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Growing up in Colonial India: Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*

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Abstract

The *Bildungsroman* has been a symbolic mode through which the conflict between the self and society existing in the real world are resolved. The *Bildungsroman* grooms the reader through a growing up narrative to balance individual fulfillment and social roles. In the colonial society, the magnitude of gap between the self and society is too wide to be bridged, and their nature too disparate for a resolution. The rigid and oppressive colonial apparatus is too rigid to compromise with individual aspirations and deviations, which results in the rupture the *Bildungsroman* narrative which ends with the protagonist where he was in the beginning of his journey or degradation of the protagonist, deprived of any tangible growth, development or maturity. In Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*, the central character Munoo undergoes suffering due to his family and the harsh informal labour market, and at the end dies of tuberculosis before he can reach the stage of adolescence or maturity. Munoo's trajectory of *Bildung* is far different from the self-development of the heroes in German and British *Bildungsroman*. If Wilhelm Meister quenched his thirst with wine and David

Copperfield with milk, Munoo had to struggle against a exploitative colonial socio-political structure to survive. Like most *Bildungsromane* the novel is not titled after the name of its protagonist. The title of the novel is not named Munoo, but "Coolie" which is a generic name for an labourer whose job is to carry luggage of travellers at railway stations, which is symbolic of the loss of identity on the part of the novel's protagonist undergoes at the end of the novel.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, colonial oppression, economic exploitation, selfhood

Mulk Raj Anand, dubbed the "Dickens of India, was born as a son to a coppersmith in 1905 in Peshawar, India which is now in Pakistan. He graduated from Punjab University and pursued higher studies in University of Cambridge and University College in London. He became deeply involved with the Indian independence movement and socialism. Anand was a versatile genius who took interest in varied fields like socialism, erotica and paintings. Apart from his

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fictional output, Anand wrote books on diverse matters like, *Persian Painting* (1930), *Curries and Other Indian Dishes* (1932), *The Hindu View of Art* (1933), *The Indian Theatre* (1950), *Seven Little-Known Birds of the Inner Eye* (1978), *Book of Indian Beauty* (1981) and *Kama Sutra* (1991).

Anand's fictions can be divided into two phases. His first phase includes novels like *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves in a Bud* (1937) and the trilogy: *The Village* (1939), *Across Black Waters* (1940), and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942). Social and political analysis of poverty and oppression of the downtrodden forms the staple of these novels. A novel of his second phase is more autobiographical and presents the mysteries of the human psyche and personal conflicts. The novels of the second phase include *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953), *Seven Summers* (1951), *Morning Face* (1968) and *Confessions of a Lover* (1976).

Mulk Raj Anand was also one of the founding members of the All India Progressive Writer's Association (AIPWA) which was formed in 1935 in London. It was an anti-imperialistic and left-oriented literary movement which aimed to bring equality and attack social injustice. It held that Indian writers and literature had developed the tendency to escape from the realities of life and had taken refuge in irrelevant spiritualism and idealism. It

considered the duty of Indian writers to deal with basic problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection. The AIPWA's manifesto defines "progressivism" as follows:

We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence to-day – the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness, and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and un-reason we reject as reactionary. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive. (qtd in Gopal, 13-14).

Anand published *Coolie* in 1936 after his first novel *Untouchable* which was published in 1935. Both the novels, along with his third novel *Two Leaves in a Bud*, are perfect specimens of AIPWA's manifesto which foregrounds inequality, poverty, casteism, and social justice in order to arouse the political consciousness of the masses. *Coolie* explores the effects of the British rule in India and casteism in

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Indian society on the development and growth of its protagonist Munoo. "*Coolie*" is a term for a labourer whose job is to carry luggage of travellers at railway stations.

Critics like Marlene Fisher have acknowledged Anand's appropriation of the *Bildungsroman* and placed him "in the front ranks with writer's like Joyce and D. H. Lawrence and Thomas Wolfe" (151). The novel is a tragic anti-*Bildungsroman* where the orphan Munoo makes the proverbial trek from a village to Bombay in search of prosperity, but on account of his poverty and helplessness, suffers mistreatment and misfortunes and dies as a teenager. The anti-*Bildungsroman* is a critique of the rigid caste structures that plagued Indian society as well as the rigid political structure which stifled any upward mobility on the part of the downtrodden. The promise of personal development offered by the traditional *Bildungsroman* is indeed hard to come by in a poor, colonial country.

