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Different Cultural Traits: A Study of Anand's novel *Coolie*

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Abstract:

Social stratification creates a lot of problems either individually or collectively in the Indian societal background. According to that categorization, people have different professions and life style. And this distinction excludes one section to get privileges from the social, economic, political and cultural perspectives. But we believe in the motto like “unity in diversity” and that’s why we must forget the clash originated from this social stratification. This paper attempts to show how the cultural diversity is depicted in Anand’s *Coolie*, a fiction that is a portrayal of the picaresque adventure of the protagonist Munno. The search for different cultural traits of different religions shows Anand’s liberal mental set up and human liberty gets prior importance in the process of his maturing creative career.

Keywords: Social stratification, privilege, cultural perspective, religion, human liberty.

India is a land of different types of religions, communities, castes, classes etc. Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Islam and Christian are the prominent religions in the vast landscape of India. Different religions and communities follow different social codes, customs, language, and behaviour. Each of them has their respective culture.

Cultural Studies became popular with the publication of the seminal works like Raymond Williams’ *Culture and Society* and Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*. The theorists of cultural studies aim at “to subvert the distinction in traditional criticism between “high literature” and “high art” and what were considered the lower forms that appeal to a much larger body of consumers”(Abrams, 53). They also believe that it has no specific methodology, discipline, and strategy. It embraces a variety of anthropological and humanistic ideas of culture. Now culture is a very complicated term to define. The word ‘culture’ took its origin from the Latin word ‘cultura’ meaning ‘cultivation’. Broadly speaking, this term is associated with anthropology, literature and social sciences. Nelson et al observe that-“Cultural studies is thus committed to the study of the entire range of a society’s arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices” (4). The wide range of cultural studies is also echoed in the language of Abrams: “...current studies deal with a spectrum ranging from the vogue of body building through urban-street fashions, and from cross-dressing to the social gesture of smoking a cigarette”(54).

Due to its wide expanse, it has its great effects on literature. In literature, its importance and values are too much precious. It includes societal feelings, human behaviour etc. With the progression of the society, the term culture changes its meaning and it is now

associated with the whole gamut of human behavior, emotions, values, societal feelings, and rituals etc. In a word, it refers to the different levels of life which have acquired a sophistry with the transformation of the society.

In the field of Indian English literature, Mulk Raj Anand ranks a supreme position and he becomes well known as the most distinguished sociological novelist for publishing novels like *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, and *The Sword and the Sickle* etc. In this context M.K.Naik's remark is praiseworthy: Anand's numerous novels form a fictional chronicle in which his eclectic humanism and his humanitarian compassion for the underdog are persistent themes. (156)

His second novel *Coolie* presents an accurate picture of the pre-partition Indian society. In this seminal work, he presents a perennial clash and tension between the protagonist and the society.

Munno, the poor hero-cum-protagonist, is in search for his identity in the midst of this crisis based on class, caste, and economy. So many articles or papers have already been written from the point of view of this social exploitation, caste or class division, economic facts etc. But this paper attempts to read Anand's novel *Coolie* from the perspective of cultural study.

In this novel *Coolie*, we find the amalgamation of different types of cultures. Sometimes the effect is acculturation; i.e. something positive; and sometimes culture becomes the pivot point and plays a leading role in the origin of clash and conflict between different religions. This paper attempts to read Anand's novel *Coolie* from the cultural perspective. In the novel *Coolie*, we encounter the clash mainly between two cultures: the Indian or Eastern or the Western culture.

India is always proud of her traditional, ancient culture. We, the Indians, always boast of our ancestral, typical culture which is a great heritage for our Indian society. The four sides of our country- North, South, East, West and the different regions of different states have their respective arena of cultural traits, practices, and performances. Thus Indian culture is the microcosmic presentation of five major world religions -Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Islam. The cultural traits of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh religions, depicted in Anand's novel *Coolie*, are as follows.

Though secularly the term 'Islam' is used instead of Muslim culture, but we are habituated to listen to the term Muslim in most of the Muslim dominated regions. The word Islam means one's free, internal, lovely, affectionate, trustworthy submission to the supreme commandments of the one and only God (Allah). They believe in the preaching and teachings of the only one messenger Paigamber. There are five pillars of Islam-Testify, Prayer, Fasting, Charity, and Pilgrimage. The first one, i.e. Testify or Faith is to keep faith in the one and only super most divine creator Allah. According to the Islamic Bulletin, it is "the verbal commitment and pledge that there is no deity but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah" (n.pag). This Islamic trait is clearly reflected in Anand's novel *Coolie* through minor characters.

