CHAPTER-III

COOLIE

“Coolie, the novel that established Anand as a novelist depicting the social realism of the 1930s, does not concentrate on caste-consciousness as does Untouchable. Picaresque in nature, it is the story of Munoo, The landless peasant, the young innocent boy of fourteen who is compelled to leave his home in the idyllic hills of North- East in the late 1920s.”[1] Mulk Raj Anand’s second novel Coolie was published in the year 1936. It may be regarded as a social tragedy of a common man, where Munoo is a tragic character who inspires pity. Here Anand does not romanticize the protagonist but exposes the social forces of tragedy, capitalism, industrialism and communalism. As Untouchable dwells on the evils of caste system which has condemned a large section of Indians to a sub human existence of insufferable sadness, Anand’s Coolie portrays in artistic terms a yawning gap between the haves and have nots, the exploiter and the exploited, the ruler and the ruled. The novel explores the stresses and strains generated in Indian society as a result of the developing economic structure, expanding commerce and political change, which necessarily demand new class arrangements in society. In the novel under study, money becomes the measure of the status of an individual in society. C. J. George has rightly observed:

The novel presents a chain of adventures in a picaresque manner. But Munoo the hero is not a rogue. He is only a victim of the world’s rogueries. His search for bread, in a world where a poor man’s flesh and blood is treated as cheapre than bread, makes him restless and it forces him to move from place to place. [2]
The novel revolves around another social evil of no less magnitude, the system of class. It describes the effects that the pervasive evil of class system has on a poor hill boy named Munoo, who is forced to leave the idyllic hills to make a living in the plains. Drifting from place to place, job to job, Munoo becomes virtually rootless and incapable of finding a place for himself in a society infested with human sharks and fat gods. He symbolized the disinherited and the dispossessed of the earth whose tragic life indicates man’s inhumanity to man. *Coolie* is a study in destitution, or to use Peter Quenelle’s words: ‘Indians, seen third Class-a continent whose bleakness, vastness and poverty are shaded by a touch of the glamour more or less fictitious, that so many English story-tellers, from Kipling to Major Yeats-Brown, have preferred to draw across the scene.’ The novel relates a series of adventures in picaresque manner, only the hero is no rogue but himself the victim of the word’s rogueries. Unlike Bakha, the negative hero of *Untouchable*, Munoo’s place is not in the old caste system that is questioned because he belongs by birth to the second highest order. What is questioned is his place in the new class system on the basis of caste nexus,

Money is the great god, and in novel after novel Anand repeats that there are two types of people—the rich and the poor. In the final analysis, money decides both caste and class; it also decides one’s political affiliations. [3]

With this attitude towards life, Anand moves from the pathetic in *Untouchable* to the tragic in *Coolie* (1936). Whereas the problem of Bakha is particularly Indian, Munoo’s problem is of universal nature. Bakha’s experience is limited in time and space, but Munoo’s struggle for survival takes him through the cross-section of the whole country. As S. C. Harrex points out, “The catastrophe for Munoo is a series of personal disasters punctuated by moments of tragic
illumination and leading to inevitable doom”. [4] After Untouchable, Anand again records the plight of the miserable have-nots in his very much successive novel Coolie. It is a panoramic novel having a much wider canvas than that of his first novel Untouchable. Scholars are of the opinion that if Untouchable is the microcosm, Coolie is more like the macrocosm that is Indian society. If we see it, “Coolie is verily a cross-section of India, the visible India, the mixture of the horrible and the holy, the inhuman and the human, the sordid and the beautiful.”[5] B. R. Agrawal observes:

While his first novel Untouchable deals with the age old ghastly problem of untouchability which has deep roots in Hindu hierarchy, his second novel Coolie is based upon the problem of class struggle, social injustice and psychological conflict of the subalterns, the poor underdogs and the rich, the privileged ones. It is an indictment against the inhuman treatment given to the poor, against the denial of the right to happiness to a simple landless orphan, against the exploitation of the underprivileged and unjust social system. [6]

Coolie is the most extensive in space and time. It brings out variegated action and multiplicity in character. There is also an arrangement of themes-such as the contrast between rural and urban India and the race relations. Cruelty, poverty and inhuman social forces of exploitation are responsible for the tragic denouement in this story. The premature death of the protagonist, an innocent child, becomes very tragic. Munoo becomes acutely aware of his predicament at some point or other in his life and begins to search for the meaning of life and destiny. A sweeper is at least assured of his place in society because of the indispensability of his work. But the coolie has no such assurance and lives under the perpetual threat of losing his job. As the class system has proved more divisive,
Anand’s attack is correspondingly vehement. Anand comments on the poverty stricken people of village through Munoo:

There were so many people, so many poor people, and only one or two rich people in his village. He wondered whether all those poor people would die like his parents and leave a gap in his belly as the death of his father and mother had done. [7]

