

THE SILENCE THAT SPEAKS: A CRITIQUE OF MULK RAJ ANAND'S *UNTOUCHABLE*

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Abstract

The article situating the novel to its historical specificities attempts to unveil the workings of Hinduist hegemony in the characterisation of Bakha and Sohini. It also seeks to evaluate Bakha's incestuous fantasies about Sohini and the very relevance of it in the texture of the novel.

Key words: Bakha, Hegemony, Sohini, Mahatma Gandhi, Hinduism.

In Mulk Raj Anand's literary landscape, *Untouchable* assumes a dignified status for being one of the early novels in English by an elite Hindu to depict the marginalisation and relentless oppression of the Untouchables in India. The novel evoked an instant socio-cultural uproar after its publication in Colonial India. Mahatma Gandhi is credited to have a significant role in editing the text that gained the status of literary voice in Gandhi's socio-cultural movements to eradicate practices of casteism and untouchability from India. Anand's *Untouchable*, though cannot be considered as the first literary tract that dealt with the plights of the untouchables, is often viewed as a sincere effort of a higher caste Hindu to stand against the inhuman practices of casteism gnawing India from within. But Anand's *Untouchable* is not a bolt from the blue, rather the novel is a fitting product of Anand's time. The focal point of discussion of this paper is to study whether Anand's *Untouchable* as a literary text speaks for the untouchables or it belongs to the dominating discourse of Hindu religion that has repeatedly curbed the liberating zeal of the Untouchables.

From the second half of nineteenth century onwards, along with the struggles against British colonialism Indian history witnessed Dalit uprisings against Vedanta based Brahmanic tradition. Suppressing the heterogeneous religious voices, the upper caste Hindu elites made a homogenising effort by means of projecting India as a Hindu nation. Most of

the reformist organisations that worked in nineteenth century India to the betterment of Indians like Raja Rammohan Roy's foundation of Brahmo Samaj in Calcutta, Swami Dayananda Saraswati's Arya Samaj in Punjab, and the foundation of Ramkrishna Mission by Swami Vivekananda assisted to solidify Hinduism on national ground. The forging of India's national identity by means of Hindu religion certainly entails the process of repeated subjugations of other beliefs. Hinduism signifies one's faith on the scriptures like the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas including Ramayana and Mahabharata. All these scriptures sacred to Hindus rationalise caste system making 'shudras' and 'atishudras' as the serving communities to other upper castes like Brahmins, Kshatryias and Vaishyas. In this regard we may quote Arundhati Roy to some length:

What we call caste system today is known in Hinduism's founding texts as Varnashrama dharma or chaturvarna, the system of four varnas. The approximately four thousand endogamous castes and sub-castes (jatis) in Hindu society, each with its own specified hereditary occupation, are divided into four varnas — Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (soldiers), Vaishyas (traders) and shudras (servants). Outside of these varnas are the avarna castes, the Ati-shudras, subhumans, arranged in hierarchies of their own — the Untouchables, the Unseeables, the Unapproachables — whose presence, whose touch, whose very shadow is considered to be polluting by privileged caste Hindus (*the Saint* 24)

The original natives of Indian subcontinent started movements against caste exploitation and oppression on large scale in 1920s and 1930s. The Dalit movements—Ad - Dharma in Punjab, Adi-Hindu in U.P and Hydrabad, Adi-Dravida, Adi-Andhra and Adi-Karnataka in South India—were unsettling Hinduist hegemony demanding their right as the original natives and questioning the validity of the Aryans in India. Before the arrival of Ambedkar in anti-caste movements, Bhagyareddy Varma, Kisan Bansode, Acchutananda and Mangoo Ram were leading the movements against casteism. Though the driving force in those Dalit movements rested on the propagation of counter discourse to casteism based Brahmanic tradition in Hindu religion, the movements did not share symmetrical views about their position in the hierarchy of Hindu religion. While Acchutananda and Mangoo Ram considered themselves as "adi" Hindus, there were leaders like Bhagyareddy Varma who tracing the origin of Hindu religion in Aryan conquest viewed the untouchables outside the orbit of Hindu religion. This bifurcation of Dalit movements was more problematised when Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar raised their voice against the inhumane practice of casteism. On the one hand, Ambedkar attempted to secure socio-political rights of the untouchables claiming separate electoral provisions for the Depressed Class. He challenged the foundational texts of Hindu religion showing their inherent biasness. But Gandhi, on the other hand, pursued his contradictory dream of building swaraj or Ram rajya (certainly on the bases of Hindu scriptures) including the untouchables within the periphery of Hinduism. In

