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Post-Colonial Reading of Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*

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Abstract

Post-Colonial literature often involves writings that deal with issues of de-colonization or the political and cultural independence of people formerly subjected to colonial rule. Indian writing in English is especially interesting for post-colonial exploration because the very language in which this literature is written was introduced to Indians through the experience of colonization. The brilliant trio Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan earned international recognition for Indian fiction in English. Apart from Rao and Narayan, Anand confined himself by and large to weaker sections of Indian society whose welfare was his main concern. The novel *Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand deals with colonialism as a significant and political phenomenon.

Keywords

Post-Colonialism; Mulk Raj Anand; *Coolie*.



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With independence, the novels experience a change in their themes and therefore it gains a new capacity to absorb many of the critical issues that have plagued it so far. So the focus is shifted from the public to the private sphere. The inner dilemma - anxiety, alienation, frustration, detachment, involvement, self- condemnation, self- approval, restlessness, sense of guilt, loneliness, etc. became the pinpoints for the themes of the novels of this age. With them the themes of current happenings, cross - cultural conflict, realism and fantasy, rural events, traumatic experiences in the form of partition of India and Pakistan, Indo-China and Indo-Pak Wars, communal carnages, loss of faith and values, industrialization and materialism, growing hostility among men, the growth of Indian ethos and sensibility etc are also seen. The brilliant trio Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan earned international recognition for Indian fiction in English. Apart from Rao and Narayan, Anand confined himself by and large to weaker sections of Indian society whose welfare was his main concern.

Mulk Raj Anand is the angry young man who cannot tolerate exploitation of one man by another man, or of one class by another class. He is a sworn enemy to all kinds of exploitation, be that economic, social or political. Anand has focused the attention of the reading public on the economic exploitation that has been mercilessly and systematically carried on the poor landless labourers known as coolies.

The novel *Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand deals with colonialism as a significant and political phenomenon. The works of the Post-Independence era must be considered in the light of the postcolonial rediscovery and progress of India. The action takes place in India and tells about Indian conditions after British colonization. It is a portrayal of unequal power relationship between the rich and

the poor. The novel represents the postcolonial Indian society. It gives a glimpse of country life, town life, the life in slums in an industrial city as well as on a hill station Shimla. The story begins at a hilly station, develops in Sham Nagar and Daulatpur, and gains momentum in Bombay and then finally ends in Shimla.

Coolie relates the tragic tale of Munoo, an orphan village boy from Bilaspur, in the Kangra hills, who sets out in search of a livelihood. His displacement occurs when he leaves the hills and comes to work as a domestic servant in an urban middle class family in Sham Nagar, where he is ill-treated, abused, and accused, later he gets a job as a worker in a pickle factory then, as a coolie in the bazaar of Daulatpur, as a labourer in a cotton mill in Bombay, finally as a rickshaw-puller in an Anglo-Indian household in Shimla, where he dies an untimely death. Displacement killed him; he could not find acceptance or a place or a family anywhere. Happiness was denied to him by the forces of exploitation, enslavement, capitalism, industrialism and colonial suppression. His lot was to remain a servant and a coolie, after he left his home, his own 'place' in the Kangra hills.

Munoo's tragedy finds him a worker at Sir George White Cotton Mills in Bombay, exposing him to the full force of the modern capitalistic machine. Anand vividly portrayed the harsh lives of the workers and their families, the squalor of their slums and their victimization by overseers and money lenders. The working hours are long and tedious. The creditors are numerous and wicked at Daulatpur. From these intolerable conditions, a strike erupts and turns into a Hindu-Muslim riot.

The presence of an elite Anglo-Indian community provided glimpses of English people and their lives to ordinary or uneducated Indians, and its insularity allowed these to be extrapolated to ideas of England and Englishness in general. Admiration, revulsion, a sense of alienation and bizarre ideas mark this "general" response to the English. This is as much a part of the constant judgement and assessment of English culture and norms as the intellectual response of the educated class.

A major feature of Post-Colonial literature is the concern with “subaltern or subalternity”. Anand is a champion of subalterns. He rejected the domination of one class over the other on the basis of superiority in the hierarchical order. He stood against the subhuman status granted to the low caste people by the people in the 'centre' who do not choose to acknowledge. Munoo, the coolie is persecuted and exploited by the rich and the selfish employers he happens to work under, at various stages in his journey to death.