Coolie has been variously described as an “epic of misery”, the epic of modern India, “the odyssey of Munoo” and” a tragic drama” with five episodes. It further confirms Anand’s position as one of the most interesting revolutionary writers of their time. The sociological concern of Anand in his fiction is no longer primarily limited to caste, but the general issue of poverty, exploitation, social and economic parasitism and moral corruption are presented in more representative contexts. So, Coolie has a power to move us with its presentation of a universal human tragedy which is the result of exploitation of all kinds prevailing in the society. It is one of the great novels with hunger, starvation, sufferings and wretchedness, sickness, disease and degradation that hunger causes its theme. Anand serves to illustrate and develop the central theme of the exploitation and suffering, of the poor in a capitalistic society. Anand’s compassion for the underdog invests the novel with great power, but at the same time his artistic control over his material does not slacken him. Anand universalizes the individual tragedy of Munoo, following the anthropological dictum that ‘the proper study of mankind is man’. Margaret Berry says,

Anand’s attacks on political as well as social and economic institutions are carried out mainly on behalf of India’s poor in the
effort to destroy forces inimical to their development and to build a world freedom and equality where human potential can flourish. [8]

Munoo has become a victim of irrational system and inhuman cruelties of society. *Coolie* is the story of the hill boy, Munoo, an orphan village lad, who moves from the hill-village to the town, from town to the city, and then up to the mountains. He is an archetype of downtrodden, the sum and substance of whose-life-story is always the same, meaning unendurable suffering and perpetual apathy. At the tender age of fourteen, Munoo was imprudently launched on the whirlpool of experiences and is finally swept away to his doom. Munoo’s life is tragic in the extreme, means he is exploited by almost everyone and everywhere. The poor orphan is forced to leave his idyllic village in the Kangra hills. Before the beginning of his inglorious odyssey, Munoo is a sensitive and intelligent boy full of high spirits and a zest for life. He is shown a genius at climbing trees:

He would hop on to the trunk like a monkey, climb the bigger branches on all fours, swing himself to the thinner off-shoots as if he was dancing on a trapeze, and then, diving dangerously into the space, he would jump from one tree to another.

But this paradise is snatched and his happy idyllic life comes to an end because his aunt and uncle are of the view that he is quite grown up and so must start earning his own living. His aunt says to him:

Munoo! Ohe Munoo! She called again, exasperated, and raising her voice, this time to the highest pitch to which, in her anger and hate, she could carry it. Where have you died? Where have you gone, ominous orphan? Come back and be gone!’The piercing soprano
resounded through the valley and fell on Munoo’s ears with the frightening effect of all its bitter content.

At this time, he was mature enough to understand the meaning of poverty. Poverty compels Munoo to be apprenticed to life at the age of fourteen. Anand shows that both feudal and usurious systems of capitalism combine to exploit Munoo’s father:

He had heard how the landlord had seized his five acres of land because the interest on the mortgage converging 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.

When he was going to city with his uncle, “he had dreamed of course, of all the wonderful things which the village-folk spoke about when they came back from the town.” But all his dreams are shattered when he is ill-treated by a shrewish and vindictive housewife Bibiji, Uttam Kaur, wife of Babu Nathoo Ram, the sub-accountant in Imperial Bank of Shamnagar. The experiences of his humiliation started in this house. He is shocked and he learns here his first lesson in the harsh school of the modern urban world. On the next day of his arrival, he relieves himself in the drain outside the kitchen and thereby, unknowingly, lowers the social prestige of his masters. Bibiji raises a voice and Munoo is terrified at the torrent of curses that flow out of her which he has never expected:

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! We didn’t know we were taking on an animal in our employ, an utter brute, a savage! What a horrible, horrible mess he has made outside my door!

Whether he is at fault or not, she is always ready with her torrent of abuses and curses. Nathoo Ram is not bad at heart, but he is a hen picked husband. To Bring out fully Munoo’s spiritual anguish, and to enlist our sympathy for him, the novelist gives us his ‘stream of consciousness’ as one day he sits scrubbing the heap of utensils and we get a peep into the tortured soul of the poor orphan:

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. He was condemned by an iniquitous system always to remain small, abject and drab.

