

A STUDY OF DEPICTION OF CHILD LABOUR IN LITERATURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MULK RAJ ANAND'S COOLIE

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Abstract: The current paper deals with the literary representation of child labour in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Coolie*. Anand is one of the pioneer novelists of Indian literature. He is placed among the three founder fathers of Indian novel (the other two being Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan), in the works of whom colonialism, nationalism and modernity intersect on the broad canvas of society. Anand has depicted the way coolies in pre-partition times were treated, (or rather mistreated), overworked and underpaid. The novel is a vivid representation of the hard lives of the manual labour workers, and their families, who had no other option but to live in the dirty slum areas in conditions not fit to live in, and still were charged even for that. The novel seems to be a demonstration of the level of pain and humiliation a child can suffer before he finally gives away and dies. Indeed, Munoo, the orphan boy, displays the plight of poor children who are subjected to constant humiliation and subjugation by the so called "advanced" society, who, in actuality has nothing to offer to poor people but hostility. We also see how poor are exploited at every possible level of the society and either they have to succumb to the whims of the capitalists, or die the painful death of the underdog.

Keywords: Child Labour, Coolie, Literary Depiction, Mulk Raj Anand, Recent Legal Developments.

Introduction: Child labour is one of the rampant diseases that have affected the modern India, since her birth. Child labour, according to International Labour Organisation (ILO), refers to the work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that which is harmful to physical and mental development. It can also refer to any work that deprives them of regular schooling or requires them to combine school attendance with long or excessively exhausting work. In general terms, it is the employment of children below the age of fourteen in any kind of physical activity that may hinder the child's mental or physical growth. In developing countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, where poverty is a major issue for the economy, child labour is a malady that has raised its ugly head in every nook and corner. It is not that the developed economies like Britain and USA are (or were) completely free of this malady, but their recent laws have helped the state to control it in a significant manner.

We can include the depiction of the menace of child labour in the novel *Coolie* as one of the important aspects of the novel, among other issues, and Anand intermixes it with the issue of the exploitation of Indians by the forces of colonialism, racism, communalism, along with the disadvantages of capitalism and rising industrialism. One can also say that the current plight of Munoo and his kind is the direct consequence of the British rule, and the industrial revolution that they brought along with them. In actuality, industrial revolution in itself was not that disastrous- it was that they never paid any heed to the social reform along with it. The position of Munoo in society raises the question of freedom in a capitalistic world. In the words of Anand himself, freedom to Munoo and millions of people like him means nothing but being beaten from pillar to post. The novel serves not only as a case study of child labour in India, but also the violation of basic human rights of the poor.

Munoo's Subjugation: Anand's *Coolie* deals with a young boy Munoo, who is fourteen years of age at the start of the novel. He is an orphan child having no formal education at school. He is sold by his cruel relatives into bonded labour, and the novel traces his two year journey of life into deeper and deeper levels of subjugation and humiliation until he dies at the age of sixteen. It is important to note the date

of publication of the novel; originally published in 1936, some eleven years before independence, the novel shows how physical overwork and abuse affects the mind of a young child. At that time, there were no such laws as we have now on child labour, which makes it even more difficult to place the central character Munoo in the category of the victims of child labour. Our law today allows children more than fourteen years of age to work in certain conditions, but the age of Munoo puts up a question mark on this set age limit too, because as we progress into the novel, we realise that even a child of fourteen years is not that adequate to be able to work.

His ill treatment at the hands of his relatives is nothing in comparison to the suffering which awaited him at Sham Nagar, where he is taken as a boy servant by Nathoo Ram at a minimal wage. He wants to play with the children of his master; his attempts to amuse his master's daughter by prancing on all his fours is cast aside by the girl who says,

"You are a servant, you must not play with us". [Anand, 57]

His mistress is a quarrelsome lady who mistreats him, feeds him next to nothing and makes him work from day to night, in addition to the abuses and curses which she liberally showered on his head. When he playfully bites his mistress's daughter, she says, "What is your status that you should mix with the children of your superiors! ... Didn't I tell you that my children are not your class! They are the children of big babu! You, you were born I don't know on what rubbish heap!" [57]- [58]. On learning about the incidence the master of the house slapped him and "kicked him with the shiny black boots, the boots which have been dream of Munoo's life..." [58]. One day, not knowing where to relieve himself, he does so at the doorstep of the house, on which he is berated in the following manner;