Munno, the tragic protagonist of this novel, exploited child labourer, a severe victim of domestic slavery, wants to escape the tortured prison house of Babu Nathoo Ram and gets a temporary relief on the train running from Shamnagar to Daulatpur. It is the eventful third chapter of this novel. In the compartment, a Muhammadan peasant verbally took the pledge by uttering “La hol Wallah!”(62) And he also snares at Munno and the pathetic condition of Munno forces him to make a prompt remark: “Who could this be? The son of Elbis!”(62)

As Muslim is a different religion, they have different tastes in art, dress, food etc. The Bibiji in Babu Nathoo Ram’s house makes an ironical remark to the Muslim culture which permits the habit of taking the flesh of cows and she tries to make a direct attack on the devastated self of Munno by making a sarcastic remark that the lower castes “eat the flesh of cows like the Muhammadans” (28). Though the dress is a kind of outer garment, but Islam gives enough importance to this dress-code. The Burkha or purdah tradition is strictly maintained by the Muslim women. The Hindu Babu Natho Ram gives a microcosmic but satiric view to the Muslim culture when he makes a remark during his conversation with Mr. England: “The Muhammadans keep strict purdah, Sir,’ informed Babu Nathoo Ram. ‘And it is the women of the household of Babu Afzuut-ul-Haq, running to hide themselves’. (40)

The Sikh is also another organized religion in India. Punjab and its nearby regions become the cultural hub for the growth of Sikhism in India. All the patronized figures or gurus in Sikh culture were the prominent leading figures of Punjab. Guru is the supreme commander in the Sikh religion.

In Anand’s novel *Coolie* Munno, the victimized, exploited, deprived, unprivileged lower caste-fellow, met a Sikh persona in the compartment of the train during his escape from Babu Nathoo Ram’s prison-house. The Sikh peasant, a minor character in the play, shows his obedience to his own culture. He started a new journey of a new morning by uttering the name of the Guru: “Wah Guru! Wah Guru!”(62.) With his sudden look at Munno, he feels sympathy and he is surprised by looking at the pathetic figure of Munno: “Strange are the ways of the Wah Guru!”(62) The Sikh culture is ironically represented through the satiric remark of the orthodox Bibiji who belittles the Sikh culture by equating this culture with the lower class culture that the lower caste people eat the flesh “of pigs like the Sikhs”.(28)

Hinduism is the largely circulated and widely accepted religion in India. This religion includes various complicated forms of culture and rituals. Hinduism basically follows the supreme hierarchical canon based on caste, class, race, ethnicity etc. They follow the Vedic scripture which gives a vivid description of the origin of four major castes in India- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. This quadruple division on the basis of ‘Varna’ and ‘caste’ reflects the clash between the so-called high Hindu culture and the culture of the untouchables like Munno.

This division of classes makes one class totally cornered and marginalized. They are the fifth class, untouchables, Dalits, and outcastes. The upper-class Hindu considers them totally uncultured, unsophisticated and they treat the lower castes very brutally and inhumanly. Munno, the simple rustic servant, is the protagonist of this novel. It is a known

fact that language is an important aspect of determining the cultural status. In this context P. K. Nayar's observation is worth to be mentioned: "All accounts of culture - literary, historical, anthropological-ethnographic-are stories about events and people, marked by the usual structures of language" (205). Munno's family show their liking for rustic and uncultured language: "Munno ohe Munnoo oh Mundu,"(4). In his visit to different places Munno, the protagonist gathers the most pathetic experience and he realises a cultural gap between the traditional Eastern and the modernized European culture.

A single episode and a surprise visit of Mr. England to Babu Nathoo Ram's house clearly depict the huge cultural hiatus between the Indian and Eastern or to be more specifically between the Hindu and the English or Western culture. Nathoo Ram, the boastful upper caste Hindu, feels pride to give a warm welcome to Mr. England's visit to his home. 'The throne like chair'(40) is ready for the comfort, relief, easiness, solace, and peace of Mr. England. "The clay image of the elephant god, Ganesha, garlanded with a chair of faded flowers" (40) easily attracts the curious eyes of Mr. Engalnd. The typical Hindu culture, image worshipping, makes the Englishman too much critical. Anand observes: " He thought it a sinister image, something horrible, one of the heathen idols which he had been taught to hate in the Wesleyan chapel he had attended with his mother"(40) .

