A CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF 'COOLIE'

Coolie is Anand's second best novel. It first appeared in 1936. It consists of five chapters, each of which tells about Munoo's life in a different place. The novel is a social tragedy caused by human cruelty, greed, selfishness, poverty and exploitation. Munoo, the hero of the novel is a universal figure representing the miseries of the poor and downtrodden, the underdogs.

Coolie is a narrative of the life and death of a coolie over a period of two years. It has for its hero a young boy from Kangra hills. He is Munoo, a fourteen-year-old orphan. His land had been snatched by the village Sahukar from his father. He lives with his aunt Gujri in a village. Driven by a necessity of independent livelihood, he sets out with his rather cruel uncle Daya Ram, a peon in the ImperialBank of Sham Nagar, to work as a domestic servant in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, the sub-accountant in the Imperial Bank. His life in the house is not a bed of roses due to Bibi Uttam Kaur. With no sympathy from his uncle, Munoo is unable to bear Bibi Uttam Kaur's cruelty, villainy and beating. One day he runs away from his mistress' house and boards a train with no definite place to go to. In the train he happens to meet a gentleman named Prabha, a goodly soul who was himself a coolie and an orphan like Munoo but is now a Seth, the owner of a pickle factory at Daulatpur in partnership with Ganpat nicknamed as the goat-face. Prabha takes him to Daulatpur and provides him employment.

Munoo, thus, becomes a labourer at Daulatpur. His life is somewhat pleasant due to the affection of Prabha and his wife. But soon the hellish and ugly days come. Ganpat begins to ill-treat Munoo and the factory is closed down due to Ganpat's treachery. Munoo is compelled to work as a coolie in the local market and Railway Station of Daulatpur. With the help of a merciful elephant driver of a circus he goes to Bombay by train. There he meets Hari, a worker in a textile factory. In Bombay he sees exploitation in full swing. Munoo gets a job in a mill. The mill is affected by a strike. He is knocked down by a motor car. The owner of the car is Mrs. Mainwaring, an Anglo-Indian lady who takes him to Simla to have him as her servant-cum-rickshaw puller. He dies of consumption at the age of 16.

This novel, *Coolie*, has been approached by critics in different ways. It has been regarded as a prose-epic of modern India, a work of fiction, a picaresque novel, a social tragedy, a chronicle of coolies, a propaganda of Marxist philosophy, etc. The novel exposes poverty and exploitation. "It is a typical novel of this oppressive trend in modern society and becomes multi-dimensional with its philosophy of naturalism and the contemporary national ideas. The Hindu-Muslim communal riots, the Anglo-Indian snobbery, the growing industrialisation of the country and the rising trade-unionism among its workers are objectively observed by Munoo with a sense of awe and wonderment. His life is wholly determined by the ruthless forces of society, but beneath this pensive pessimism, there is an essential undercurrent of optimism and the need for the drastic reform of the wide society. (A. V. Krishna Rao)

Coolie is steeped in humanism. It has a tilt towards the poor and the down-trodden. It is a novel of the underdogs. To quote Saros Cowasjee, "It is a study in destitution, or to use Peter Quennell's words: "India seen third-class—a continent whose bleakness, vastness and poverty are unshaded 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."

In the words of Maurice Richardson, "It is a classic", indeed a classic of Indian masses. It is through Munoo that the novelist sings of the virtues of the proletarian class. So it is a piece of propaganda too.

The novel is also remarkable for its stark realism. In the words of Dr. Iyengar, "It is verily a cross-section of India, the visible India, that mixture of the horrible and the holy, the inhuman and the humane, the sordid and the beautiful."

One of the excellences of the novel is Munoo. *The Spectator* of London records, "Munoo is a universal kind of figure. He is the passion not only of India but of mankind." The other view is of Saros Cowasjee who says: "He (Munoo) belongs with some of the endearing juvenile characters in modern literature with Victor Hugo's Gavroche and Dickens's David Copperfield."

According to Mr. Kurmanadhan, "Everyone of Anand's other novels is but a kaleidoscopic turn of one phase or other: an event or chapter, a character or a situation, in isolation, or in juxtaposition, appears shown under a magnifying lens. In other words, it (*Coolie*) is the microcosm of the macrocosm of Anand's world of fiction."