the year 1927 Ambedkar participated in a Satyagraha to establish the right of drawing water from public tank by the untouchables. Again at Nasik he led another Satyagraha in 1930 to establish the right to enter temple. Gandhi did not support Ambedkar in his peaceful way of practicing Satyagraha but strongly denounced their way. Gandhi's perfidy surfaces in second Round Table Conference as he opposed the demands of the untouchables for political safeguards. In fact, Gandhi never wanted the abolition of caste system in Hindu religion but what he wanted is the abolition of untouchability. The rift between Gandhi's proclamation and practice has been severely criticised by many. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste, Gandhiji and Emancipation of the Untouchables, Who are the Shudras and Writings and Speeches* are priceless contribution to the cause of Dalit movements since through these works he attempted to lay bare the historical factors which have gone in the formation Depressed Classes in India. B.R. Ambedkar has severely criticised Gandhi for his nonchalance towards the untouchables in his work like *Gandhiji and Emancipation of the Untouchables* and *Writings and Speeches*. Against this volatile socio-political background Anand's *Untouchable* came out as a literary plea ensuing sympathy and kindness for the Untouchables since the date of its publication.

This paper aims to study the novel elaborating on two interdependent approaches: how did Anand portray Bakha and Sohini in the novel and what rationale has worked to conceive the characters in such fashion? Critics like Saros Cowasjee, C.D.Narasimhaiah and many others have studied the novel on the ground of Anand's sympathetic delineation and idealisation of Bakha as a sweeper boy. Many scholars have also interpreted Anand's portrayal of Bakha as a dialectic character as Nandini Bhattacharya says: "While Bakha has been socialised into believing in his essential inferiority, there lurks just beneath the surface of his apparent humility and deference, a volcanic substratum of anger and violence that is simply straining to erupt." . Niladri Ranjan Chatterjee in his essay "The Body as a Structural Motif in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*" has shown how the notion of disability studies inaugurated by Lennard J.Davis, that an ideal body is valourised at the cost of less-than ideal, falls flat as Anand provides a twist to the narrative by marginalising the able bodied protagonist at the cost of the 'little' people. Chatterjee elaborately has shown how binary oppositions have worked not merely in characterisation of Bakha's physique but also in the depiction of his mentality. That Bakha as a sweeper boy has been idealised has been accorded by many critics. But this paper to achieve its above stated purpose will expand the critical enquiry a little bit by posing the question—on what occasions did Anand glorify Bakha or did he maintain Bakha's idealisation throughout the narrative? Sohini's gendered presentation often eludes critical attention since the novel centres on Bakha and deals with the issue of casteism. Again the critics have hardly pondered upon Bakha's incestuous

feelings about his sister. We will also try to understand whether Bakha's incestuous feelings about Sohini have any artistic, thematic or psychological relevance in the novel.