"Vay, you eater of your masters! Vay, you shameless brute! You pig! You dog!Vay, you shameless, shameless, vulgar, stupid hill boy! May the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence! May you die! ...May you fade away! May you burn! We didn't know we were taking in an animal, an utter brute, a savage!" [57]

When he complains to his uncle, instead of any sympathy, he gets severely beaten; one can feel his agony from these words, "Oh, don't beat me, please don't beat me, uncle,...I only want food".[47] As a consequence of it, the starved boy quietly ran away one night and hides in a train, from where is taken to Daulatpur by Prabh Dayal. This phase of his life was comparatively pleasant, as he was treated well by the man and his wife, but as ill luck could have it, Prabh Dayal's partner Ganpat plays a villain, and the couple is forced to sell everything and leave the city. Munoo is left behind, to take the job of a coolie, i.e. a beast of burden, first in the grain market, and then in the vegetable market, at extremely low wages. Here is an instance which shows how the work was too much for him;

Munoo arose, his legs trembling, his whole frame stretched totally outwards to support the burden on his back. He took a step forward, two steps, three steps. Now he was under way, impelled by the mere weight of the sack to go forward in a sustained momentum. At a little ditch on the edge of courtyard, his legs crossed, but he found his balance by an effort of will. His bare, supple body was sweating with the heat of the violent exercise, he radiated a fire that glistened on his pale- brown flesh... he lifted his left foot and before deciding whether he should jump or take a long step, lifted his right foot. His feet hit each other, and he fell tottering onto the ground, completely clear of the sack of the grain, but on an uprise of hard earth which stunned his head. [123]

He tries to find customers at the railway station, but gets scared of a policeman, and then reaches Bombay through the help of an elephant-driver. Munoo is full of hopes that Bombay is a promising city, a city whose 'roads are paved with gold', but upon his arrival finds that the hunger, starvation and misery that existed in Bombay was many times more than what he had experienced before. He finds work at George White's Cotton Mills, where he notices the tyranny of his white master, the creditors, and the weather as well. He meets Hari, another peasant who had just arrived in Bombay along with his

family, and strains to find himself a place to sleep on the pavements. Anand describes the scene with horrifying images, he writes, “an emancipated man, the bones of whose skeleton were locked in a paralytic kind” [160], “the rotting flesh of a leper who was stretching his bandaged arm and legs as a warning to all passers-by” [163]. They finally reach a small spot, but encounter a half naked woman sobbing, who told them that her husband passed away at that spot last night. Hari is not at all concerned, and tells her that he had attained his escape and that they would rest at that place for the night. C.D. Narasimhaiah writes, “Death has ceased to frighten the poor, they are past all fright, it is the life that is the threat.”

Past the communal riots and the life of constant misery in Bombay, the last phase of Munoo's life takes him to Simla, where he is taken up as a domestic servant by Mrs. Mainwaring. He is made to work hard, he has to pull the rickshaw up and down the hill for long hours, until he is derived of all his energy and starts coughing blood, and thus finally, he dies. There are a few hints at his sexual exploitation too.

Anand's convictions for humanistic values and his compassion for humanity, particularly the unprivileged, downtrodden sections of the society have given us one of the most unforgettable scenes of the novel, when Munoo has the realisation that he is born to be exploited. This gives us an insight into the psychology of the poor. Munoo is one of those over burdened workers, who have absolutely no power to fight either social conventions or superstitions, and who are disappointed at every step in their lives, whenever they try to aspire for something better.

One sees the mature desires of the child Munoo, when he wanders in the rich circles of the society, just to get a bitter taste of reality. He notices the wide contrast between the rich and the starving- he sees how the luxurious sky-touching dwellings of the rich contrast with the miserable slums of the poor, how the gorgeous dresses of the rich are in contrast with the tattered rags of the poor, he notices how the well fed opulence of the affluent is in contrast with the hunger of the poor and the insignificant of the society.