In the words of Saros Cowasjee, "*Coolie* (1936) shares with *Untouchable* (1935) not only Anand's social angers but also its immense popularity (the two novels have been translated into more than twenty world languages). The classical unities of the previous work are no longer preserved; the exigencies of the plot are swiftly dismissed, the canvas is much wider and the characters more varied." Whereas *Untouchable* is flawless, short, compact and experimental, *Coolie* is epical, long and colourful. The reformist zeal of Anand

can be observed in both the novels. *Coolie* is a tragedy; *Untouchable* ends on an inconclusive note. The theme of *Coolie* gets a wider treatment than that of *Untouchable*. Bakha is a negative hero but Munoo is not. Bakha is delineated psychologically whereas Munoo is portrayed socially. Thus *Coolie* is a true picture of exploitation of the poor and emerges as a powerful tragedy.

Coolie is harshly realistic. It presents a picture of the poor people; their sadness and cruelty, happiness and revolt, exploitation and hunger. From the technical viewpoint of plot and characterization, it is certainly not flawless but as a social proletarian novel it is a brilliant success. There is no doubt about it.

The typical technique adopted in *Coolie* is naturalistic. Munoo's progress and other things are described in naturalistic setting and prose with "tantalising realism," says Cowasjee. It is the photographic realism that brings accuracy and objectivity and makes the picture very touching. According to K. R. S. Iyengar, there is a Dickensian piquancy of realism in the characters and action of *Coolie*. But Anand shows his grip on the expressionistic also. Expressionistic technique is X-ray photography and it is diametrically opposed to naturalism. It is a technique of bringing out the intrinsic reality or truth of an emotion or situation. Truth can be known only by distortion. Symbols are also used. In the fourth chapter the naturalistic technique of the earlier chapters is replaced subtly by the expressionistic technique. Here Munoo is no longer an individual. He becomes a type like O'Neill's Yank in *The Hairy Ape*. The fourth chapter, to use Saros Cowasjee's phrase, is 'wholly expressionistic in technique and is devoted to dramatising and universalising the basic theme—that of the fate of the natural man's essential innocence.'

Coolie is a novel written with a purpose. It is a powerful indictment of modern capitalistic society and its tragic exploitation of the poor. The hero of the novel wants to live, but the society does not allow him to live. He dies of exploitation, poverty and hunger. Humanism is the answer to the problem. If the poor are treated humanely, many of the problems related to them can be solved easily.

Coolie is not merely a piece of propaganda. It is indeed a piece of art. The work is not by a doctrinaire Marxist singing the virtues of the proletariat. Whatever propaganda is found in the novel is 'digested completely'. The speeches detailing the miseries of the labourers and atrocities of employers delivered by the leaders of the Union Congress and Union Jack appear to have been designed and woven by Anand specifically to drive home his point of view since they are all not much comprehensible to Munoo. In this connection the remarks of Saros Cowasjee are very pertinent : "Anand is a political novelist. He sees his characters and their actions in relation to India, and often in relation to the world outside India. It is in this that his chief strength lies. At a time when most Indian nationalists thought that Independence would usher in the golden age, Anand saw deeper and asserted that political freedom, without a

change of heart, was meaningless. India's present predicament, after twenty five years of freedom, is a vindication of Anand's foresight. What Munoo suffers at the hands of his English Masters in Bombay is no more than what he suffers at the hands of his Indian masters, and even from those of his fellow workers as down-trodden as himself."

As mentioned above, *Coolie* is remarkable for its humanism too. It has given the story of Munoo a human touch. It runs like an undercurrent and saves the novel from being a dark picture of contemporary India. There is a certain philosophical touch and depth.

In the field of characterization, the novel has not achieved any significant literary excellence. The characterization is quite ordinary. Most of the characters are melodramatic and are flat. Anand does not seem to understand fully the English characters he has drawn. But the Englishmen are merely caricatured.