Munoo is exploited all the time, one way or the other, by one person or another, and his fate is typical of the fate of millions whose only distinguishing badge is patient suffering. He symbolizes the agony and humiliation forced by subalterns in Indian society, in one way or other. Sometimes this humiliation springs from the caste considerations, at other times it is a result of the class and rank factors. Anand has picked up Munoo to awaken humanitarian concern towards a coolie and raise his dignity as a piece of flesh and blood, a human being capable of thinking and feeling; endowed with a mind and a heart.

Munoo's poverty poses obstacles in the path of his moving in the company of the rich, the privileged and he finds a water-tight division between the rich and the poor- the haves and the have-nots: “Money is, indeed, for everything; Munoo thought. The babus are like sahib, and all servants look alike: there must only be two kinds of people in the world; the rich and the poor” (*Coolie* 121). The novel portrays Anand's concern for the subaltern and his mission to proceed on the path of social justice and awaken the conscience of the learned people to the problem of subaltern- victims of social, political, and economic justice. Dayaram, Mr. and Mrs. Nathoo Ram, Ganpat, Chimta Saheb and Mrs. Mainwaring, too have only contempt for Munoo. They slap him, kick him, and abuse him.

In Bombay he gets a job in Sir George White's Cotton Mills and is exposed to the full force of industrial and colonial exploitation. M.K. Naik says, “the factory is a huge octopus with its numerous tentacles clutching the labourer in its deadly grasp, slowly paralysing him” (46). Munoo's life falls into the tentacles

of this huge octopus which squeezes out of him all his hopes, aspirations and his life.

The British management offers no security of tenure and effects. The British foreman is at once the recruiting authority, a landlord who rents out ramshackle cottage at exorbitant rents; the Pathan door keeper practices usury with even more drastic methods, the Sikh merchant puts his monopoly as the authorised dealer in the Milk-keeper colony to full personal advantages. The ill-paid, ill-housed, under nourished and bullied labourer is broken, both in body and soul. The final act of Munoo's tragedy commences when Mrs. Mainwaring, whose car knocks him down, takes him to Shimla, as her servant, his own wishes in the matter are of no consequences.

Mr. England, chief cashier of the Imperial Bank of India, Sham Nagar, typifies the average British reactions to the Indian in those days. He is embarrassed by the obsequiousness of his subordinate, Babu Nathoo Ram, and his visit to the latter's house where he is invited to tea turns out to be a social disaster, owing to woeful ignorance of each other ways on the part of both.

Displacement, colonialism, capitalism, industrial exploitation and human tyranny had taken its toll on Munoo. Anand ends the novel in these words, "Munoo felt the warm blood in his veins like a tide reach out to distances to which it had never gone before. But in the early hours of one unreal white night passed away- the tide of his life having reached back to the deeps" (243).

Mother India receives Munoo to her bosom with the words "we belong to suffering! we belong to suffering my love" (244). His death the 'premature life negation completes his victimhood'. His aspirations, passionate longings and potentialities go waste before they could be fulfilled. Toya Chakrabarthy says that with Munoo's death "all that is good in life seems to be irreparably lost" (124). But Coolie, despite its tragic ending is not a pessimistic novel. The hope of humanity lies in people like Ratan and Mohan who protest against the existing system.

The novel is a cry against the dehumanisation and brutalisation of man which has to end, to give 'place' to the dispossessed and the marginalised; to give them a sense of belonging and an identity. Anand's essential humanity lies not in heroic action but in stoic suffering and man's striving to remain human in the face of colossal humanity. To Dostoevsky and Kafka suffering is a value. It is suffering that helps man to find his true identity and freedom. It is suffering that makes man truly human. Compassion in people like Prem Chand, Prabha Dayal, Hari and Mohan offer a solution for finding a place for the displaced and the victimised subjects of human exploitation.

The themes such as the contrast between rural and urban India and the relationship between Hindus and the Muslims on the one hand and the Indians and the British on the other. In this treatment of themes, Anand's compassion for the underdog and his indignation at the exploitation of the Indian by the forces of capitalism, industrialism, communalism, colonialism and racism invest this novel with great power. Anand tried to show the cultural displacement that happens in India because of the influence of British culture during colonialism in India.

The features of colonialism such as exploitation, poverty, selfishness, greed, conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality, crisis of self-image etc. go together to make *Coolie* a Post- Colonial novel. In colonial condition, there is a master- slave relationship. The master (British) always exploited and suppressed the slaves (the Indians). And this exploitation gave birth to poverty and miseries. The same psychological condition occurred in the minds of the people after colonialism. That condition was depicted by writers through their writings. Mulk Raj Anand depicted this condition especially through his second, powerful novel *Coolie*. His main aim is to reform the society or to decolonize the minds of the people in the country.

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