

Negotiating the Fringes: Interpreting and Interrogating the Class and Caste Conflict in Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*

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Abstract

When we talk of any author, we have to position him/her in the intersection of race, class, caste, gender and historical context; and thus Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Coolie* (1936) is meaningfully contextualized in my paper. I will delineate in my paper, how unlike Charles Dickens, Anand focuses on the class rather than the individual and hence names his novel *Coolie* rather than 'Munoo'. Here, my paper will illustrate how Anand predicates destiny on a class as the class system in India has become a new sort of caste system and the individual identity rooted in the detrimental class system causes much harm to the social unity. It has apartheidized or segregated people into rich and poor; haves and have-nots. I will explain through my paper that the term "Dalit" does not necessarily confine itself to a particular lower caste but tends to encompass all the oppressed and downtrodden souls in the society. Nevertheless, in this process, the vastness of the social canvas, India's multi-layered social hierarchies, with possibilities of the exploitation and subjugation of the underdogs in every stratum, comes through.

Key Words: Marginality, Class, Caste, Oppressed, Underdog.

While discussing any author, we have to position him/her at the crossroad of race, class, caste, gender and historical context. We will see that all these contexts are meaningful in an analysis of Mulk Raj Anand's work. Anand was the son of a coppersmith and his mother was a peasant. One senses in Anand a true sympathy for the underdog of Indian society. When one reads *Coolie*, it is important to keep in mind, Anand's involvement with the Progressive Writers' Association and its goals of promoting a "critical" spirit in literature. Simultaneously with the Congress meeting in Lucknow in 1936, the Progressive Writers' Association held its first meeting presided over by Munshi Premchand. It is Premchand who urged a "critical" spirit in writing, instead of a passive acceptance of traditional or received ideas. In his inaugural address Premchand declared:

We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic social backwardness and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and unreason, we reject as reactionary. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason,

which helps us to act to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive (Narayan 20-21).

The emphasis in literature was to avoid the romantic and unrealistic contexts of much Indian writing done before that. The members of the Progressive Writers' Association felt that literature should not only critically analyze the loopholes of society but help in the promotion of socially conscious values and help in the amelioration of social conditions. There is a profound rationale that powers Anand's writing. He is writing as Premchand advocated with a "critical spirit" with the intention of examining "institutions and customs in the light of reason", so that he can "transform" India in the direction of being "progressive."

The association also felt that the writer must be sensitive to his environment and reflect issues of importance to society. This raises a very crucial question- is it possible to be true to one's subject matter and true to art at the same time? Anand's fiction raises the question of art and beauty of politics and whether it is possible to unite the two. Anand has been called the Balzac or the Dickens of Indian writing in English. Certainly his passionate social conscience does raise echoes of Dickens. Like Dickens, Anand often assumes the mantle of the omniscient narrator, to arouse the reader to a state of indignation about the injustice and plight of the underprivileged in society.

The novel *Coolie* (1936) written in a style that we would call realist, in assuming the referentiality of language as a medium, chronicles in great detail and within a sufficiently vast canvas, the progression of its child protagonist Munoo from carefree, though poor country boy, to an Anglo Indian woman's minion. In the process, an entire society whose unjust hierarchies and insidious interrelationships, wipe out the life of an innocent child caught within its grip. As Dickens creates profound sympathy for an Oliver Twist or a Nicholas Nickleby, Anand wrings sympathy for this child hero who is both engaging and intelligent but whose aspirations die an untimely and cruel death because of the class that he is born into. Unlike Dickens, who often names his novel of social exploitation after the child like Oliver and Nicholas, Mulk Raj Anand focuses on class rather than the individual and therefore names his novel *Coolie*, rather than Munoo. Clearly, Anand predicates destiny on class. It is obvious that he subscribes to the naturalist point of view which posits the determining influence on environment in the destiny of the individual subject. This is what makes Mulk Raj Anand's art different from Dickens who even in his socially conscious novels, picked in enough humour and diversity of incident to make the novel entertaining from the reader's point of view. Sometimes, Anand's accretion of unpleasant details relating to the physical and mental conditions of Munoo's life becomes a burden to the text and on the reader. In his attempt to paint a picture of unmitigated evil which makes Indian society particularly cruel for those who are its underdogs, there is no beauty to alleviate the uncompromising severity of Anand's portraiture.