But the Hindu rituals enforce Nathoo Ram to make a stereotypical comment about that image that this is – "The God of wisdom, worldliness and wealth" (40). The typical Eastern beliefs or values are vividly reflected through the desires, expressions of the members of Nathoo Ram's family. Dr. Premchand expresses his long cherished desire to 'go to England for higher studies' (40).This is the ancestral belief of the orient that Western countries excels the age-old notions of Eastern countries from the perspective of education. That's why Premchand even thinks of getting some suggestions from the English Sahib- 'and perhaps you could give me some advice about my courses of study'. (40) This indicates the known oppositional relationship between the orient and the occident, east and the west, self and the other. The orient is described as 'irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal" (Said, 40).

Indians boast of their nostalgic feelings and Babu Nathoo Ram also tries to share his past happy memories with Mr. England by his quick look at the photo frame and nostalgically he makes a remark-'This is my family photograph taken on the occasion of my marriage, Sir,' ... (40)

Anand brilliantly depicts the picture of Nathoo Ram's wife. That lady is 'loaded with clothes and jewellery'. (41) This is none other than an indication that the Indians have a strange fascination for such things. As a typical Indian lady she is represented as 'very shy' (41) and 'So she will not come in as is the custom with the women of your country' (42).

The sound of the gramophone is also a reminder of the ancient heritage of East India. Anand beautifully observes: ' Ain- ain-wain- ain –ain-ai-an', a throaty wail wound its way out of the trumpet of the gramophone which Dr Prem Chand had set in motion(42).With this nostalgic

sound Nathoo Ram also feels very proud of their Indian culture: ‘This is our Indian music, Sir,’ said Nathoo Ram proudly; ‘a ghazal, sung by Miss Janki Bai of Allahabad’. (42)

Even the choices of dishes, style of eating foods are also different in two different zones. That’s why Nathoo Ram takes pride in the utterance of the names of such sweets like sweet meat, gulab jamun etc. But ‘The perfume of the rasgulas and gulab jamans as well as the sight of them made Mr. England positively sick’, (43) and the following lines clearly prove that the style of their eating foods is different from that of the Indians: “If Mr. England had been offered a plate and a fork, or a spoon, he might have taken one of the sweets. But he was supposed to pick them up with his hand. That was impossible to the Englishman, who had never picked up even a chicken bone in his fingers to do full justice to it”. (43)

Not only so, but Mr. England feels uncomfortable due to the unfavourable weather of India. His declaration, ‘I can’t eat in this hot weather,’ (44) is a strange proof of his rejection of the inferior Eastern tradition. The concepts like superiority and inferiority in cultural traits indicates the cultural strength of the West and it is indicated in the observation of Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism*: “Cultural strength is not something we can discuss very easily- and one of the purposes of the present work is to illustrate, analyze, and reflect upon Orientalism as an exercise of cultural strength.”(40) This clearly hints at the domination over the orient by the occident.

In the mean time, the valuable tea-tray is spoilt by the home servant Munno. As he is representative of the lower caste, the Hindu family considers him as untouchable. Due to the social stratification, he belongs to the ignoble group of the society. Though they belong to the mainstream Hindu religion, they are being excluded from the privileges of the society. Munno, a representative of the stupid hill folk begins his life as a servant and is directed to do his ‘best for the masters’(14). Due to his silly mistake, Bibiji rebukes him harshly and shows that the typical Hindu family tries to maintain a distance between the masters and the servants or the upper caste and the lower caste. This also indicates a gap between the so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. Anand mentions Bibiji’s utterance-‘Vay, may you die, may you be broken, may you fade away, you blind one! Do you know what you have done?’ (45)

Even Varma attempts to make a differentiation between the upper and the lower castes. Hence he satirizes the poor orphan Munno and belittles him by the side of their prestigious culture: ‘Don’t bark you dirty hill man,’ said Varma, with a frown on his coarse, bestial face as he swaggered beneath the cloak of his saintliness and strength”. (50)

