

### **Coolie:**

*Coolie* (1936) shares with *Untouchable* not only Anand's social anger, but also its immense popularity (the two books have been translated into more than twenty world languages). But in *Coolie*, the unities of time, place and action, so central to *Untouchable*, are no longer employed; the exigencies

of the plot are swiftly dismissed, the canvas is much wider and the characters more varied. The novel 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 story-tellers, from Kipling to Major Yeats-Brown, have preferred to draw across the scene.'

Munoo, a hill-boy, leaves his idyllic surroundings in the Kangra valley so that he may work and see the world. Arriving at the house of a bank clerk, he falls foul of a shrewish and vindictive housewife, and before he flees from his employers' frenzied rage he has relieved himself at their doorstep and thereby lowered their social prestige. He next finds himself in a primitive pickle and jam factory in the feudal town of Daulatpur, where a quarrel over money between his employers uproots him and sends him to Bombay as a worker in a cotton mill. He sweats to earn his bread in appalling conditions when, eventually, he is knocked down by the car of an Anglo-Indian woman who takes him to Simla as her servant. Here he dies of tuberculosis (which is aggravated by his having to pull the rickshaw for his mistress), watching the peaceful hills and valleys he had deserted for the plains.

The novel relates a series of adventures in picaresque manner, only the hero is no rogue but himself the victim of the world's rogueries. Unlike Bakha in *Untouchable*, it is not his place in the old caste system that is questioned, because he belongs by birth to the second highest order. What is questioned is his place in the new caste system, on the basis of the cash nexus, that the *Kaliyug*, the Iron Age, has established. The magic of the book is in Munoo's innocence, in his naïve warm-heartedness, his love and comradeship, his irrepressible curiosity and his zest for life. He belongs with some of the more endearing juvenile characters in modern literature: with Victor Hugo's Gavroche and Dickens' David Copperfield. But he is no tragic hero. When he dies, nothing of any real consequence seems lost—nothing but his own lust for life. Yet such is the force of the author's pity that it seems much good has gone to waste.

*Coolie* marks a big departure from *Untouchable* in many ways, but most noticeably in technique. *Untouchable* is confined to a single day in the life of a sweeper-boy in a cantonment city, with the episodes carefully selected and organized with a view to exploring the mind of the hero; and the



prose chiselled and maintaining an even pace throughout. *Coolie*, on the other hand, covers vast spaces, contrasts rural with urban life, and the action is spread over several months. We traverse with Munoo half the subcontinent: from his village in the extreme north to Bombay—India's commercial capital in the south-west. We meet a vast number of characters, and see an immensely varied life. The change in the tempo of the prose is modulated to suit the changing scenes, as in the transition from the pastoral first chapter to the urban second chapter. Munoo's journey from Daulatpur to Bombay is another instance where the narration is attuned to the varying speed of the train, vividly bringing to life the cities and the types of vegetation he rushes past.

The novel is divided into five chapters. The first is purely introductory, giving us a glimpse of Munoo's life in his village—the memory of which haunts him till his early death. The second chapter brings Munoo to Sham Nagar as a servant in the household of Babu Nathoo Ram, a minor bank clerk angling for promotion. Constantly abused and ill-treated, Munoo's inquisitiveness and zest for life partly compensate for his misery. But the most unforgettable episode in this chapter is the tea party arranged by Nathoo Ram for the English chief cashier, Mr W.P. England, to get from him a letter of recommendation. The fiasco with which this encounter between east and west ends has never been bettered in Indian fiction, and is equalled only by the fiasco of the tiger hunt in *Private Life of an Indian Prince*.

Apart from its undoubted literary qualities, the episode is significant for two other reasons. First, it is perhaps the best refutation of a criticism levelled against the author that he does not fully understand his English characters and is thus unable to portray them faithfully. But where in Indian fiction is there a more authentic portrait of a colonial Englishman than that which we have in Mr W.P. England? It is true that some of Anand's English characters suffer in comparison to his Indians, such as those who appear in the Bombay chapter, but the reason is not that the author does not understand them, but rather that the spleen of the man gets the better of the artist. Second, the episode illustrates Anand's belief (one he shared with George Orwell) that the British rule not only exploited the country's natural resources, but debased the character of those Indians who were in its service. It created a body of sycophants, looking up to the English,



fawning, cringing, becoming a ready tool of exploitation in the hands of the masters. And they lost their sense of humanity and human decency. Nathoo Ram in this chapter and the Todar Mals in the next chapter have been dehumanized in the service of the Raj and have lost all fellow-feeling.

Chapters 3 and 4, depicting Munoo's experiences in Daulatpur and Bombay respectively, constitute the bulk of the novel and show Anand at his angriest. Laughter is kept to the minimum, and the comic irony of the previous chapter gives way to caustic irony. Having fled from his mistress's wrath, Munoo has found a home with Prabha Dyal who, along with Ganpat, has come to own a pickle factory in Daulatpur. At the start, things seem to go well for Munoo, despite the long hours and gruelling conditions of work. Prabha, himself once a coolie, understands the boy's plight, and he and his wife consider adopting him as their son.