Anand also indigenizes the language of the book in ways that prefigure Ngugi's move towards the "decolonization" of colonized languages. The text otherwise written in a high flowing style, carrying references to Modigliani (250) when a character Mainwaring is referred to has many explicit Hindustani words without a glossary. These words are "Huzzor" (217), "vay" (57), "phatphaties" (6), "injan of the rail gari" (7), "chalo" (184), "jaldichalo" (184), "angrezisarkar" (5), "angrezi women" (137), "j'tamasha" (142), "gol karma" (258) etc. There are moments of inauthentic in the style when the language seems too exalted or feeling too refined to be attributed to Munoo in spite of the fact that he has a developed consciousness. For instance, when Anand talks about the coolies singing after work in Prabha's factory, the language seems oddly inappropriate and complex:

The doleful melody traced its long-drawn notes from a painful cry through the full, clear accents of a verse quickly mounting to an agonized crescendo. Then, retracting itself to a minor key, it reiterated the sympathetic flow of works along the ringing tenderness of the song to a final despair (Anand 91).

These lines are reminiscent of the songs that black slaves used to sing to shield themselves from the deracination of their bought lives. Apart from such instances, it is clear from the narrative that in this case, the subalterns had to be spoken for. One also wonders who Anand's audience was. Obviously, it could not be a large section of Indian people because they would be untrained in English. Inspired as he was by Gandhism, he was also strongly impacted by sociologist ideas abroad. A statement by the omniscient narrator in the text provides the framing device for the episodic nature of the novel:

For the most part men realize themselves through the force of external necessity, in the varied succession of irrelevant and unconnected circumstances (Anand 89).

The episodic pattern followed by the novel allies it with the picaresque tradition in writing. The novel could also be called a *bildungsroman* in its emphasis on the consciousness of a single individual. The social guarantees that allow the unfolding and proper maturity of the aspiring consciousness of a Stephen Dedalus or Dorothea Brooke, are absent in *Coolie*. However, Munoo is very intelligent and often reflects or cogitates on experience. For instance, early on in the novel, after Munoo has the humiliating and deracinating experiences at Baboo Nathoo Ram's house, he asks himself who he is and the answer that hits him is that, his identity and his servitude lies in his class:

What am I- Munoo? 'He asked himself as he lay wrapped in his blanket, early one morning. I am Munoo, Babu Nathoo Ram's servant', the answer came to his mind (Anand 34).

What is particularly endearing about Munoo is his *Joie de vivre* which he manages to keep intact, till very much later when his spirits and his mind sag from repeated sadness and disappointment. He wishes to learn and often gives himself up to the joy of a new experience. At the outset of his life as a coolie in the city of Bombay, Munoo thinks:

And again he reached out to life, the joy of life which registered in his mind's eye the clear hieroglyphs of numerous desires. 'I want to live, I want to know, I want to work, to work this machine. He said, 'I shall grow up and be a man, a strong man like the wrestler'' (190).

Earlier, the narrator had described Munoo's reactions to the sprawling city of Bombay: While on the train to Bombay, Munoo has fears about what this new life would mean, but he ignores it too,

But he sat back and resigned himself to the contemplation of the magical landscape of green fields, washed clean in the sunlight and the shimmering dews of the water from the sea (151).

One wonders of course, whose language this is. It is not Munoo's. Throughout the text we have a certain voice that narrates the events of Munoo's life and focalizes through Munoo. However, when it is Munoo's consciousness that is formulating the thoughts, the formality of the language, often distances the immediacy of Munoo's experiences. The imperial language must have been as far from Munoo's experience as is conceivable. Anand is here putting his knowledge of the English task for the specific purpose of bringing to light and dealing at length with the burdens of the socially most oppressed classes of India.