In fact Munoo has been presented as passive and incapable of analyzing his situation like Bakha therefore he took for granted his identity. It never occurred to him, to ask himself what he was, apart from being a servant and why he was a servant. And like every child in the world, like most grown-ups, he had been blinded by the glamour of greatness, glory and splendor of it, into which forgetting that he was condemned by an iniquitous system always to remain small, abject and drab. What kept him chained to the wheel of coolie’s destiny was his ignorance about the potentialities of his make-up. He had suffered every day since he came to the house but now he had been slapped and abused most callously, because he slipped with a tea-tray in presence of Mr. England. His heart was no longer in his work. When a few days later, he complained to his uncle, he refused to listen to him, and beat him most mercilessly. Munoo’s expectations are extremely modest. The world is not his oyster and he wields no sword with which to open humiliates
him. Munoo fails to dampen his high spirits completely, and it is finally his living vitality’ and irrepressible impetuosity’ which drive him away from the house, as, while playing, he accidentally injures the small daughter of Bibiji. He runs away from Sham Nagar. As Anand says “whipped dog hides in a corner, a whipped human seek escape”, he thought he could no longer bear the disgrace and humiliation he had suffered. Sham Nagar episode is the first act in the tragic drama of exploitation.

After the early sting at Shamnagar the second phase of Munoo’s tragic life begins in Daulatpur, where Prabh Dayal and his wife are kind to him, but Prabh’s partner in pickle factory, Ganpat, ill-treats him. Prabh’s wife soon grows fond of him and gives him motherly warmth. Here, life for Munoo is pleasing in the beginning owing to the affection of Prabh and his wife Parvati. But “Happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of pain.”[9] Life becomes ugly and hellish because of Ganpat’s wicked behavior and it is Ganpat’s villainy that Prabh Dayal is reduced to beggary. Prabha’s pathetic condition is clearly observed when Ganpat wants to turn him out of his factory but in a helpless and miserable condition Prabha begs pity of Ganpat:

Oh your shoe and my head, said Prabha, taking up one of Ganpat’s shoes and handling it to him, with desperate humility. Beat me on my head till I go bald, but don’t leave me. We have been together two years and built up this business. It will be terrible for me to have to bear weight on my back as a coolie in my old age.

The pickle factory is sold out and Munoo has to work as a coolie which means mere beast of burden, first in the grain market and then in the vegetable market. His poor and meek personality is exploited here because in the grain
market there is cut throat competition between the naked starving coolies each competing with the other for jobs at extremely low wages. Anand gives us a harrowing account of sufferings of Munoo and other coolies in the market. They are reduced to the level of beast and are huddled with them:

The square court yard, flanked on all sides by low and mud shops, flimsy huts and tall five storied houses with variegated cement facades, aches, colonnades and cupolas, was crowded with many crucifixes, crammed with snake horned bullocks and stray rhinoceros –like bulls and skimmy calves bespattered with their own dung, as they sat or stood, munching pieces of straw, snuffing their muzzles aimlessly or masticating the grass which they had eaten some hours before.

The nature of the passage is Swiftian in its irony and in its piling of details. Here the court yard belongs to animals and the author describes them first, pressed against them are the bodies of men. The implication is not simply that the two humbled together, but that man has stolen into the animal world and carved out a niche for him. The color of their bodies minglees with that of the earth, perhaps an ironic fulfillment of the prophecy that the poor shall inherit the earth. After vegetable market he goes to railway station, where he is again given some troubles by a policeman and he runs away in terror till a kind hearted elephant driver comes to his help and enables him to reach Bombay. He yearned to go to Bombay, for he had heard of the marvels of the city, and how gold and silver were to be had quite easily there.

Munoo’s urge to go to Bombay is fulfilled and he is overjoyed but all his enthusiasm and curiosity about Bombay goes proironical when he comes to
understand and experience the “Life in death” there. He is also warned by elephant driver- “The bigger a city is, the crueler it is to the sons of Adam... You have to pay even for the breath that you breathe.” He does not find the city much different from Sham Nagar or Daulatpur; only he realizes that life is more confusing in Bombay. The problems of the exploited remain the same; the change is only the scale. In the bigger factories there is more ruthless exploitation and greater human misery. The working conditions in the Sir George Cotton Mills are worse than those in the pickle factory at Daulatpur. Ganpat turns into Jimmi Thomas, a tyrannical foreman who is wicked and shrewd. In this episode, Anand wants to make it clear that the economic and political exploitation thus coalesce into one. The capitalists particularly Englishmen consider the laborer and coolies as subhuman with no rights. For them “the Indian laborer is just a piece of property a sub human being, no rights and all duty, whose only utility is to be a serviceable tool.”[10]

Standing in contrast with the covert exploitation instanced above, the exploitation which flows from the lower layer of the industrial system -- the layer symbolized by the foreman Chimta – is face to face exploitation. It alternates between the crude and the subtle. When Hari and Munoo approach Chimta Sahib in search of employment, there follows the following dialogue which illustrates the crudeness and rudeness of exploiter Chimta Sahib: “Oh, Huzoor, ‘entreated Hari, joining his hands again, please be kind to us for the sake of these Children.” “Yes”, said the foreman, ‘You have the pleasure of going to bed together, damn fools, and breeding like rabbits, and I should be kind to your children.” “Huzoor Sahib”, interposed Munoo, I Heard in Daulatpur that the least pay for work in a factory was thirty Rupees.” “Yes, bark a lie,” said Jimmy Thomas and he would have burst, but Lal kaka brought a book for him to sign.” Chimta Sahib’s
exploitative approach changes from rudeness to subtle politeness and pose of sympathy as he comes to the main points of exploitation:

I take pity on you this time. But you know you did not do anything for me that last time you were here….. I am kind to your folk. He set about to do business with a sudden smile. And now I suppose, you have no money. Well, I will advance you ten rupees at four annas in the rupee, whether sum I will add to the regular monthly commission you give to me.