The novel has its shortcomings too. These flaws broadly relate to the structure and plot-construction of the novel. The device of the motor accident destroys the probability of its action. It is a cheap romantic device of developing action. In the words of Prof. Naik, "The accident is the beginning of Munoo's end : it is also the beginning of the end of the artistic integrity of the novel." Another flaw is lack of any remarkable woman character. Piari Jan, Mrs. Mainwaring, Bibi Uttam Kaur, and Laxmi are introduced and left undeveloped. They are there to represent their classes.

Yet the novel is a best-seller. It is classic of modern India, and a classic about child life. Not a spiritual autobiography like Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, not a pensive comedy like R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, not a novel of political hatred and mass passion like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Anand's *Coolie* is a folk-epic, a novel of "human centrality" and a tragedy of man's innocence and poverty. It is just human and touching.

MAIN CHARACTER SKETCHES IN 'COOLIE'

1. MUNOO

Munoo is the hero of the novel. He is "a universal kind of figure. He is the passion not only of India but of mankind." In the words of Saros Cowasjee, "He belongs with some of the most endearing juvenile characters in modern literature: with Victor Hugo's Gavroche and Dickens' David Copperfield." He is the hero of an epic about ordinary men, and in this respect he can be compared with Huck Finn of Mark Twain.

He is a sturdy hill boy, with a taste for the joy of life which is denied to him again and again :

> "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.....'"

Till the last he feels that he is not going to die. Munoo is not one boy but three or four linked together as if the same soul achieved transmigration from body to body; he is necessarily passive,—things just happen to him,—but at least he is a sensitive photographic plate that receives impressions correctly and preserves them. Apart from Munoo himself, the novel is peopled with scores of characters, the scenes change, the situations alter, white jostles with black, and both are often covered by a dull grey : but all is seen through Munoo's awakening and ripening consciousness. His robust health, his thirst for life, his essentially unspoilt nature, his readiness to respond to kindness, his puzzlement that good and evil should be so inextricably mixed up, all make him a true cousin-brother to Bakha, who are both heirs to the scalding frustration that is the only birthright for millions born under the Indian Sun. (Srinivas Iyengar)

Innocence is a dominant feature of Munoo's character. He becomes a victim of poverty and exploitations, man's greed and selfishness. In the beginning he is excited about the life in the cities merely because he does not know the wicked ways of the world. When Varma says filthy things about Bibi Uttam Kaur, his mistress, Munoo gets angry and quarrels with him. With innocence goes his rustic ways. For example, he relieves himself outside of the house of Bibi Uttam

Kaur. According to Saros Cowasjee, "The magic of the book is in Munoo's innocence, in his native warm-heartedness, his love and comradeship, his irrepressible curiosity and zest for life."

Munoo is full of fellow-feeling and comradeship. He has malice towards none. Working with the boys in Prabha's factory, he has the feeling of being in the same boat. Maharaj and others mix with him. But he is a silent comrade. In Bombay he meets Hari and because of his warm-heartedness, befriends him. "His physical body exuded the continual warmth, the living vitality that reached out in a wild frenzy of movement to any and every feeling and object. He laughed, sang, danced, shouted, leaped, somersaulted, with the irrepressible impetuosity of life itself, sweeping aside the barriers that separated him from his superiors, by the utter humaneness of his impulses, but the sheer wantonness of his unconscious life-force."

Munoo is an adventurous young boy. The whole novel is a collection of his adventures from his village to different cities of India, more specifically to Sham Nagar, Daulatpur, Bombay and Simla. He looks at life with a sense of excitement and wonder. Like Pip of Dickens, he has great expectations, yet all of them fade in the prime of his life when he dies of consumption because of over-work and drudgery and cruelty of human life. When he reaches Daulatpur, he surveys life with wonder and excitement with inquisitive eyes. We find that "there was only a curious flutter of excitement in his heart, like thrill of ear and happiness which had filled him when he first laid eyes on Sham Nagar—the fear of the unknown in his bowels and the stirring of hope for a wonderful life in the new world he was entering." (p. 81)

Munoo is a hard-working and industrious boy. He has potentiality and tolerance. He once was interested in the machine-work. It was for this purpose that he looked at cities with hope and wonder. But his expectations were never fulfilled. As a coolie also he is quite active and industrious. Yet he is a pitiable character. His tragic death shocks the readers and provokes their anger at cruelty, selfishness, greed, exploitation and poverty in the society.

