

# Beyond the Order: A Study of “The Vulture and the Little Girl” and Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie*

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**Abstract**— The photograph, ‘The Vulture and the Little Girl’, also known as the ‘Struggling Girl’, taken by renowned photographer Kevin Carter, first appeared in the New York Times on 26 March 1993, which depicts a young girl in Sudan, crouching on the ground in a state of malnutrition while a vulture stands nearby. This stark and haunting image encapsulates the grim realities of hunger, poverty and death that affect millions across the globe. Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie*, a seminal work of Indian literature, shares similar themes of exploitation, suffering and the brutality of societal systems. The novel, set in pre-independence India, explores the life of Munoo, a young boy who faces the harsh realities of poverty, child labour and an oppressive social hierarchy. This research paper will delve into the connections between the photograph and the themes portrayed in *Coolie*, drawing parallels between the image of the little girl and the tragic journey of Munoo, in Anand’s novel. The paper brings out how life across art, history and real world go hand in hand regardless of time, clime and space. This paper aims to explore the different facets of predation in human society, analyzing how these “predators” operate within a framework of power, influence, and survival.

**Keywords**— malnutrition, oppressive hierarchy, predator, struggling girl, vulture



Kevin Carter's [Pulitzer Prize](#)—winning photograph of a starving [Sudanese](#) child and a vulture waiting in the background

Life is a series of orderly charted events. This proposition seems fictional when we closely observe real life. Hardships, misfortune, even failure are hard bound in everyone's life. The juxtaposition of strong and weak, happy and sad, rise and fall and a lot more have always co-exist in real life. Just as one way leads on to other, existence too is to balance ourselves amid contrasts. But the grim realities exist in this world despite the fact that such things teach harsher lesson of life. A predator does not always hunt in the wild. Sometimes, it sits in big offices, factories and controls who suffers and who survives. A predator does not always kill with teeth – it hunts with hunger, with work, with silence.

This picture won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography award in 1994. This photo question the authorities, system and humanity at large. The vulture in the paragraph is not just a bird. It represents the employer who like a master waits for a servant to serve him. The girl on the ground is not starving; she is being hunted by something bigger than the bird (vulture) – famine, war, a world that has already left her behind.

Munoo in *Coolie* is very close to the girl in the picture. He runs from one place to another, but the predator follow him everywhere. They take his breath, his sweat, his life. They feed on him without bloodshed. They don't need weapons; they have power to oppress others.

The girl in the photograph represents Munno, the vulture represents other characters like the Uncle, Daya Ram, masters – Babu Natho Ram and his wife, Ganpat, Chimta Sahib and those who harass Munoo. The photographer, Kevin Carter represents the society who silently sees everything but doesn't do anything to control such events in the life of helpless poor people.

Being a realistic Mulk Raj Anand depicts the stark realities of life through Munoo's journey. He gives voice to the voiceless and marginalized class through his works. Munoo and the girl both are children and at such early age they both face contrasting situations. At last both Munoo and the girl meet their end.

Both Munoo and the girl are not merely victims of the circumstances but of a structure that continuously sacrifices the weak for the benefit of the powerful. In Munoo's life the vultures like his uncle, his aunt, Babu Nathu, and Ganpat are always keeping an eye on him. This kind of disorder among the human beings can be clearly seen. All works of Mulk Raj Anand are deeply rooted in social realism, humanism and ideology which can be seen in every aspect of this novel too. Humanism, a positive philosophy which centers on the dignity of man, his individuality, his suffering, is missing from the world in general. Pain and suffering are part of human life but

when it becomes unbearable to see an individual facing overwhelming adversity. Munoo does not suffer because of his fate or chances but because of man-made laws and theories which continuously exploit others. Munoo and the girl both are born free but the society and the circumstances make them their slave. As Jean Jacques Rousseau states

**"Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." ("The Social Contract" 1762)**

Anand writes this novel in 1936 and the photograph "The Vulture and the Girl" (The Struggling Girl) is taken in 1993. The most striking thing is that from 1936 to 1993 the circumstances don't change only the spheres of exploitation differ. A poor has to suffer his entire life. The scenario is very clear where rich are becoming richer and the poor are becoming poorer. In *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, characters like Tom Buchanan and Gatsby himself illustrate predatory behavior, either through their manipulation of others' desires or the way they use people to achieve their own ends. Such kinds of events are widely found in the society and literature.

Munno is born in Bilaspur, a small village in the Kangra Hills, where his early life is shaped by the poverty and deprivation. Orphaned at a young age, he lives with his Uncle Daya Ram and his Aunt Gujri, who regard him as an economic burden. Munoo has big dreams. He wanted to live a better life. Munoo's first encounter with urban life comes in Sham Nagar, where he is employed as a servant in the house of Babu Nathoo Ram, a Govt. officer. Both Nathoo Ram and his wife treat him harshly and they treat him with a feeling of predator. Even his Uncle and Aunt want him to earn money. This form of predation is widespread across the globe, yet it often goes undocumented and unnoticed by governments.

This phase of Munoo's life shows that in this harsh world, the exploiters change and he remains a victim to someone or the other. Munno's next destination is Daulatpur, an industrial town where he finds employment in a pickle factory owned by Prabha Dayal and his business partner Ganpat. Here, Munoo experiences temporary relief under the care of Prabha and his wife. The cruelty of human can be seen when Seth Prabha Dayal is deceived by Ganpat. Due to the betrayal Munoo once again become jobless and is left to wander in the streets.