In addition to usury and brokerage of commission charging, the exploitation at the lower level assumes the form of land lordism. Both Feudal and usurious systems of capitalism combine to exploit Munoo’s father prior to his industrial exploitation. Because of his father’s exploitation, Munoo comes to inherit poverty and squalor. In Coolie, it is shown that politico-economic exploitation is more crucial than religion based social status as a factor of exploitation. Munoo says in Coolie:

I am a Kshatriya and poor and Verma, a Brahmin, is a servant boy, a menial, because he is poor. No, caste does not matter. The Babus are alike. There must only be two kinds of people in the world, the rich and the poor.

Anand observed that in those days money decided the class of a person. How industrial and capitalistic forces were exploiting the poor in India can be easily understood through Coolie. The layer of this system in their descending order includes Sir Reginald White, President of Sir George Cotton Mills; Mr. Little, the Manager and Jimmy Thomas, the foreman. The higher the layer in the system, the more subtle and politely masked is the exploitation. In a moment of
crisis brought about by depression, Sir Reginald White guards, “against any loss to the share holder.” But he instructs the mills to go on short time, ordering “no work for the fourth week in every month” cutting short the laborers’ already meager wages to what is less than even “starvation allowance.” He, however, masks this exploitation in a subtle manner by calling it “substantial allowance” in his letter:

The Board of Directors regret to announce that in order to keep the plant running and curtail expenses, the mills will go on short times immediately. There will be no work for the fourth week in every month till further notice. No wages will be paid for that week, but the management, having the welfare of the workers at heart, has sanctioned a substantial allowance.

The factory is a huge octopus one with its numerous tentacles crutching the laborers in its deadly grasps, slowly, paralyzing and poisoning them. The British management offers no security of tenure and effects retrenchment summarily. The British foreman is at once the recruiting authority, a landlord who rents out ramshackle cottages at exorbitant rent, and also a money lender – all rolled into one, the Pathan door keeper practices usury with even more drastic methods. The Sikh merchant puts his monopoly as the authorized dealer in the mill workers colony to full personal advantage. The ill paid, ill housed, under nourished and bullied laborer is broke, both in body and mind, as Munoo finds his friend Hari is, though his own youthful vitality saves him from this ultimate fate.

The normal life is paralyzed as soon as crisis overtakes the city. Munoo finds himself in the midst of the labor strike, followed by an outbreak of communal violence. A large gathering of the coolies was addressed by three communist leaders, and a decision to go on strike was taken. However, the management
played a trick and a rumor was spread that Hindu children were being kidnapped by the Mohammedans and the meeting which was called to take a strike decision soon turned into a wild crowd frenzied with communal passions. Their wrath against the management was turned against each other, and all efforts of the leaders to make them see reason were of no avail. Communal frenzy possessed the coolies and with in no time, the rioting spread to most part of Bombay. Hindus and Mohammedans struck blows and killed each other and many other were killed and wounded by the police lathis and bullets.

Communal madness creates a horrible scene, and Anand has brought out the full horror of it by his realistic presentation, just only in order to show that the people using politico-economic factors to exploit poor people are so clever that only in order to solve their own purpose they inspired poor, innocent, uneducated laborers to fight with each other and used religion and caste based social status as an instrument to exploit the poor people without thinking about the painful results of the situations. Munoo is both an actor and a spectator who drifts with the crowd. He senses the futility of rhetoric as also the greater futility of disorganized action. The words of poet Sauda—there are two kinds of people in the world: rich and the poor echo in his ears. Munoo feels that there is no happiness for poor in this world. As in the search of happiness and in order to escape himself from the world which is full of pain of suffering he runs from one place to another. He leaves Shamnagar as he is going away from the miseries. But in Daulatpur, he is welcomed by different types of miseries. And again as urge to go to Bombay, a place of happiness and enjoyment in his imagination compels Munoo to run away from Daulatpur. But miseries are everywhere; there is no escape from pain in this world for an underprivileged, poor person. Only the name, shape and level of exploitation
are changed. But he is being exploited everywhere and every time because he was a poor person.

