down trodden, coolie, peasants

Introduction

Anand's humanism makes him a novelist with a mission, his mission being to write for the betterment and uplift of the underdog of society. He considers that a, "truly humanist art is commensurate with the needs of Our times," (Untouchable 48) and his humanism results from his, "consciousness of the need to help raise the untouchables, and peasants, the serfs, the coolies and the other suppressed members of society, to human dignity and self-awareness in view of the abjectness, apathy and despair in which they are sunk." (Untouchable 48) He is a crusader in the cause of humanity: he writes not for art's sake but for "the sake of man, for refining and ennobling him, for stirring up the dormant stores of tenderness in him for his fellow human beings and for inspiring him into action calculated to achieve the well being of mankind as a whole. It is precisely for this reason that Anand is no spinner of fairy tales for mere amusement of a creator of escapist literature. On the contrary, he has always written to emphasise the essential dignity of man-despite his weakness-and to engender compassion in the hearts of men for the oppressed and the downtrodden." (Untouchable 49)

Coolie is the odyssey of Munoo, an orphaned village boy from the Kangra hills, who sets out in search of a livelihood. His several roles include working as a domestic servant in an urban middle-class family in Sham Nagar; as a worker in a pickle-factory and a coolie in the bazaar in Daulatpur; as a labourer in a cotton mill in Bombay; and as a rickshaw-puller in an Anglo Indian household in Simla.

The Central theme of the novel is the tragic denial to a simple, landless peasant of the fundamental right to happiness. The terrible destiny of being a victim of exploitation is indeed Munoo's dubious birth right:

"He had heard of how the landlord had seized his 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 arms". (Naik 40)

Poverty compels Munoo to be apprenticed to life at the age of fourteen. His expectations are extremely modest. The world is not his oyster and he wields no sword with which to open it. His only prayer is "I want to live, I want to know, and I want to work." (Naik 40) starts on the wrong foot, since an early faux pas committed in total ignorance of urban ways (he relieves himself near the wall of the house) brands him as a stupid, rustic Oaf. The lady of the house, Bibi Uttam Kaur, a snobbish and suspicious termagant under-feed, nags and humiliates him. Tired of this life of toil at his eternally nagging mistress's house, he contemplated his position in the world more than once and exclaims: "I am a Kshatriya and I am poor, and varma. A Brahmin, in a servant boy; a meniei. Because he is poor. No, caste does not matter. The Babus are like the Sahiblogs, the poor." (Anand, Coolie 56) It is his stint at the Sir George white Cotton Mills in Bombay that exposes Munoo to the full force of the modern capitalistic machine. The factory is a huge octopus with its numerous tentacles clutching the labourer in its deadly grasp, slowly paralysing and poisoning him.

The third and final act of Munoo's tragedy commences when Mrs. Mainwaring whose car knocks him down, takes him to Simla, as she wants a servant, his own wishes in the matter being, of course, of no consequence. A "deep rooted feeling of inferiority to the superior people who lived in bungalows and wore Angrezi clothes." (Naik 42) makes him accept without murmur his lot as a rickshaw puller, as a result of which he died of consumption at the age of sixteen.

Capitalism and industrialism are not the only forces which exploit Munoo and his like. Communalism too lends a hand. A worker's strike is easily broken by casual rumours of communal disturbances which divert the wrath of the labourers from the mill to the religious factions among themselves.

Anand here also raises a low-class boy - generally treated as the scum of the earth - to the position of the hero and thus insists on his belief in the essential dignity of man, no matter what his position in Society is. This is in keeping with Anand's decision to write about the underdog. Munoo is, in fact a

burning symbol of millions of unfortunate souls like himself-lost and bereft, abused and down trodden.

Anand's description of Munoo's life in the dark chambers of the primitive pickle factory at Daulatpur gives an idea of the miserable life of factory workers:

"It was a dark and evil life. He (Munoo) rose early at dawn before he had had his full sleep out, having gone to bed long before mid-night. 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 a spineless ghost of his former self."
(Coolie 88)

Munoo, we see, accepts everything objectly and without a protest. He does not really know why the rich and superior. He is even content to be a slave, a good servant. This unquestioning submission is the direct result of his feeling of inferiority bred and nourished by his belief in karma. Munoo's is not an isolated case. It is the same story with invariably all coolies. The following description that Anand gives of some workmen shows how these helpless creatures get used to their infernal miseries and grow morbidly fatalistic:

"..... They (the workmen) were broken, dispirited, docile and reticent and they only stared blankly through dim brown eyes or mumbled a conventional phrases in a meek and holy manner: Never mind, brother this is the will of God. Or 'it is sad, but in this world the wicked seem to flourish and the good always suffer'. The misery of their lives had robbed them of all energy, til their should seemed to have disappeared and only a bare suggestion of the memory of Pain hung round their faces, like helplessness about the limbs of a sick man, tenderness about the face of a child, and weakness about the eyes of a dumb animal". (Coolie 210)

The novel is significant for another reason also. As will be shown later in this novel we find the inklings of most of the problems Anand deals with in the rest of his novels. Mr. Kurmanadhan rightly says:

"Every one of Anand's other novels is but a kaleidoscopic turn of one phase or other: an event or a chapter, a character or a situation in isolation or in juxtaposition appears shown under a magnifying lens. In other words, it is the microcosm of the macrocosm of Anand's world of fiction". (The Novels 53)

Anand shows in Coolie how it is replaced by class system- an evil no less vicious than the former-an awful result of social revolution fermented by the twin force of industrialism and the cash nexus. Munoo, like Bakha, is imaginative, sensitive and hard working. But like him he is starved of affection and harassed by society. We see in coolie how these evils of poverty and cruelty crush a bud of youth before it could bloom to any extent. The novel vindicates Anand's belief that pain is a brute fact in the world and that it is not inescapable provided man views and trusts his fellow-men as his equals irrespective of their economic and social status. Anand directs our attention to the vital need of restoring among men compassion the conspicuous paucity of which is shown to be mainly responsible for the woe some life and untimely death of an orphan-as a living value. Probably Munoo is only an inconsequential waif in the eyes of the world, but for Anand he is as important as any other human being in flesh and blood, and he brings to bear such profound pity on the good boy that the novel gives the impression that his death implies the death of all that is good at the altar of cruelty.

Reference

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