The orphan protagonist of the novel moves from village to city, and from place to place in search of livelihood. He is oppressed, exploited, ill-treated, and dies at the age of 15 without making his way into maturity. The promise of self-development and social acceptance offered by the classical *Bildungsroman* is denied by the colonial society to Munoo.

The plot of *Coolie* is episodic in nature which relates the tragic experiences of Munoo in Sham Nagar, in Daulatpur, in Bombay, and finally in Shimla where he dies. The traditional *Bildungsroman's* plot is usually loose and episodic in structure which forms a pattern at the end. The unifying link among the episodes is Munoo's pursuit of his goal, which is to earn his livelihood and struggle for his existence. *Coolie* is a series of chronological, loosely-linked episodes, which in the case of Munoo, instead of contributing to his development leads to his demise.

The novel begins in the childhood of Munoo, a young orphan boy in the Kangra Hill in Bilaspur who lives with his aunt and uncle. Unable to support Munoo, his uncle and aunt send him to Bombay to earn his livelihood. The orphan protagonist is one of the generic features of the English tradition of the *Bildungsroman* and *Coolie*. Similar to most of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* novels, *Coolie* follows the English models rather than the German tradition; the protagonist of *Coolie* is an orphan like David Copperfield, Pip and Jane Eyre. In the English *Bildungsroman*, orphan hood provides freedom of choice and action for the protagonist. In the German tradition, the protagonists are born into middle class families and stable background like Wilhelm Meister who leaves his family to form his own identity

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out of his own volition in order to escape the influence and control of his family. This choice is not available to the protagonists of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. Munoo who has lost his parents before the beginning of the novel is left with no choice. Munoo like David Copperfield, Pip and Jane Eyre does not have to take the decision to leave his family. Munoo is compelled by the circumstances of his life to leave the safety of home and dive into the world to make his future and identity from scratch.

With his Uncle, Munoo travels to a nearby town where he finds a job as a servant to a bank clerk, Babu Nathoo Ram. Munoo is mistreated by his master's wife but he admires his master's younger brother, Prem Chand, who is a doctor. Babu Nathoo Ram himself is something of a caricature; a typical example of a Middle Class Anglophile who has internalized the values of the colonizer and firmly believes in the supremacy of white people. A great fuss is made when the aptly named Mr. English visits the bank where Babu Nathoo Ram works, but Anand uses this episode to undercut the apparent superiority of the English. When Prem Chand enquires about the best place in Britain to further his medical training, it is revealed that Mr. English is uneducated and does not know.

Munoo flees his master's home when he is beaten mercilessly for accidentally injuring Babu Nathoo Ram's

daughter Sheila. Munoo moves to Daulatpur and finds work in a pickle factory. The factory's owner Prabha Dayal and his wife treat him kindly but Munoo finds the work backbreaking. Munoo exemplifies the exploitation that the lower classes suffer by those above them.

Munoo is rendered unemployed again when Prabha Dayal loses ownership of the factory. Coolie moves to Bombay and is employed at Sir George White's cotton mill. In Bombay, Munoo finds that coolies sleep on the streets as elsewhere. At the cotton mill, Munoo befriends a member of the worker's union Ratan, who is also a wrestler.

Amidst the tiresome and tedious life of the mill, Ratan is a much needed source of solace for Munoo. He admires Ratan for helping in the time of his need and for sharing his joy with him. Munoo visits the town and the toddy shops after working hours of the mill with Ratan who also introduces Munoo to the local red-light area. Munoo's friendship with Ratan is short-lived as Ratan is dismissed from the mill. There is a union strike against the management but it is converted into a communal riot between Hindus and Muslims.

Munoo escapes from the riot and moves towards the Malabar Hills where he is run over by Mrs. Mainwaring's car on the road. Mrs. Mainwaring takes the injured

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Munoo to Shimla in his car and hires Munoo as a servant and as compensation. Mrs. Mainwaring is another recurring character in the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* that of the hybrid colonial subject. Mrs. Mainwaring is an Anglo-Indian and she offers insight into another dimension of Indian society. She has English, as well as Indian, ancestry, and yearns to be accepted by English society. In her desire to be accepted as English, she had travelled to England and married a young English soldier. She had also married, divorced and remarried several times. The novel hints that Munoo is also sexually exploited by Mrs. Mainwaring. His task was to pull the rickshaw whenever Mrs. Mainwaring went out. Rickshaw pulling takes a heavy toll on his body and damages his lungs. Due to overexertion he coughed frequently and blood came out in his spit. Mrs. Mainwaring was kind to him when she realized that she had overworked him. At the end of the novel, Munoo dies due to tuberculosis at the premature age of fifteen.