Poverty, starvation and hunger make Munoo realize their effect when he is on the Kangra hills. Usurious exploitation was at its peak in that village. In Shamnagar, he is exploited physically and psychologically in order to get some relief from this fortune, unknowingly he enters into the cage of an exploitation based on politico-economics system in society at Daulatpur and Bombay, where capitalism, industrialism and communalism are used to suck the blood from the veins of poor labor class people. At the end of all these three episodes, Shamnagar episode, Daulatpur episode and Bombay episode, Munoo is found running away from every city. Tired, dazed hungry and sweating under the heat of the sun Munoo was walking in the middle of the road and was suddenly knocked down by a speeding car. Thus ended the Bombay phase of career of Munoo and began the Simla phase, the last phase of his chequered career.

In Simla, the final act of Munoo’s tragedy commences when Mrs. Mainwaring, whose car knocks him down, treats him with almost loving care, yet he is compelled to work hard, to pull rickshaw uphill for long hours and so his energy is sapped and he falls a prey to the deadly disease of consumption. While pulling his mistress’s rickshaw, Munoo observes the beauty of the place and also shows curiosity about the world of the upper sections of society. He wishes he too belongs to this society. His mistress is kind to him but her coquetry fires his adolescent passions till he crumples at her feet in an orgy of tears and kisses. Mrs Mainwaring is a woman of vast pretensions and no morals. She has married and divorced and remarried several times. To her Munoo is just a boy and a servant. Munoo fails to endure his illness for long and at last passes away in the arms of his friends, Mohan, when he is hardly sixteen years old. Harrex says, “In a dirge-like
movement, *Coolie* ends with Munoo’s death as a result, medically, of consumption, and naturalistically, of the ills of society.”[11] The novel concludes with the words: “but in the early hours of one unreal white night he passed away the tide of his life having reached back to the deeps.” Thus, the life history of Munoo is presented with depth in the novel and this is the life history of the starving millions of Indians who are over worked and treated like animal, till they die prematurely of hunger, suffering and disease. Munoo is a universal figure, a larger-than-life character, one who represents the sufferings of the exploited millions of the country.

There is a contrast between the starvation and hunger of the poor and well fed opulence of the rich, between the luxurious and sky touching dwellings of the rich and the miserable hovels of the poor, between the tranquil and decent bungalows of the English and the meaner dwellings of Indians, even the well-do-do, between the tattered rags of the poor and the gorgeous dresses of the rich and between the price and arrogance of the Europeans and cringing servility of the Indians. A close study of the novel shows how “Even in the midst of unfold misery and horrible sordidness, his instinctive yearning for life compels him struggle for existence.”[12]

Munoo has been denied the fundamental rights to happiness Anand presents him as a victim of irrational system and of the inhuman cruelties of society. What happens to this obscure hill boy is by no means an isolated example of human suffering and exploitation. Munoo’s destiny symbolizes the tragic situation of the poor, and the under privileged and downtrodden who in themselves are not responsible for their unalleviated suffering, but who are all the same victims of ruthless exploitation. Therefore, asserts K. K. Sharma that “*Coolie* is a sincere protest against the emergence of a new world of money and exploitation and class
distinction. It shows how coolies like Munoo are completely beaten down by the curve of money power in the Iron Age.” [13]

The prevailing social order and new values created by the modern civilization sap the natural warm heartedness and zest for life of an individual like Munoo and lead to his tragic waste and suffering. Munoo is not able to redeem himself because he is made to think that people like him are born to suffer. He expresses himself, “we belong to suffering. We belong to suffering.” The poor are hungry and sick, and weak and helpless at all places, whether in small towns and villages or in big cities. They have no sense of self respect or dignity, they are incapable of asserting themselves, and they have to cry before the more affluent people for right to live. They are driven from pillar to post and are compelled to live a sub-human life in most unhygienic conditions, having been reduced to this wretched state by the combined forces of colonialism, capitalism and industrialism. In addition to the above one more aspect of the novel is traced by S. A. Khan:

The prominent theme of Anand’s novel Coolie is the theme of ‘lost innocence’ as it is related to the personal life of the protagonist who finds no silver line in the horizon of life. Munoo is akin to Bakha in more than one respect; he is innocent and warm-hearted and has a remarkable zest for life. [14]

Anand’s role has been to observe every situation very keenly and to portray it realistically, authentically and honestly. Above all, his approach is balanced and objective he does not allow himself to be overwhelmed by his compassion for the down-trodden, nor does he lose sight of both sides of picture. Anand also describes the redeeming side of good fortune that comes in the way of Munoo. For instance, Munoo becomes an object of sympathy and kindness of a childless couple Seth
Prabha Dayal and his saintly wife Parvati: “Wonderful eagerness with which she came up to Munoo and without asking who he was, took him in her arms and patted him on his forehead.”

