

## FACT, FICTION AND REALITY OF CHILDREN'S PLIGHT: A STUDY OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S *COOLIE*

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Childhood is thought to be a time for fun and shaping one's character through education. Whereas many children grow with the tender and protective care of parents and teachers and have a pleasant childhood, a large number of children are deprived of all these nice things of life. All children do not have the good fortune of enjoying life and educating themselves. Instead, they undergo suffering, hardship, struggle and injustice. They are subject to child labour, poverty, abuse and exploitation. Writers are concerned about the plight of such children. So they have highlighted their problems in their writings. Mulk Raj Anand is such a writer who is sensitive to human problems and depicted them in his novels like *Coolie*, *The Big Heart* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*. The character- Munoo is such a case of deprived childhood. He is born to a poor parents, is subject to hardship and exploitation and meets an early end. Though this is a fictional character, it is not imaginary but it is based on Anand's childhood friend. As Saros Cowasjee points out: "He took for his central character, Munoo, one of the childhood playmates, who was consigned to labour in a pick-factory and who accepted his lot with a fatalism peculiar to the Indian peasantry"( 60). Anand himself also states: "All these heroes, as the other men and women who had emerged in my novels and short stories were dear to me, because they were reflections of the real people I had known during my childhood and youth... They were not mere phantoms... They were flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood..."( Anand ii-iii). This implies that problems such as child labour, child abuse, lack of education though observed in the 1930s by the novelist, they are part of our contemporary society too. We meet many Manoo like characters in our contemporary society.

This paper makes an attempt to study the plight of such children and relate it to the experience of Manoo's life to show how there is an intimate connection between reality and fiction. It also concludes that children are subject to such hardships even though we have plenty of laws to safeguard their childhood. To show such relations, the paper draws evidences from literature that are available on such issues. Journals like *World Bank Journals*, *Economics Journal*, *American Economic Reviews*, *Journal of International Economics*, *Economic and Political Weekly* are referred to go deeper into the issue. Such a study will help us to see to what extent we are affected by these challenges.

Before going into the topic, it is important to know the writer and his ideology because these have a major influence on the novel. Mulk Raj Anand was born at Peshawar in Punjab in 1905. His father was a traditional coppersmith who became a soldier later. Anand lived in Soldier colonies and came into contact with children and play mates from the lower strata of society. His novels reflect his sympathy for the underdogs. For instance,

Bakha, Lakha, Sohini, Gulabo, Ram Charan and Havildar Charan Singh in *Untouchable*; Tulsi, Prabha, Ganpat, Maharaja and Munoo in *Coolie*,

Ananta, Ralia Ram and Dina Temurlung in the *Big Heart*, Havildar Lachman Singh and Sepoy, Kirpal and Dhanoo in *Across the Black Waters* and Lala Singh, Nihal Singh, and Mahant Nandgir in *Lalu* trilogy are the real characters which Anand had seen as he admits in his autobiographical novels- *Morning Face* and *Confessions of a Lover* .( Sharma15)

Coming back to the novel, *Coolie* is a story of Munoo a young orphan boy who undergoes suffering and hardship at an early age. As the novel unfolds, we find him in his uncle's house in a small town near Kangra. His uncle works as an assistant in the Imperial Bank. Later his uncle takes him to the town and hands over him to his superior to work as a servant. There Munoo is insulted and illtreated by the mistress. He is rebuked and beaten up mercilessly. The master and mistress use the following words of abuse: "You lie, You cur! You are a rogue"(48). Very often he is called as swine, donkey labeling him as a lesser human. And these words of abuse are common to the poor boy. Humiliated and insulted he decides to leave the house and works in Sham Nagar in a pickle factory. There he lives in filth and unhygienic condition with a lot of smoke. As the novelist comments:

Munoo felt choked by the pungent smoke that had trailed out of the aperture into his nostrils. He felt the bitter taste of it in his mouth. Later he felt hit descend irritatingly down his throat. He coughed. He spat a mouthful of thick spittle. His eardrums seemed to have closed But out of the clouds of smoke there came shrill, hoarse shouts which reverberates dully on his ears. (79)

Dissatisfied by life there, he sits in a train with a circus party that goes to Bombay. There he lives with coolies, lepers, beggars on pavements, streets and huts. He visits brothels with his companion Ratan. The factory is shutdown. So he is picked up by Mrs Mainwearing from Shimla . He works for her a servant. He has to pull rickshaw on the mountainous roads of Shimla and affected by tuberculosis. Munoo meets his tragic end when he is still young.

Munoo is a fictional character carved by the novelist in the 1930s to highlight the problem of child labour and economic exploitation. The situation is no better even today. Even now children are put to work in hazardous condition. These some of the facts gathered from Social Sciences journals.

According to 2001 national census

- The total nos of child labour aged 5-14 to be at 12.6 million
- Out of 12.6 million about 120, 000 children work in hazardous job. Literature on child labour says that children are employed in many industries that make crackers, matches, etc., because they are suitable for such jobs with their little fingers. They are also paid less compared to adults. Needy parents are compelled to push their children to such hazardous jobs.
- Also known as Indian slavery, there has been attempts to curb this problem. Though Indian Constitution also forbids child labour, it is going on in different form. According to RTE children below the age of 14 should have the right to education, their place is as Santa Sinha says " schools" but it has remained just a law and yet to be translated into action.
- Children below the age of 18 years represent **between 40 to 50 percent** of all forced labor victims.

- The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that **more than two thirds** of all child labor is in the agricultural sector. Children in rural areas begin agricultural labor as young as 5-7 years old.
- **126 million** children work in hazardous conditions, often enduring beatings, humiliation and sexual violence by their employers.
- The highest numbers of child labourers are in the Asia/Pacific region, where there are **122 million** working children.
- The highest proportion of child labourers is in Sub Saharan Africa, where **26 percent of children** (49 million) are involved in work.

Though there are polices and provisions children are still exploited. It is time we woke up to the situation and work for the betterment of children, our future citizens. But it is not to say that the world is a mute spectator to the problem. Many individuals and organizations have been working for abolition of child labour and justice of the child. Bandhua Mazdur Morcha, Bachpan Bacho Andolan, MV Foundation run by Professor Santa Sinha and so on. It is worth quoting Kailash Satyarthi the leader of Bachpan Bachao Andolan and winner of Nobel Prize:

First everyone must acknowledge and feel that child slavery still exists in the world in its ugliest face and form. And this is an evil, a crime against humanity, which is intolerable, which is un acceptable and which must go. Second , there is a need for higher amount of political will, corporate engagement, and the engagement of the public. So, everybody has a responsibility to save and protect the children of this planet. (50)

Satyarthi adds, “India is the land of 100 problems but is the mother of one billion solutions”(50). Hence one hopes that a conscious group of people like our will find ways and means to tackle the problem. This international seminar is a step towards that direction.

Coming back to the novel again, this is not to say that Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie* is just a pack of facts but one would like to conclude that it has the merit of an artistic work of fiction with properly carved characters, plot and settings. They have been so beautifully weaved together that they appear to be real. They also bear the peculiarities of the locale. The appropriate use of diction also adds to the artistic representation of the novel. Considering all these elements one can conclude that the novel is an excellent blend of fact, fiction and reality.

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