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Mulk Raj Anand's 'Coolie' As A Portrait Of Child Abuse And Exploitation

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Abstract: India is a nation known for its flamboyance and audacity. Governed by the pathos of human, caste, and creed divide, it holds a history drenched in mystery. The predicament of child exploitation and abuse has pertinently infected the grandeur of our nation since a long while. Making Munoo an archetype, Mulk Raj Anand in his *Coolie* has magnificently traced the plight of innocent kids being coerced to do vulnerable tasks. The paper portrays the abuse and exploitation faced by children in pre independence India through the life of Munoo.

Index Terms- Abuse, Exploitation, Children, Munoo

The issue of child labour and child exploitation has been a grave one in our nation since eternity. Our esteemed constitution guarantees the right against exploitation in Article 23 and Article 24. Enshrined in our constitution, these Fundamental Rights guarantee every citizen protection from any kind of forced labour, specifically child labour as upheld in Article 24. The Child labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, and its subsequent amendments, further strengthen the legal framework for protecting children against exploitation.

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) is one of the triumvirates, who inaugurated a new section of writers of fiction along with Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. His famous works include *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, *The Morning Face*, *The lost child*. M.K. Nair compares Anand to 'august' and 'many-branched Banyan tree.' Santa Rama Rau has praised Anand's writing for its 'lyricism and compassion and its ability to capture the essence of Indian life.'

Anand awakens his social conscience through his novel *Coolie*. He exposes the harsh realities of the underprivileged society. The novel is set in 1930's -1940 when poverty, slavery and the inhuman exploitation of the masses were at its pinnacle. The filthy color of child labour and child exploitation was pertinent in our nation then and even now. George Orwell reviewed *Coolie* as 'a remarkable book' that 'gives a picture of Indian life which is both truthful and sympathetic.'

Munoo, a fourteen-year-old boy lives in Kangra. His father died due to exploitation under feudal system and mother died of poverty and hunger. Munoo's uncle and aunt consider him a burden and ill-treat him in various ways. "Where have you died? Where have you gone, you ominous orphan." (*Coolie*, 11) These lines illustrate the

cruelty Munoo suffers at the hands of his aunt. Later, Munoo is sent to Sham Nagar to earn his own and their living.

“Look! The world is darkening with shame! Bibiji cried to her husband.” “Look! Did you hear? He does not like the food he gets here! Heavens! And he wants to go away without scrubbing the utensils or washing up, to eat with his uncle! Now, I will have to slave all day! Gracious! What is the use of such a servant?” (Coolie,64) This monologue depicts Munoo's plight as he starts a ‘new life filled with plight’ in Sham Nagar. Bibi Uttam Kaur abuses Munoo in ways myriad. Anand in a very beautiful yet dense manner portrays the message of denial to right to life and unjust social system through the episode of Sham Nagar.

In Daulatpur, Prabh Dyal and his wife treats Munoo like their own child, alas! his plight continues. Ganpat, a cruel and insensitive factory official, exploits Munoo and other factory workers. “At first, he stabbed him with an angry glance. The second time he scowled at him. The third time he turned his face away. The fourth time he shouted at him: 'Get on with your work, you inquisitive bastard!’” (Coolie,122) Ganpat's behavior reflects the exploitation of factory workers in general and specifically child labour, in colonial India. All the workers were made to work in the factory for long hours, from dawn to dusk, so mechanically, that they never noticed the movements of their own or each other hands. Ganpat shows no concern for Munoo's suffering, he forces him to work under harsh conditions without caring for his exhaustion or injuries. Prabh Dyal is ruined by treachery, Munoo worked as a coolie on the railway station. Munoo is forced to carry heavy loads of passengers' luggage for long hours with barely any rest. He struggles to get enough to eat and is always hungry. As a newcomer and a child, Munoo is bullied by other coolies who see him as a competition. His basic needs are ignored, and the episode shows utmost levels of exploitation.

Munoo's stay in Bombay, is marked by extreme hardship, exploitation, and suffering. Munoo finds a counterpart named Hari in the brutal industrialized city to survive. “There were corpses and corpses all along the pavement. If the half dead are company, he was not alone” (Coolie,203) All the workers slept in the street pavement. Munoo initially finds it hard. He cried out in his soul “O, Sleep! Sleep!” (Coolie,204). This episode is crucial as it highlights the poverty, exploitation and dehumanization faced by Munoo, and the broader working class, serving as a stark visual representation of their precarious lives.

“The pale flame of a small tin lamp struggled against the gloom that descended through the solitary window on the North side of the room, from the dense, dark rain clouds that still masses the sky” (Coolie,239-240) This description emphasizes the inhumane living conditions of the poor working-class in Bombay, where Munoo struggles for survival in a cramped and unhygienic space.

Later Munoo moves to Shimla. Munoo worked as a servant and rickshaw -puller for Mrs. Manwaring here. Trapped in the vicious cycle of excessive physical exertion and ignorance to his body and soul, he starts to collapse. “And then the saliva in his throat choked him and he coughed a harsh, continuous cough which seemed to distress him, till he spat out mouthfuls of blood.” (Coolie,339) Mrs. Manwaring reprimands and harasses Munoo when he refuses to act as a Playboy for her.

“But in the early hours of one unreal white night he passed away --- the tide of his life having reached back to the deeps.” (Coolie,343) The tender bud dies before it bloomed in silence. Fighting all the adversities and sipping exploitation all his life, Munoo dies quietly and alone, it also highlights the loneliness and quiet tragedy of his death-unnoticed, unremarked by the world around him.

CONCLUSION

Anand, through his novel has given a faithful picture of the exploitation and abuse faced by children in colonial times. Though critics like R.K. Narayan have criticized *Coolie* for being too focused on social issues and not enough on individual human experience, saying that it is 'novel with a proper purpose' rather than 'novel with a story.' V.S. Naipaul criticized *Coolie* for being overly sentimental and lacking in intellectual rigour saying that it is "a sentimental and superficial book." On the other hand, Harish Raizada praised Anand's realism in *Coolie*, "not merely documentary but an impassioned pleas for social justice." Anand's *Coolie* has left a deep-down impact on reader's mind. As in the words of E.M. Foster words "Anand has done for the Indian underprivileged what Dickens did for the poor in England."

CITATIONS

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