

# COOLIE

Mulk Raj Anand

(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.

## 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.

## 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.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

MUNOO (Proud)

**Character** Munoo begins the story as a high-spirited young boy, full of energy and playfulness. He loves the beauty of the hills around his native village and swings from trees with careless energy. But he is an orphan, who is forced to leave his beloved hills and seek employment from a series of exploitative masters and a mistress. He is deferential throughout, never openly opposing the system that oppresses him, but he does gradually gain an understanding of how it works. He is a proud and sensitive person, born in a middle-rank caste and given love by his relatives. For this reason, while he doesn't rebel, he does criticise anyone who mistreats him in a personal way. And when he is beaten or scolded, he feels it deeply. Still, he retains his self-respect no matter how cruel the treatment. He is also a loyal and sincere person, who will help anyone in need, even those who might have shown him disrespect. He has few personal needs, and even his introduction to sex is initiated by a woman who feels sorry for him. In the end, though, and as he himself is forced to admit, he is a coolie, a worker, who must earn his living.

**Activities** In his childhood, Munoo climbs trees and wanders about the countryside, enjoying the beauty and freedom of the hills. When he is forced to leave his relatives and seek employment, he works as a domestic servant, a porter and a factory worker. In between these jobs, he wanders, on trains, down streets and in rural landscapes.

## Illustrative moments

Acquiescent Munoo is not a rebel. Instead, and understandably, he has accepted the system he lives within. This self-identification as a coolie is dramatically shown in an early scene when Munoo is sent on an errand to a bank. He is stopped at the entrance and asked his business. Smiling, Munoo draws himself up to his full (but not very tall) height and declares proudly, 'I am Munoo, Babu Nathoo Ram's servant.'

**Proud** Although servile, Munoo is proud and will not accept personal insults. Once, while eating in a roadside snack bar in Bombay, he was mocked by a waiter. Reflecting on this insult, he tells himself, 'I would have fought hard if he had dared to turn me out or abused me. I am not an untouchable. I am a Hindu Kshatriya, a Rajput, a warrior' and I will not 'take an insult lying down.'

**Caring** His fundamentally caring nature is displayed several times in the novel, when he helps others in distress. A good example occurs when his master, Prabha, is badly treated by the police, and Prabha's wife (who often scolds Munoo) huddles inside the house in shame. When he sees her doubled over with shame and hurt, Munoo instinctively goes and comforts her.

**Modest** Munoo has modest goals in life. The only time he expresses any ambition comes when he meets Ratan, the wrestler and labour union member. After a few days with him, Munoo says, 'I want to work, to work like this machine. I shall grow up to be a man, a strong man like the wrestler.' The misery of Munoo's life is compounded when he loses contact with this man, his hero.

**PRABHA DYAL** (Generous)

**Character** Prabha Dyal, a kind and generous factory-owner, is the exception that proves the rule in this novel revealing the depth of exploitation in India. He sees the miserable Munoo on a train, gives him a job in his factory and offers him a room in his house. He also treats his pickle factory workers with respect and decent wages. He is something of a doppelganger figure for Munoo because (like Munoo, the coolie of the title), Prabha comes from the hills, was an orphan and worked as a labourer. His essential humanity is emphasised when he himself is exploited by his business partner and mistreated by the police. As a good-natured, generous person, he is ultimately defeated by the cruel system that grinds him and others down. Even though he rose from the ranks of a coolie to own a factory, he reverts to that lowly status by the end. His is a story of rags to riches to rags.

### Activities

Prabha Dayal is busy supervising his pickle-factory, inspecting jars, checking on machines and training his workers in new methods of production. He also spends time reviewing the accounts, although his lack of financial acumen results in his being cheated and losing the factory. His domestic relations with his wife and daughter are amiable and calm.

### Illustrative moments

**Generous** Even when Prabha is cheated by his business partner and is bankrupt, he promises to pay his creditors and his employees' wages. In a dramatic scene, when everyone demands their due, the police come and drag the factory owner away to prison. As he is led from the factory, the police Inspector suspects he is hiding his money away somewhere and demands that he reveal the hiding place. Prabha, handcuffed and humiliated, says, 'Sir, I have no hidden money. But I have stock. I will sell it all and pay everyone.'

**Kind** Prabha's instinctive kindness is evident in many scenes. Perhaps the most moving is the scene in which he first meets Munoo, who has boarded a train without any destination in mind. Prabha sees him slumped in the corner of a compartment and puts a hand on his shoulder. 'Are you all right?' he asked. When the slumped body barely moved, he asked again and then raised him upright. 'C'mon. That's a good lad. Be brave. I will help you.'