As Munoo made his way with his uncle who was a *chaprasi* in the service of the British Raj and wore a gold brocaded red coat, he often had to "nurse" (5) his bare feet as he trudged with his uncle on a ten mile march, but got yelled at as "You son of a bitch" (4). They arrive at Babu Nathoo Ram's house in Sham Nagar where Munoo will work as a servant. Soon after his arrival, slowly getting used to the constant stream of abuse that the *Bibiji* or mistress of the house heaped on him, he relieved himself outside the wall of the house, not knowing where the lavatory was, or where he should go. The incident caused him enormous shame with the entire household acting as witness to the incident of the village boy who had not been instructed about the use of a bathroom.

However, Munoo was gifted with such innate high spirits that he soon tried to recover the good spirits of his masters by doing a "monkey dance" for them:

After dusting his feet and his hands he advance, still playing the fool, and began to dance like the monkey of the village juggler whom he had seen perform every day on the crossroads in his way back from school (Anand 22).

However, *Bibiji* likes nothing that he does, and reminds him that his "place is ...in the kitchen" (23). The narrator informs us that he was "essentially impetuous by nature, and as yet too young to have disciplined his hands to the adequate performance of menial jobs" (28).

One is reminded of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Pather Panchanli* (1929) and the child protagonist Opu in this context. Opu too was born into desperate poverty, the worst brunt of which was however, taken by his sister Durga. Opu too dreamt of far off vistas, which however, were allowed to flourish in his imagination because he was the idolized member of his family as opposed to his sister Durga, who always bore the worst brunt of their mother's temper. The fact of caste also helped Opu, because he was the son of a Brahmin *purohit*, and in spite of poverty enjoyed a position of exaltation in rural Bengali society.

The narrator tells us that for days Munoo "went about work as if he were in a dream...his heart not in the job (46). A child himself, he yearned to play and this desire led to one of the greatest disasters of his life. One day while playing with Nathoo Ram's children while his wife was visiting the neighbours, he accidentally bit into the cheek of Nathoo Ram's daughter Shiela. One can imagine the furor that the incident caused and Munoo and as the narrator informs us once again, "A whipped dog hides in a corner, a whipped human seeks escape" (59). Anand's creation of Bakha was rendered possible because he wanted to explore that part of the Indian society which was steeped in social malice. He wanted to insist on the sensitive nature of the young man in contrast to those who considered touching him as an act of degradation. E.M Forster, in his preface to *Untouchable* (1935), explains that:

Bakha is a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometimes weak, and thoroughly Indian. Even his physique is distinctive, we can recognize broad intelligent face, graceful torso... as he does its nasty job or stumps out in artillery boots, in the hope of a pleasant walk through the city with a paper of cheap sweets in his hands (Forster 2).

The founding motif which characterizes one of the greatest novels of English, *Tom Jones* (1749), is used by Anand very effectively in *Coolie*. Fleeing from Babu Nathoo Ram's house, Munoo boards a train and is accidentally found sleeping below the seat of a kind hearted man named Prabha. Prabha had no children and was overjoyed with his discovery of an orphaned child.

Munoo arrives at Prabha's pickle factory and although, Prabha treated Munoo well, his partner Ganpat was nasty to the boy and the conditions of work in factory were abysmal. In fact, Munoo had once seen "a monstrous python with a flowing beard sitting over the fuel in a deeper chamber of the grotto facing the oven" (92).

A typical day in the life of a coolie at the factory was as follows:

Thus they worked from day to day in the dark underworld, full of the intense heat of blazing furnaces and the dense malodorous smells of brewing essences, spices and treacle, of dust and dashes and mud, which became kneaded into a sticky layer on the earth... and plastered the bare toes of the labourers. They ran about barefoot and naked except for loin cloths...they worked long. Hours from dawn to past midnight, so mechanically that they never noticed the movements of their own or each other's hands (Anand 92).

But Munoo's ravenous hunger for the mangoes was to cause him trouble. Not only did he fall seriously ill from the intake of so many unripe mangoes but when Ganpat found out and chastised him severely. The coolies went in terror of Ganpat, relaxing from the arduous routine only when he was not there. The only thing that redeemed this killing routine or melancholy life was the "silent comradeship which existed between him and the other coolies" (90).