Coolie is a classic example of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. The novel begins with the 14 year old Munoo who begin his journey towards maturity and social acceptance. The combined impact of racial, caste and class hierarchies make life impossible for Munoo. As Munoo moves from one place to another in search for livelihood, he experiences one tragedy after

another. The traditional *Bildungsroman* ends on a positive note with the protagonist finding a sense of belongingness, a vocation, or a community. *Coolie* ends with Munoo failing devastatingly to secure for himself despite all his sincere efforts a stable vocation, a sense of belonging or identity which justifies the categorisation of *Coolie* as an anti-*Bildungsroman*.

The anti-*Bildungsroman* novel appropriates the elements of the traditional *Bildungsroman* without participating in the ideology associated with the traditional *Bildungsroman*. The traditional *Bildungsroman* hinges on the balance between the public and the private and the compromise between the individual and the society. In the anti-*Bildungsroman*, the balance is tilted against the individual who suffers suppression, failure and frustration at the hands of a hostile and unaccommodating society.

If the *Bildungsroman* can be described as novel of formation, the anti-*Bildungsroman* is a novel of de-formation. Many of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* novels can be classified under this rubric. The "anti-*Bildungsroman*" is a novel which is similar to the *Bildungsroman* in term of its plot's focus on the central character's journey of inner development, socialization and self-realization, but ends in the central character's failure to attain any growth, accommodation with society, or selfhood. The anti-*Bildungsroman* in postcolonial

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literature can be distinguished into three types. In the first type, the reason for the failure of the central character's development is usually an inherent flaw in the protagonist's character which render him or her undeserving of any growth, accommodation with society, which is the hallmark of a traditional *Bildungsroman*. In the second type, the protagonist's *Bildung* is thwarted by the unrealistic and impossible expectations of the society from the individual. The third type, is a combination of both, the individual fails to attain growth and maturity either due to society's hostility and rejection of the individual or because the kind of development aimed by the protagonist disrupts the pillars of the society whose affiliation he or she is seeking.

The impact of the oppression of colonial structures on the development of self is so strong that the marginalisation of the protagonist ruptures its very form of representation. The unending and unassimilable alienation of the colonial subject in a milieu of social and political servitude results in a directionless and incomplete *Bildung* for the central character.

In *Coolie*, the central character Munoo undergoes suffering at the hands of his employers, the colonial society and the harsh informal labour market, and at the end dies of tuberculosis before he can reach the stage of adolescence or maturity.

Munoo's trajectory of *Bildung* is far different from the self-development of the protagonists of German and British *Bildungsroman*. If Wilhelm Meister quenched his thirst with wine and David Copperfield with milk, Munoo was denied quenching his thirst even with clean water by the exploitative colonial socio-political structures.

The prospects of personal development are next to non-existent in a colonial country stricken by poverty and social disabilities. Mulk Raj Anand's novels portray the non-existence of any scope of personal growth and realization of self in his novels like *Untouchable* (1935), *The Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves* and *A Bud* (1937).

In Anand's novels, the poor and the unprivileged crusade unsuccessfully against social-political exploitation. Anand's main characters invariably suffer alienation due to social-political ostracism. The conflict between individual and society lead to self-exile of protagonists. In Anand's novel, poverty and socio-political oppression cuts-short the journey of growth of the protagonists, crush their individuality and reduce them to non-entity.

Munoo does not have a clue about himself or his future and is far from the ideal hero of the traditional *Bildungsroman* who obtains a fully developed personality through self-knowledge leading to self-

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realization. Munoo does not know who he is, or what his place is in India's colonial society.

The novel is not titled after its protagonist like the traditional *Bildungsroman* novels like *Wilhelm Meister*, *David Copperfield* or *Jane Eyre*. The title of the novel is not named Munoo, but "Coolie" which is a generic name for a labourer whose job is to carry luggage of travellers at railway stations. Munoo is boy from the hills who came to the cities of the plains for livelihood and loses his identity in the sea of the unskilled labour market. The selfhood of the protagonist in the novel moves from particular to general, which is an inversion of the trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* in which, the identity is gradually formed. In Anand's novel, the

protagonist's identity is gradually eroded and at the end the protagonist who was called Munoo in the beginning of the novel, is referred to by the anonymous name "Coolie."

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