Mahatma Gandhi's influence in giving the final shape to the novel is no less significant. Anand followed Gandhi's suggestions and shorn off all the qualities that do not commensurate with the protagonist's disposition. Ketaki Goswami mentioned about Gandhi's influence in the following words: "Gandhiji's valuable suggestion of pruning more than hundred pages from the already written novel—which, Gandhiji felt, would not commensurate with the hero's disposition—was taken seriously by Anand. Bakha would then think and act like a 'Bloomsbury intellectual' " (Mulk Raj Anand). Thus the novel has been designed to portray the events of a single day in the life of an outcaste. It is true that an author, who is concerned with realism, should delineate his protagonist keeping in view the subjective position of the character in the socio-cultural milieu in which he has been placed. But to assume that an outcaste cannot think and act like an intellectual is a casteist notion. However, Gandhi not merely had a decisive influence in shaping the work, he appeared in the novel with his haloed Mahatmahood to induce an epiphanic experience in the psyche of the protagonist by means of altering his love for 'fashun' and perpetuating his life as a scavenger by glorifying the very act that Bakha loathed. Now let us turn to the novel.

Anand's portrayal of Bakha, the protagonist of the novel, is fraught with dualities in that under the rubric of Bakha's tragic sufferings the novel shows Bakha as a potent rebel repeatedly subjugated by the socio-cultural discourses of his time. Nonetheless Bakha's challenges to the hegemonic brahmanic tradition and his desire to escape the snare of all oppressive Hindu religion have made him not only a colonial hybrid but a representative hero of subalterns. The novel opens with a lurid description of the outcastes' colony where Bakha, a scavenger lived along with other outcastes. Anand's poetical description of Bakha's physique is aglow with heroic attribution:

Each muscle of his body, hard as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass. He must have immense pent –up resources lying deep, deep in his body, for as he rushed along with considerable skill and alacrity from one doorless latrine to another, cleaning, brushing, pouring phenoil, he seemed as easy as a wave sailing away on a deep-bedded river. 'What a dexterous workman!' the onlooker would have said (*Untouchable* 8). In spite of being a scavenger by birth, Bakha nurtures a kind of taste that surpasses his job. He looks "intelligent, even sensitive, with a sort of dignity that does not belong to the ordinary scavenger, who is as a rule uncouth and unclean" (8).

On surface reading it would appear that Anand is trying to make Bakha an exception as a scavenger, but actually the whole portrayal is hegemonic for more than one reason. Firstly, Anand is no exception in glorifying the physicality of a 'shudra' since from Balmiki's *Ramayana* to Girish Karnad's *Hayavadhana* we have enough instances of

‘avarnas’ or shudras who have been portrayed in terms of their physicality and are denied the property of the soul, mind or intellect which are considered as the ‘locus classicus’ of rationality or humanism. Anand’s description—that Bakha “looked intelligent, even sensitive, with a sort of dignity”—hardly chimes in with the story that the novel unfolds since his seeming intelligence never found at work. Secondly, Anand glorifies Bakha only when the issue of physicality comes in executing his menial job, and when he becomes obsessed with his sense of duty. The poetical gloss of Anand’s dictions while describing Bakha’s rushing with “alacrity from one doorless latrine to another, cleaning, brushing, pouring phenoil” is lost forever when Anand describes Bakha’s approach to his friends: “They always made a butt of him, ridiculing the weight of his body, the shape of his clothes, his gait, which was a bit like an elephant’s, on account of his heavy, swaying buttocks, and a bit like a tiger’s, lithe and supple”(26). In fact, the glowing terms used to describe Bakha’s workmanship as a scavenger only echo how naturally he fits to his job and how the best of him comes out when he performs what his hereditary has bequeathed upon him.

Sohini’s significance in the narrative proves instrumental in laying bare the hypocrisy of Pandit kalinath. Anand portrayed Sohini with the following words:

she had a sylph-like form, not thin but full-bodied within the limits of her graceful frame, well rounded on the hips, with an arched narrow waist from which descended the folds of her trousers and above which were her full, round, globular breasts, jerking slightly, for lack of a bodice, under her transparent muslin shirt. Bakha observed her as she walked along swaying. She was beautiful. *He was proud of her with a pride not altogether that of a brother for a sister* (14) [Emphasis mine].