Among the few good characters of Anand, Prabha Dayal treats Munoo just like his own son and showers a lot of love and affection on him. Again in Bombay, he meets Hari and Ratan and the tension created by the hellish atmosphere is occasionally relaxed by moments of comfort and warmth of comradeship. A Sunday evening spent with Pyari Jan is delightful too. Similarly, though rickshaw pulling in Simla drives Munoo to an untimely death, his life there is paradoxically, much more comfortable than his life in Bombay. Anand is fair both to the rich and the poor. He takes no side. It can, however, be said that needless greed of the rich results in the evil of exploitation. We see a lot of difference among ceiling Prabha’s creditors, fighting among themselves to recover whatever they can, and the coolies anything with each other to earn a few annas so that they might live another day. We see the pitiable condition of the poor coolies when some of them, on the verge of starvation, request the rich Lalla:

Oh, Lallaji! Oh Lallaji! I am Muhammad Butt. You employed me yesterday!’ A coolie said. ‘Get back, Get back!’ Oh, Lallaji! I can carry two mounds on my back easily! Please employ me, ‘another coolie said. ‘Get back, Get back! None of you will get a job this way! Lalla, Lalla, only an Anna a sack, I will take only an Anna to bear the sack from here to anywhere! A third appealed. Get back, swine, or I will break your bones!

Thus, *Coolie* reaches the heights where it touches the pathetic and sublime areas of human experience. Here, Anand explores the limits of pain central to
existence. He places Munoo in opposition to a debasing and debased society – a frail, defenseless figure in a predominantly hostile world. Society is the great destroyer that kills Munoo and his like. The tragedy of Munoo is an indictment of the evils of capitalism. But the purpose of the novelist is not to present a gloomy picture of life. On the contrary, he wishes to arouse the conscience of humanity against the ruthless exploitation of the weak and the down-trodden. In Coolie, Anand handles the realities of the human situation as he sees and understands them. What he desires is self restraint and joint efforts to resist exploitation and suppression.

Anand’s involvement in painting the picture of realities of human beings, of social inequities is so deep that the artistic danger in leaving his protagonist a static and passive victim escapes his notice altogether. Things happen to Munoo and he reacts to them but strangely enough, the growth of his mind is nowhere shown, means inner development of Munoo is totally neglected. He feels, observes, and thinks about the horrible situations provided by society, but instead of reacting against these, he wants to escape from them which are not the solution of the problem. Actually, Anand has given indirect solution of the problems he creates sympathy and pity for the protagonist and a feeling of awareness in the hearts of readers that what type of place should be given in the society to the figures like Munoo in this world. His problem is universalized. Next the concrete manifestations of exploitation such as abuses, beatings, and sex have an intrinsic tension which enhances the reader’s enjoyment. As in Coolie first time Munoo was struck by other servant boy and second time by Ganpat:

He struck Munoo a ringing slap on the right cheek. The boy raised his left arm to protect his face. Ganpat’s second slap fell on the hard, conic bone at the corner of the joint. His hand was hurt. He was
infuriated beyond control. He struck the boy in the ribs with his first one, two three blows, till Munoo fell stumbling onto the mud in the passage sobbing and shrieking hoarsely... you go out another to me and I shall break your bone.

When a weak or an individual person is being exploited, it arouses our pity for the helpless individual victim. The motives and the aesthetic aspects of exploitation compile tension, blending of tension and thrill, tension born of conflicts, patterns involving contrasts and the enduring universal appeal and relevance of the theme. The whole, according to Anand which he wants to convey in his novel Coolie, is that poverty is the basis of exploitation. It is poverty which impels children of the poor to work as coolies and laborers at the age of twelve or thirteen. Poverty is not particularity Indian poverty. The exploitation of poor is, therefore, a worldwide phenomenon. Poor people are not sub-human, they also possess the same feelings and zest to live life properly in their heart as rich men possess.

Thus, the exploitation of the poor, limitless greed of the capitalist society, the dehumanization of mankind, loss of human values, and human decency are the main targets of Anand’s attack in this novel. Anand thinks that it is totally indifferent attitude of the rich towards poor that it is widening gap between the two classes. The inequality involved causes hatred and mutual distrust, which hinders the betterment of the whole mankind. Anand does not look to any God or any religion to come to the rescue of the poor, but rather suggests that man made disparities can only be relieved by man himself. Anand is not a fatalist and through Coolie he has preached the doctrine of action. He seems to be suggesting that, “The poor must assert themselves for it is only then that they will get their rights and their lot will be ameliorated.” But as C.D. Narsimhaiah observes, “an
underdog’s wits are powerless in the face of a complex machinery of economic and religious oppression.”[15] Anand has given a faithful picture of exploitation of the underprivileged, down trodden and the misery and suffering of poor people which was being tolerated by lot of poor in pre-independent India and which continues to their heals after independence. The young protagonist of Coolie infers:

There seemed to be only two kinds of people in the world. Caste did not matter. I am a Kshatriya and I am poor and Verma, a Brahmin, is a servant boy a menial because he is poor. No, caste does not matter. The babus are like the sahib logs, and all servants look alike. There must only be two kinds of people in the world: the rich and the poor and between the two there is no connection.