Even after getting a small bruise he considers that it will be cured by earth or ashes: “I have treated it with ashes. It will be all right”. (52)

Eventually, in his playing mood, Munno bites Sheila and this event prepares his departure from Bibiji’s home. Bibiji mistakenly takes it as a kind of mischievous nature of Munno and involves the little boy in this filthy activity:

Being infuriated, the master also insulted this little boy very harshly. This incident enforces Munno to leave his master’s home forever. This spoiler of our salt has

bitten Sheila on the cheek! Has not the wicked age come! This boy! He is hardly yet born! And he attacks the honour of his master's child! Heavens! (58)

Significantly enough, this incident proves that the relationship between the Hindu upper castes and the lower castes is not a healthy one. Due to their cultural ego and social status of the aristocrats, Munno, the little representative of the lower castes, is easily crushed in this world. And the culture of the Dalits or the untouchables is reflected through his activities, feelings and behavior. Rightly enough, Anand is the best novelist to point out the misery of this poor, downtrodden boy.

Munno's second encounter with Seth Prabh Dyal enriches as well as enhances the experience of this poor little boy. Munno's meeting with Prabh's wife Parbati gives a kind of relief in the psychological crisis of Munno. Parbati, the Hindu wife is the typical representative of the Hindu woman. Anand observes:

...Munno faced a slight, modest woman,... Prabh's wife. She was rather pale and reticent but the wonderful eagerness with which she came up to Munno and without asking who he was, took him in her arms and patted on his forehead...and made him realize, what we always realize in one subtle moment, the living warmth that is going to endear us to a person.(66)

The childless wife, thus, shows her motherly care for this poor orphan. Like a caring wife, she also, shows her concern for her tired husband: And then she addressed her husband: 'I am just getting the meal ready. Will you take your bath so that you can rest afterwards and sleep off the fatigue of the journey?'(67)

Hence, Parbati is benignly responsive to the Hindu rituals. Obediently and sincerely, she follows the duties of a traditional and typical Hindu woman.

Prabha, a Hindu businessman, shows his obedience to the Hindu religious codes. Anand observes that Prabha along with Munno follows some rituals. Anand mentions that he- "...entered the courtyard of the vast medieval Lotus temple of Vishnu, before which was a holy tank. Prabha bought a string of marigold and jasmine flowers. Just then a drum began to beat in the courtyard below the steps". (72)

Though Munno is totally ignorant of such rituals, but he is just spellbound by looking at 'the ritual of tinkling bells and chantings of hymns and loud hysterical shouts of 'Long live the Gods'. (72) The ascetic picture of Hindu religion is depicted through Anand's minute observation of a group of saints: "...naked saints sat growing lean by pyres of burning wood, surrounded by devotees with offerings of food, fruit and flowers; and yellow-robed, clean-shaven mystics, with clouded eyes intent on something which people called God, but which for the life of him Munno did not know and could not understand". (72) Anand thus portrays the pictures of two different Hindu families – one is indicating their snobbish attitude and treating him quite inhumanly and the other one is submissive to the typical Hindu codes.

When Prabha is cheated by his business partner Ganpat, Munno is compelled to go to Delhi in his search for employment. This is for the third time he is searching for another

employment. Here he becomes the coolie in the cotton factory. There the coolies are described as-“...queer race of men, dried up, shriveled, flat-footed, hollow-chested, hollow-cheeked, hollow-eyed”. (228)

Later on, Munno’s encounter with Mrs. Mainwaring, his job as a rickshaw puller and then as a domestic servant- are the brief episodes to suggest the untouchability of a particular community. Their lifestyle, behavior, feelings, activities, language indicate that there exists a wide gap between the haves and the have not, the rich and the poor, the master and the servant, the Hindus and the untouchables, and last but not the least between the ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture.

As a man of the world, Anand raises his voice to show that the Indian untouchables like Munno are always in the midst of crisis, pain, and suffering. Due to the disparity in the fields of economy and politics in Indian societal background, one section becomes culturally enriched and the other one remains culturally ‘low’ or ignoble. Anand shows his generosity and liberal mind by mentioning the cultural traits of different religions in India. After all, he gives emphasis on the issue of human liberty and equity.

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