

Coolie (1936)

Story *Coolie* [English form of *kuli*, unskilled labourer; servant] is the second of Mulk Raj Anand's novels and possibly his best. It tells the story of Munoo, an orphan from a middle-rank caste who lives with his aunt and uncle in the Kangra Hills, in the foothills of the Himalayas. One day, they tell him that they can no longer support him and that he must leave. With his uncle's help, Munoo finds a job in a nearby town as a servant to a bank clerk, Babu Nathoo Ram. Ram's wife mistreats Munoo, but Ram's brother, a doctor named Premchand, acts as a role model to the lowly Munoo. Through various incidents in Ram's house and in the bank, the author reveals the injustice and absurdity of both colonial rule and the caste system. After receiving a beating for accidentally injuring Ram's daughter, Munoo runs away and begins to work in a pickle factory in another town. Here the author focuses on corruption and worker exploitation, which result in the closure of the factory. On the road once again, Munoo joins a travelling circus on its way to Bombay. In the big city, nothing changes for a coolie, but Munoo meets a wrestler named Ratan, who is a member of a workers' union. Munoo takes inspiration from Ratan, but following a chaotic strike and riot, he loses contact with him. Destitute in Bombay, he is run over by a car, but the driver, an English woman named Mrs Mainwaring hires him as a servant and takes him to Simla. She flirts with him, but he is exhausted from pulling her in a rickshaw up the steep hills of Simla. There in the hill station where the British gather during the hot season and where all the privileges of the white colonial class are evident, Munoo contracts tuberculosis and dies. He was 15 years old.

Characters

Munoo Munoo, the protagonist, is a poor but proud young man who suffers exploitation from the various men and women who employ him. A naïve boy from the 'hills' who enters the cut-throat world of a big city, he slowly gains insight into his condition but not the means with which to change it.

Babu Nathoo Ram Babu Nathoo Ram is something of a buffoon, a 'babu' in fact. 'Babu' was a derogatory term for an Indian civil servant in British India, who was seen as little more than hired help. Anand's Babu Nathoo Ram is an anglophile, who has internalised the values and attitudes of the coloniser and lost all self-respect.

Ratan Ratan is perhaps the only hero in the novel. A wrestler and a union member, he represents strength and solidarity, among a cast of characters who are corrupt, weak or cruel.

Prabha Dayal Prabha Dayal is one of the few characters who shows any compassion to Munoo. Seeing a miserable waif in a train station, he takes Munoo under his wing, gives him a job and a place to live. In a somewhat clumsy parallel with Munoo, Prabha is said also to have been an orphan and a coolie.

Jimmie Thomas Jimmie Thomas is a cruel contractor in Bombay, who exploits the likes of Munoo and other naïve migrants who come to the city desperate for work. He overcharges them for rent and clothing and takes a substantial amount of their wages for his 'commission.'

Mrs Mainwaring Mrs Mainwaring is well-intentioned but ultimately corrupted by the colonial system in which she lives. As a British woman, she unquestioningly assumes her superiority over the natives, even those whom she cares about, such as Munoo.

Themes

Exploitation *Coolie* is a devastating critique of the exploitation of workers in India. Munoo, although born in a middle-rank caste (*ksatriya*) and although brought up with love, has no control over his destiny. His life is an unpredictable series of unconnected events, whose causes are hidden from Munoo and the other labourers he meets. The exploitation Munoo faces is particularly powerful since the economic divisions are underpinned by the racial divisions of colonialism and caste.

Servility Although the novel attacks the inequities of these systems, with unflattering portraits of rich Indians, British officials and high caste men, he also shows how Indians of all classes have

internalised the mentality of the servant. Munoo considers himself inferior, by virtue of his unfortunate circumstances. 'It did not occur to him to ask himself what he was apart from being a servant, and why he was a servant and Babu Rathoo Ram his master.' However, Babu Nathoo Ram accepted his inferiority in order to keep his position as a middle-class bank clerk.

Comedy Anand also uses comedy to reveal the absurdities of class and colonialism. A good example is the fiasco of a tea party at Babu Nathoo Ram's house for Mr England. Ram has invited Mr England because he wants to coax him to write him a letter recommending that he get a promotion at the bank. Newly-arrived Mr England is too naïve to know that accepting such an invitation will lower his status. Ram has been advised about how to talk with a sahib (Britisher) and makes some early progress by commenting, again and again, on the weather. Mr England, seated opposite a statue of Ganesh ('a heathen idol'), swelters in the heat and is nearly sick from the smell of the sugary sweets he is served. The conversation bogs down when a doctor asks him where in England he should go for training, and Mr England attempts valiantly to hide the fact that he has only studied typewriting. The comedy reaches a climax when Munoo, carrying the tea tray, trips and the expensive china smashes on the floor, and with it any hope that Babu Nathoo Ram will get his precious letter of recommendation.