In the preceding chapter, the relationship of master and servant was explored. Anand censures all such relationships, for they are unhealthy and meanly submissive. He now goes on to show the relationship between equals, and there are none more equal than the poor. The relationship between Prabha (at heart a coolie), Munoo and the other factory employees (all hillmen) is one of comradeship: their common humanity is all they possess. At the other end of the scale we have Ganpat (the frustrated son of a well-to-do broker), the Todar Mals (essentially Nathoo Rams become successful), and the police—more a symbol of British oppression than British justice. Their world is a world of hysteria, one devoid of restraint and self-respect. When Prabha goes bankrupt on being cheated by his partner, his creditors beleaguer him. They yell, shout abuse and fight among themselves for what little might still be had from auctioning the property, and then come together and fall mercilessly upon their victim. The scene is almost unbearable in its violence.

Though Anand's sympathies lie with the poor, it would be an oversimplification to presume that all virtue is embodied in them and that the rich are irredeemably bad. The competition that Munoo faces at the Grain Market after Prabha's insolvency is a case in point. In the night the coolies fight among themselves for a spot of ground to lay their naked bodies to rest; in the morning they shove and push each other in a mad rush to carry heavy burdens on their backs. But Anand makes it known that the evils one sees in the poor are the direct result of capitalistic exploitation and of the



indifference of the British towards millions of their subjects. The same cannot be said of the rich—their greed is needless. There is a lot of difference between Prabha's creditors fighting among themselves to recover whatever they can and the starving coolies vying with each other to earn a few annas to keep body and soul together.

The Bombay chapter offers some unforgettable scenes such as the Hindu-Muslim riots; it also reinforces what we have witnessed earlier. The life and hardship of the poor remain the same; the change is one of scale mostly: the larger the city, the more ruthless the exploitation and the greater the human misery. The indigenous pickle factory has now its counterpart in the Sir George White Cotton Mills, where the working conditions are even more gruelling; the world of the poor remains basically one of comradeship, whilst that of the rich is still one of greed and hysteria. The occasional destitutes to be seen on the streets of Daulatpur have now been replaced by a vast concourse of pavement dwellers, and Anand's description of them makes some of the most poignant reading in the book. Note how deftly and laconically they are etched: '... in a corner a coolie lay huddled, pillowing his head on his arm, shrinking into himself as if he were afraid to occupy too much space', 'an emaciated man, the bones of whose skeleton were locked in a paralytic knot', and 'a bare body rolling in anguish and slapping itself on the knees to the accompaniment of foul curses'. But perhaps the most agonizing picture of all is offered when the farmhand Hari, along with his family and Munoo, reach a clearing which surprisingly has not been occupied. As they stand wondering, a half-naked woman speaks to them between sobs:

'My husband died there last night!'

'He has attained the release,' said Hari. 'We will rest in his place.'

Death has ceased to frighten the poor, it is life that is a threat. Anand's rustics, like those of Wordsworth and Hardy, reveal a solemn dignity born out of long suffering. Their stoical acceptance of fate is not mere fatalism, but wisdom acquired through long experience.

Two of Anand's most sympathetic critics—Jack Lindsay and C.D. Narasimhaiah—feel that the Simla chapter is not an organic part of the total pattern and could be dispensed with. I do not agree with this view. It



was right of Anand to retrieve his hero from the horrors of Bombay to help him regain his identity before he coughs his lungs out pulling his mistress's rickshaw. It is the correct finale to the concerto—the boy who had come from the hills to work and see the world goes back to the hills to die. What is wrong, if anything, is that Anand gets so involved in pillorying the Anglo-Indian woman that he occasionally loses sight of his hero.

The mountains and the valleys revive in Munoo the memories of his village, and this section contains some of Anand's best descriptions of nature. Like the Anglo-Indian writer Philip Mason, Anand is a painter of nature in all its moods and has a remarkable flair for evoking the smells and colours of India. The steep hills overgrown with rich green foliage, the streams and the waterfalls, the clouds rolling swiftly across the sky, the crisp cool air, all stand in sharp contrast to the heat and humidity of Bombay. Munoo responds to the beauty around him as he pulls his mistress's rickshaw along the Mall and sees the world of the upper echelons of society. He wishes he could belong to that class. His mistress is kind to him, and her coquetry fires his adolescent passions till he crumples at her feet in an orgy of tears and kisses. Sexual urges—half-expressed, half-understood—had tormented him from the very beginning, and like much else in his life they never saw fulfilment. The body of Nathoo Ram's daughter, Sheila, outlined in her wet garments, had stirred his first inklings of sensuality; later the warmth of Parbati's body, as he nestled against her, aroused a confusion of the feelings of both a son and a lover. Much the same feelings prevailed when he returned from a prostitute's salon in Bombay to writhe in pent-up passions in the arms of Hari's wife, who understood the boy's torments and lulled him to sleep with the incantation, 'We belong to suffering! We belong to suffering! My love!' These lines could have been a fitting conclusion to the novel, though the lines Anand has chosen are no less beautiful: 'But in the early hours of one unreal white night he passed away—the tide of his life having reached back to the deeps.'