Life at Prabha's factory came to a standstill after Prabha was cheated by Ganpat and declared bankrupt. Munoo leaves and starts working as a coolie in the market place. On his first night in the market place, he felt that the sleeping coolies around him were like "corpses" (118). As he himself sleeps in a precarious condition he moans once or twice:

As if the curves of his soul were straightening, smooth from the coils caused by the impact of his horrible experience! (119)

We see how Mulk Raj Anand forcefully and a little dogmatically drives home the point of Munoo's continual and unrelieved suffering. The next endearing aspect of Munoo's childlike nature or childishness comes when "he gets excited about the circus, seeing the advertisements of Tara Bai, the female wrestler, Munoo decided with a wild delight in his eyes. 'And I will go to Bombay'" (140).

Munoo makes friends with the elephant driver and the driver arranges to have him watch the circus through a "hole in the canopy." (142) Munoo was "spell bound" (143) and it seemed to him like a "miracle" (143). We notice how he responds like a child. We notice his capacity for hope and optimism and the ability to rejuvenate himself. And we feel the hurt of his disillusionment even more because he was capable of such high optimism and hope, in spite of the disappointments of his life.

The Factory that they sought employment in was Sir George White Cotton Mills and the man who represented authority was Jimmie Thomas, "Sometime mechanic in a Lancashire mill" (172) and now head foreman in one of the biggest cotton mills in India. He is referred to as "Salaam Huzoor Chimta Sahib" and rents inhabitable tenement huts to

the coolies. Apart from Chimta Sahib, we also have the figure of Nadir Khan who guards the gate to the factory. Layers of exploitative hierarchies are exposed by the author to us and along with it also the Indian peoples' craven dependence on God. He cites the lepers that Munoo had seen on the way to the factory as uttering "Ram, Ram, Sri, Sri" (166). Another aspect of hypocritical and exploitative Indian existence that Munoo had blundered into accidentally was a nexus where a woman acted as a procurer for a sadhu who made love to childless young women of upper class families to beget them "sons of God" (135).

There are moments when Munoo feels an "outcast" (137) and terribly "alone" (165). One of the redeeming features of his life in the factory in the Bombay is his friendship with Ratan and in the opinion of the omniscient narrator whose attitude here smacks of unashamed regionalism:

The friendship between Munoo and Ratan grew, as friendship can only grow between two spontaneous, naïve, warm-hearted men of the Punjab (208).

Once more we warm to the endearing aspects of Munoo's character as we see that he "always burst out with happiness on a holiday. And he joined the general exodus of coolies to the town, to see the wonderful things that were sold there, to caress them in his heart, since he could not buy them, with the warm hope that one day he would be able to possess them." (209) Munoo is also drawn towards women and one day goes with Ratan to visit Piari Jan the prostitute cum dancer. When he returns home, Hari's wife is waiting up for him:

He averted his glance from her and moved towards the part of the floor where he slept. When he looked up again, Lakhsmani was bending over him with a trembling wild light in her eyes...And she lay down by his side and took him in her arms, pressing him to her bosom with a silent warmth.... making him writhe with all the pent-up fury of his adolescent passion, till in the magic hour of the dawn it found an escape in death, in the temporary death of his body in hers (216).

Eventually, Ratan gets into trouble with Chimta Sahib and the trade union movement is drawn into the fabric of the story as Ratan complains to the President of the Trade Union Committee. Ratan tells Munoo:

Do not all the insults you people suffer rouse you from the apathy to which you have succumbed? (219)

Eventually, the President makes a recommendation to the management of the factory but riots ensue and Munoo gets lost in the process. As the narrator tells us, he did not curse his destiny; he was in love with life, especially the life of the senses (248).

He walks up to the Malabar Hills where the sea was to his left and as he stares out at the beauty of the scene when gets hit by a car. The car belonged to an Anglo Indian lady called Mrs. Mainwaring. She takes Munoo to Shimla and makes him her rickshaw puller. She is attracted to him in spite of having a husband and in spite of being married twice before. She flirts with him and the implications of the text are that she uses him for other purposes too. Eventually Munoo gets tuberculosis, coughs interminably and vomits blood. Even in the throes of death he feels he is not going to die, however his body succumbs and he breathes his last. Thus Anand has tried to inculcate empathy and human values and transform the unequal society radically where there will not be any socio-cultural discrimination, where the haves and have-nots can share life on equal footing with love, peace, fraternity and justice.

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