Munoo is a sturdy hill-boy, with a taste for the joy of life which is denied to him again and again. "Munoo is not one boy but three or four linked together as if the same soul achieved transmigration from body to body; he is necessarily passive—things happen to him,—but at least he is a sensitive photographic plate that receives impressions correctly and preserves them.....His robust health, his thirst for life, his essentially unspoilt nature, his readiness to respond to kindness, his puzzlement that good and evil should be so inextricably mixed up, all make him a true cousin-brother to Bakha, who are both heirs to the scalding frustration that is the only birthright for millions born under the Indian sun." (Dr. K. R. Srinivas Iyengar)

2. MRS. MAINWARING

An Anglo-Indian, she is a house divided against itself, the passionate blood of her pagan Indian grand-mother, in her being at

perpetual war with the European-Christian horror of the flesh and sex instilled into her by her convent schooling. She descended from an old Anglo-Indian family of four brothers. Her grand-father begot her father, William Smith, through a Moslem washer-woman. William Smith got colonised in Zalimpur. He married the daughter of an English engine-driver. May is the only child of that union.

Mrs. Mainwaring suffers from a strong sense of inferiority complex about her origin. She is English only at the fourth stage. In her early childhood she was looked after by the wife of a Catholic missionary who sent her to the convent of the Sacred Heart at Simla. In order to cope with the snobbery of the other children she fabricated cock-and-bull-stories about her 'home'. However, her life was miserable at school. She had the great ambition of going to England. It is only to cover her inferiority that she pretends to be a true British lady.

Yet she is away from gross evil. She finds Munoo to be "a young boy with a lithe, supple body, with a small, delicate face, and with a pair of sensitive eyes." "She is kind-hearted towards him." Her attitude with other servants also is good.

Mrs. Mainwaring has a horror of sex and flesh. She has a fascination for sensual enjoyment. Early in Zalimpur a German photographer fell in love with her for her dusky hue. She married him (Heinrich Ulmer). But her husband abandoned her soon. "For a time she mourned the loss of her husband. But she had never really gone out to him. For although she had outdone him in her display of physical passion, she had really remained a virgin at heart as if pulled back always by the leaf of sin which had sunk deep into her subconsciousness through her early Christian training. Her warmth, her ardour, her intense capacity for desire must have been due to the blood of her pagan Indian grand-mother 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 on her body, was conditioned by the idea of sin. The fundamental contradiction in her nature resulted in perversity. She indulged in a strange furtive, surreptitious promiscuity. She gave herself to people at the least felt impulse and regretted having done so afterwards." (p. 286)

Then she married Aga Raza Ali Shah, a Persian Captain in the Nawab's army. But due to the basic contradiction in her nature and split personality, she could not develop integrity of character. "If her mind had not been reacting against the deep-rooted belief in the sin of sex, she might have had an integrity of character which would have saved her from the onslaughts of all these men, but, vacillating between a belief she felt to be wrong and a desire which was continually insistent, she became a bitch to all the dogs that prowled round her bungalow." (p. 287)

She divorced the Captain and married Guy Mainwaring. This third husband left for her a rich legacy in Simla while he stayed in

Peshawar. In Simla, she lingered on with her romantic moorings. Mr. Merchant often paid visit to her. She also aroused Munoo's passion, and chose him to be a servant keeping in view his age and robust youth. Just see her utterance : "Why didn't the world understand how a woman gives herself in love, in hate, in pity, in tenderness, in playfulness and in a hundred different moods ?..... .....Then she looked at him with a flutter in her eyes..... .....Beautiful boy ! Lovely boy ! You only want a wife now." (pp. 293—94).

3. OTHER CHARACTERS

Other significant characters, though not so important as those of Munoo and Mrs. Mainwaring, are those of Daya Ram, Babu Nathoo Ram, Bibi Uttam Kaur, Ganpat, Dr. Prem Chand, Seth Prabha, Jimmie Thomas, and Mr. England, For paucity of space they are not discussed here.