This old and worn out tradition of class system often results in the segregation and subjugation of thousands of people into perpetual misery and eventual extinction. Though class consciousness is inseparable from caste consciousness, its impact on social relationship is much more damaging to social cohesion than that of caste hence it has to be discussed as a separate theme. Coolie portrays the tribulations of an individual coolie in a class ridden society, brings into sharp focus the capitalist domination which cuts across caste and racial distinctions, and is often regarded as a proletarian novel, like Two Leaves and a Bud. Munoo, when he sees the vast anomaly underlying human behavior says, “Why are some men so good and others so bad-some like Prabha and the elephant driver and other like Ganpat and the Policeman who beats me at the railway station.” Premila Paul observes that the impact of class- disparity is more damaging than caste system. She says, “Class has certainly proved to be more
divisive than caste in Indian society because it is able to affect every section of society at the economic, cultural and political level.”[16]

Though the novel has a vast canvas, the multiplicity of its characters and the variety of its episodes, the focal point in Coolie is always Munoo and the pathos is sustained by the emphasis on the innocence of the protagonist against the merciless, mechanical rhythm of society. He is subject to more rigidity and deprivation unlike that sweater who is assured of his ‘place’ in the society because of the indispensability of his work. The coolie, ruthlessly exploited and externally indebted, has no such assurance or certitude and lives under the perpetual threat of losing his job. The four tragic episodes which make up Munoo’s tragic life as a servant in Bank clerk’s household, as a worker in a pickle factory in a feudal city, as a factory worker in Bombay, and a lastly, as a servant of half caste workman at Simla – present a sequence of events suggestive of the abject condition of a hapless, illiterate Indian, who is exploited at such places. It is only the exploiters that change, the exploited remains the same. As he makes journeys through life, sleeping in city streets, dwelling in slums, and living on the very edge of starvation and stricken with an agonizing sense of insecurity, Munoo dies a tragic death.

The tone for Munoo’s life is set by his aunt Gujri’s shrieking call to him, followed by a volley of abuses at the beginning of the novel. He is an orphan, fourteen years old, studies in fifth class when his uncle and aunt think that he is quite grown up, so must start earning his own living. His strenuous ten mile march with the unsympathetic uncle, from Bilaspur to Sham Nagar to find a job, is just a prelude to his sufferings that are to follow in Sham Nagar. Munoo is employed as a boy servant with Babu Nathoo Ram and his wife Bibi Uttam Kaur. He is informed in unmistakable terms, about his position in the house: “You are their servant and they are big people”. He has no right o join in the merry making of his social
superiors and eat from a plate as they do. Scrubbing the vessels, sweeping the floor, preparing beds and laying the table, and of course, getting abused – these chores constitute his monotonous daily routine. Leading a life of domestic slavery, Munoo frequently thinks over his sad plight and tries to find out the cause of his suffering and asks him: “What am I Munoo” the answer comes to his mind. “I am Munoo, Baboo Nathoo Ram’s servant.” An idea of identity is planted in him by his uncle, and he takes it for granted. Amidst torrents of abuse and humiliation, he has some moments of relief when he plays with Shiela, his master’s daughter. One day, he performs the usual monkey and the little girl enjoys the performance. To make the dance look natural, Munoo quite innocently bites Shiela on the cheek as a monkey would. At this indiscretion of his servant, Babu Nathoo Ram showers blow after blow on the poor boy. It turns out to be the proverbial last straw on the camel’s back. “As a whipped dog hides in a corner; a whipped human seeks escape”, comments the novelist.

Munoo somehow manages to escape to Daulatpur where the pickle factory is situated. The bleak and airless primitive pickle factory is an inferno that is lighted up only by the geniality of Prabh Dayal, his employer. The parental care that Munoo receives from Prabh Dayal relieves him of the gloom enveloping him, a gloom thickened by the malevolent presence of the loathsome, goat faced Ganpat who is always angry, sharp tongued and abusive. In spite of Ganpat’s cruelty to him and other coolies, the warm fellowship of workers, renders his life somewhat tolerable. The hell like living condition of coolies has been realistically presented by Mulk Raj Anand in this novel:

The roof of clumsy straw mats, which dropped dangerously at the sides from the cracked beams supporting it in the middle, was not high enough for Munoo or Hari’s wife to stand in, though Hari, whose
back was bent, escaped hitting his head against it. The mud floor was at a level lower than the pathway outside. The cottage boasted neither a window nor a chimney to let in the air and light and to eject the smoke.