Anand has written the novel in such a way that it is very hard to feel any empathy or sympathy to the required degree; at the most, the reader pities at the poor state of the child, who dies in the end. But, like the millions of poor who die every day without making any mark in their lives and society, Munoo also dies unnoticed, and un-mourned. The very fact that his death fails to move the reader suggests the society has no affection or concern for its poor.

Recent legal developments in India

There have been recent laws in India too, which have made child labour illegal, and a punishable offence, but still, I personally feel that they are not adequate enough when it comes to tackle a giant like child labour. Article 24 of the Indian constitution, ‘Prohibition Of Employment Of Children In Factories’, restricts the employment of children below 14 years in hazardous conditions, but this article does not completely abolishes child labour. Rather, it allows children to work in non hazardous working conditions. There was, of course, an ambiguity about the industries- which should be categorised as hazardous or non- hazardous. The major enactment in this regard by the Parliament was the ‘Child Labour Prohibition Act, 1986’, under which certain industries were shortlisted where children below 14 years cannot be employed, which includes deep sea diving, mining, fire-cracker industry, carpet industry, etc. Whereas, in non- hazardous industries, their employment is regulated by law, by fixing working hours, wages, and promotion of health and education of children.

In 2006, the employment of children in household industry and other places like hotels, dhabas have been prohibited. Again after a period of eight years, in 2015, three changes were proposed by an amendment in the Act-

1. Earlier, employment of children of 14 years of age was banned in hazardous industries; after the amendment, the age limit was extended to 18 years. But, it still allowed employment in non-hazardous industries.

2. There is a complete ban of employment of children below 14 years of age, in any kind of commercial enterprise, except family enterprises and farmlands; that is also allowed provided the said employment is done after the school hours.
3. Employment in Entertainment industries like advertisement, T.V., films, etc is allowed, provided it does not affect the school education of the child. Circus is an exception in this case.

These amendments were accepted in 2016, but they made the 'Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act' seem like a law that rather enables child labour. There are certain flaws left, for example, the number in the list of hazardous occupations has been slashed from eighty three, to include only mining, explosives, and the occupations which are included in the Factory Act. Working in cotton farms, chemical mixing industries, and brick kilns, among others has been allowed. It is a paradoxical situation that the government has put the poor parents into, when it says that employment is allowed as long as it does not interfere with the child's school hours. Also, it has become mandatory for the parents to send their children to school, as under Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or simply Right to Education Act (RTE), 2009. It is not hard to imagine the mental and physical burden on a child who goes to school in the morning, and then has to come back in the afternoon to financially help his/her parents. If the child is working till evening or night, when will he/she do the homework? It seems like a bogus or superficial move of the government, where its only aim is to ensure enrolment in schools. It is not at all concerned with whether the child is learning anything at all, it is just that a superficial record is to be produced, and according to it, the development of the nation is to be judged; i.e. the government is targeting at statistical growth, not inclusive growth.

Also, it seems strange that the government gained its consciousness regarding the rights of the children of India after some thirty-nine years of independence. Before 1986, there were no specific provisions made regarding the violation of rights of children. It seems that the nation too needed 'cheap labour' for its fast development, like Britishers needed 'cheap sahebs' to help them in running the administration.

Conclusion

This particular dialogue between the police inspector and Munoo shows that at pre-independence times, child rights were nowhere in any charter of the government; the policeman was vexed that Munoo had no license, not that he was too young to work yet- "Why, oh you illegally begotten! Where is your license?"... "Answer me, you swine, where is your license?" [136]

Child labour in any form and at any time should not be acceptable. Just because a certain child gets to attend school, does not mean that the obligation of the parents and the society towards him is fulfilled. The poem 'Cry of the Children' by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which was written by her after reading a report of the employment of children in factories and mines, can be quoted here, in which the mindset of the children induced into labour at a young age is aptly reflected;

"How long," they say, "how long, O cruel nation,
Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart, -
Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?
Our blood splashes upward, O our tyrants,
And your purple shews your path;
But the child's sob curseth deeper in the silence
Than the strong man in his wrath!"

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