Munoo's journey leads him to Bombay, where he becomes a coolie at the railway station. In Bombay, Munoo witness the stark contrast between the affluent British rulers and the improvised Indian labors. He befriends Ratan, a fellow coolie, who helps him navigate across the ruthless urban government. Later he finds work at a cotton mill, where he encounters the most dehumanizing conditions of his

journey.

Munoo's journey takes him to Shimla where, he becomes a rickshaw puller for Mrs. Mainwaring. In the beginning she shows some love towards her but she too harasses him. She tries to stalk him sexually. Later she torments him mentally and physically as well. She offers him the job of a rickshaw puller, but the price of her exploitation is steep and relentlessly demanding.

By analyzing the image through the lens of literature, especially *Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand, it becomes evident that the vulture can be seen as a representation of systemic structures that prey upon the weak. Munoo and "the little girl" in the photograph are not mere individuals but they are presented as type. The vulture in the photograph is waiting for the girl's death in order to fulfill his starvation similarly his uncle, Babu Nathoo Ram and his wife etc. nurture themselves. The vulture has hunger of food but the characters in Anand's novel has hunger of dominance and Munoo is a victim to them. Anand writes;

**"'Bibiji' said Daya Ram with joined hands, 'I have brought my little nephew to serve you. Here he is.' Then he flashed an angry glance at Munoo and said: 'Join your hands, you pig, and say "I fall at your feet" to Bibiji' (P. 12)**

Both Munoo and the girl seems objects of malnutrition. During 1993, the circumstances are not familiar, famine, civil war, conflict are taking place. Munoo too fights a war against his circumstances every day. Challenges seem inevitable in the life of Munoo as Northrop Fry writes in the essay, "Theory of Myths", "Tragic heroes are wrapped in the mystery of their communion with something beyond which we can see only through them..." (P. 208). The symbolism behind the vulture as a representation of death and impending doom signifies that the world in which we are living gives unending suffering and trauma to an individual. Munoo in the end meets a tragic end and dies due to Tuberculosis (T.B.). Anand describes,

**"But in the early hours of one unreal, white night he passed away - the tide of his life having reached to the deeps." (P. 282 )**

Anand's novel *Coolie* and Kelvin's photograph can be analyzed through different aspects like social, economic and psychological as well. Psychological in the sense because Munoo's tragic life and the condition of the girl makes the reader emotional. In reader's psyche a number of emotions arise. GDP, Infrastructure, development etc. are the aspects on which the economic stability of mankind depends. In relation to *Coolie* and The Struggling Girl all

these aspects can be related. If the economic stability of Munoo and the girl is good then they don't have to suffer in their life. Somehow the economic stability related to social, political and legal stability etc. In the world money is everything all the aspects of human life are affected by an individual's economic condition.

The future of a country depends on the children of that country. If their present is not secure than how can they be able to run the country. Munoo and the little both suffers. If the Munno's uncle and aunt take care of him and educate him and the photographer, Kevin Carter helps the girl, give her food and look after her then in future both the children become pillar of the country.

The St Peterburg Times (Florida), condemned Kevin Carter, the photographer, saying; **"The man adjusting his lens to take just the right frame of her suffering might just as well be a predator, another vulture on the scene."**

This reflects political aspects also, if the govt. takes proper step then miserable condition of millions of downtrodden can be solved. Government as well as all the humans should show humanity in order to work out on the situation.

Munoo's journey in *Coolie* is more than a personal tragedy, it serves as a powerful critique of colonial exploitation and social injustice. Economic Exploitation, Class and Caste Oppression, illusions of hope, colonial capitalism are the themes of Anand's novel. The novel serves as both a social document and a literary masterpiece, offering an unflinching critique of the forces that dictate the lives of the underprivileged. Munoo's tragic fate is not just an individual misfortune but a symbol of the countless lives crushed by an unjust system, making *Coolie* one of the most powerful indictments of the colonial exploitation in Indian literature.

From a Marxist perspective, the vulture is the ruling class, and the girl is the exploited class. The girl's suffering is not an accident – it is an outcome of economic system that creates wealth by creating starvation. Munno's fate is sealed the moment he is born poor. No matter where he runs, the vultures follows him, each feeding on his labour, each waiting for him to collapse.

It is not just a story or a paragraph. It is the structure of society. Slums, child labour, unpaid workers – modern vultures still wait, still watch, still feed. The predator never disappears. It only changes shape.

## CONCLUSION

"The Vulture and The Little Girl" and *Coolie* serves as powerful critiques of societal structures that perpetuate poverty, exploitation and suffering. By drawing parallels

between the photograph and the novel, this study highlights the universality of human suffering and the role of society in perpetuating or alleviating it. Munoo's tragic journey and the haunting image of the starving girl both compel in order to address social injustice and oppression of poor. The close observation of the psychological and social dimensions of predation, bring out its impact on individuals and also suggests that human societies need to mitigate its negative effects. Through this exploration, light is thrown on the dark undercurrents of human behavior that often go unnoticed but play a significant role in shaping our world.

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