One more hard experience awaits Munoo in Bombay. The cotton factory where he works is nothing but another version of hell where innumerable lads like him are condemned to subhuman existence. The coolies, writes Anand, are “shivering, weak, and bleary, with twisted, ugly faces, black, filthy, gutless, and spineless, with unconscious, vacant looks”. These coolies toil with their sweat and blood while the oppressors discuss the weather over a cup of tea. What is revolting is that their employers like Mr. Little should think that “They should all be put up against a wall and shot, the whole darned lot of them”. Depicting vividly the lot of coolies, Mulk Raj Anand brings out the inhumanity bred by avarice and cash nexus. At last, Munoo’s sojourn in Bombay terminates when he gets badly mauled in a car accident. Mrs. Mainwaring, the occupant in the car, wanted a servant and she takes him to Simla. In Simla, he becomes her domestic servant, her rickshaw-puller, and as the novelist hints frequently, something more, but that “something more” is never explicitly stated. After serving and servicing her for some time, Munoo falls ill, and then death completes his victimhood.

While describing the tragic woes of a teen aged boy, the novelist censures the religious men. The fat yogi of the shrine of Bhagat Har Das is a crafty person who seduces young childless women on the pretext of granting them child. Munoo, taken in by his appearance, seeks his help to initiate him into spirituality so that he could prove to be worthy son of his master, Prabh Dayal. But he is overpowered by a sense of shame when he sees through the mask of saintliness worn by this voluptuary who specializes in granting children to the rich and young
childless women of the town. More than a dozen novels have appeared since the publication of *Untouchable* and *Coolie*. Throughout his writings the primary concern of Mulk Raj Anand is man, the whole man. We notice one more major theme which Anand has dealt with in his popular novels. Nigam, one of the scholars who have analyzed Anand’s novels says:

*Coolie* deals with the economic exploitation of one man by another, i.e. of the lower class by the upper class….The microscopic minority consisting of a few called capitalists dictated terms to the majority consisting of the poor and the deprived. In order to keep body and soul together, the poor had to work under their masters: the rich, who subjected them to exploitation and persecution. [17]

While his first novel ‘*Untouchable* deals with the age-old ghastly problems of untouchability which has deep roots in Hindus hierarchy, his second novel *Coolie* is based upon the problem of class-struggle, social-injustice and psychological conflict of the subaltern, the poor, under dogs and the rich, the privileged ones. It is an indictment against the inhuman treatment given to the poor, against the denial of the right to happiness to simple landless orphans, against the exploitation of the underprivileged and unjust social system. It is Anand’s genuine effort to awaken the consciousness of the people of the world against this injustice and exploitation of the lower people in rank or class a subordinate or a subaltern of India society. According to E. Manickam,

The novel highlights the loss of precious childhood, the hardships and privations experienced at the hands of adults motivated by greed for gain, selfishness, heartlessness and callousness in destroying
irrevocably that tender shoot of humanity that ought to find protection and nurture from the adult world.[18]

It is an appeal for healthy human values and a radical transformation of the miserable subaltern, the have-nots; an appeal for building a class’s society built upon the principles of fraternity, peace, love and justice. Anand’s attacks on political as well as social and economic institutions are carried out mainly on behalf of poor Indians, in the effort to destroy forces inimical to their development and to build a world of freedom and equality where human potential can flourish. *Untouchable* is the microcosm *Coolie* is a cross section of India-a symbolic combination of the horrible and the holy, the inhuman and the human, the good and evil. 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 around us. We are moving from village to village Toluca headquarters, from District headquarters to presidency capital, then the national capital. This is a regression indeed but only spastically for the human situation hardly alters wherever we may be. Munoo is the exploited all the time one way or the other by one persons or another and his fate is typical of the fate of millions whose only distinguishing badge is patient sufferance. Munoo symbolizes the agony and humiliation faced by subaltern in Indian society, on one way or other. It will be relevant here to mention that poverty has played a vital role in the tragic life of Munoo. Balram Gupta has rightly said, “Anand believes that poverty is a cruel evil and cruelty is itself a deadly evil. We see in *Coolie* how these evils of poverty and cruelty crush a bud of youth before it could bloom to any extent.”[19] P.P.Mehta has also analysed Anand’s novels. Mehta’s opinion about Anand’s style in *Coolie* is:
The style of Mulk Raj Anand is simple but effective with a good sprinkling of Hindustani words. Humor and absurdities of human life are finely worked out. The feelings of the Anglo Indians have been clearly shown in the character of Mrs Mainwaring. Mulk Raj Anand has described the sorrow and pathos of the poor class in India. [20]
References:


7. Aanad, Mulk Raj. Coolie. New Delhi, Arnold Heinemann, 1983. All textual references have been taken from this edition of the text.