**Defeated** Although Prabha runs a successful factory, he is ultimately ruined by his business partner's fraud which leaves him without a cent. When Prabha realises what has happened, he reverts to 'coolie-like' deference and begs for mercy. He places one of his partner's shoes on his head (an iconic gesture of deference in India) and says, 'Beat me on my head till I go bald, but don't leave me. We have been together two years and built up this business. It will be terrible for me to have to bear weight on my back as a coolie in my old age.' Once a coolie, always a coolie.

**Mrs MAINWARING** (Possessive)

**Character** Mrs Mainwaring is a minor but interesting character, who appears in the final chapter and whose characterisation and role in the novel has been found wanting by several literary critics. When Mrs Mainwaring's car accidentally hits Munoo (the protagonist and 'coolie'), she literally comes out of nowhere. Compassionate, as well as lonely, she takes the injured Munoo back to her home in Simla, in the mountains. This is significant in itself because this is where Munoo began his journey, in a

mountainous village. But Mrs Mainwaring represents the British Raj. Or does she? She is, in fact, an Anglo-Indian, the daughter of an Indian servant and English officer. She has a dusky complexion, but Munoo is spellbound by what he thinks is her 'white skin.' The complexity of her character grows when we learn of her past: desperate to pass as a member of the ruling class, she married a German (not English, but second-best) and had a daughter. Then she attracted the attentions of a Muslim army officer who got her to divorce the German (who later dies) and marry him. They have a daughter, but the Muslim husband tires of her and throws her out. Now, she finally achieves her goal and marries a young English soldier. In other words, she has been a victim of skin-colour and ethnic prejudice, just as Munoo has. The very large difference is that she is accepted, if not by British society, then at least by Anglo-Indian society, which is second-tier but still far superior to Indian society, let alone a 'coolie'. Once in Simla, she introduces Munoo to 'respectable' men of the Anglo-Indian world of Simla, a popular hill station. She takes lovers freely and even flirts openly with the fifteen-year-old Munoo, who has become her servant. Critics say her character is thrown in at the last moment of the novel, that she is not fully developed and that she unbalances the novel as a whole. The counter argument is that her predicament serves to underscore Munoo's. She is 'half-caste', a person belonging to neither the British nor the Indian society. She throws herself at men in order to find someone to whom she can belong.

**Activities** The past history of Mrs Mainwaring is narrated by the author in a page or two, with little detail of activities. Once in Simla, however, we follow her, pulled in a rickshaw by poor Munoo, to shops where she buys clothes, food and the occasional nick-knack. Purchases in hand, she then goes to a tea-room or restaurant, where she meets with her, mainly female, friends and gossips. Her only failure is that he is rejected when she applies to become a member of an exclusive British club. Whenever she has the opportunity to meet an English man in private, however, she struts and prances in order to attract his attention. Some of them are then invited to dinner, and some of them spend the night in her bed.

### **Illustrative moments**

Possessive One prominent aspect of Mrs Mainwaring's kaleidoscopic personality is her need to possess things and people. This trait is displayed when we first meet her. Having accidentally run over Munoo on the street, her first reaction is to say, 'Oh, what a terrible thing to happen to us. Right on the day of my arrival from home, too [she has just come back from England].' Later, she asks his age and then 'pinched him playfully on the arm....drew back, smiled down at him and giggled. A boy of fifteen was just what she wanted...He was just the boy for her, just the right servant.' Although Mrs Mainwaring says to herself that she is 'kind-hearted' in taking in the injured boy, it is obvious that she sees him as a possession, something that will augment her precarious status. She uses him as a servant who pulls her rickshaw up and down the steep hills of Simla. And although she did not intend this, the hard physical labour breaks Munoo and he dies from it.

Rejected The key to Mrs Mainwaring's character lies in her family background, the fact that she belongs to the Anglo-Indian community, which was shunned almost as strenuously as most Indians and was often seen as less desirable than high-caste Indians. The height of her life-long humiliation occurs at a ball held at a club in Simla. She has only been admitted because a doctor, and a major in the British Army, has taken a fancy to her (after treating the increasingly ill Munoo). Although she anxiously scans the crowd, hoping that she will dance with her, the Major avoids her. To dance with an Anglo-Indian would cause him to lose face in the finely calibrated social hierarchy of Simla society. It is excruciating to watch how she is shunned by him and then by others during the course of a long evening. She is not very likable, she is self-centred and vain, but the rejection she experiences is horrible, even to read on the printed page.