Saros Cowasjee had given a different direction to Anand’s portrayal of Bakha and Sohini when he mentioned:

If Bakha is pictured *as a male god*, his sister Sohini is portrayed *as a goddess* ‘with a sylph-like form’, ‘full bodied’, ‘well rounded on the hips, with an arched narrow waist’ and ‘globular breasts’. *Her figure could have vied with the sculptured images of Konarak or Khajuraho*, but she has been condemned by birth to walk the path of the outcastes and to suffer their mortification [Emphases mine].

What Anand intended to convey has been captured by Cowasjee when he compared Sohini with the sculptured images of Konarak and khajuraho, famous for posing sexuality with its rhythmic movements. Starch apart, Cowasjee is blatantly wrong in interpreting Bakha a male god and Sohini a goddess. Anand’s gendered representation of Sohini has obviously been coupled with his sexist portrayal of the said character. Anand may be fairly accused for his gendered representation of Sohini like many other authors who have portrayed women as such. But Anand went a step further in making Sohini a prey of sexual

fantasy of her own brother. Anand hinted it when he describes Sohini in above quoted words and gave it a conspicuous reflection at the temple yard.

Having finished his early morning drudgery, Bakha headed to the bazaars” to sweep the roads in the town and the temple courtyard” (28). Involuntarily Bakha touched a caste Hindu on the street while walking absent minded with delightful sweet syrup of jelebis in his mouth. The incident turned to be a horrifying one as the caste hindu not merely humiliated Bakha with abusive words but slapped him for his negligence and fallibility to announce his presence by shouting “posh, posh, sweeper coming” (42).

Having been humiliated at the bazaar, Bakha made his way to the temple yard. His encounter with the Gods and Goddesses of Hindu religion induces in him awe and fear. As he saw with the eye of an alien, Bakha was mesmerised to visualise “huge turreted structure of massive stone and carved masonry, the florid exuberance of whose detailed and intricate decoration struck a strange kind of awe into his being” (48). For Bakha Hindu religion is not a resource of solace, rather it always horrifies him: “Bakha had never quite got over his sense of fear born of the respect for these twelve- headed and ten armed gods and goddesses which was inculcated in him in his childhood” (48). Bakha’s naivety about Hindu religion surfaces through his inability to decipher the significance of the snake enclosing a miniature temple. His fallibility to know the meaning of the Sanskrit chanting “Om, Om, Shanti Deva” signifies how the untouchables are kept blissfully ignorant about Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hindu religious texts. Bakha’s desire to see the inside of the temple is coupled with irony since the very “temple seemed to advance towards him like a monster”. With dexterous psychological skill Anand had captured Bakha’s experience with the following words:

He hesitated for a while. Then his will strengthened. With a sudden onslaught he had captured five steps of the fifteen that led to the door of the temple. There he stopped, his heart drumming fiercely in his chest, which bent forward like that of an athletic runner on the starting-line, his head thrown back (51).

Keeping his step firm on the top of the fifteen steps leading to the temple door, Bakha managed to have “a glimpse, just a glimpse, of the sanctuary which had so far been a secret, a hidden mystery to him”(51). Bakha was stupefied by the aura of the rhythmic song chanted by the Hindu priests to adore the gods and goddesses. Ironically enough Bakha became a devotee, though for a moment, of Hindu deities from whom they have been alienated for a long time.

Hearing the shrill cry “Polluted, polluted, polluted”, Bakha was so petrified that he failed to utter a word for some time. Gradually he discovered pandit Kalinath “trembling, stumbling, tottering, falling, with his arms lifted in the air” along with his sister Sohini pitifully unnerved like Bakha himself. He was horrified to find himself and his sister in such situation. When Bakha came to know about Sohini’s molestation by Kalinath, Bakha dragged

his sister to the middle of the courtyard to find out that lanky priest who had already disappeared. Bakha's outrage against pandit Kalinath rests on reason and his standing against a priest suggests his revolt against the Brahmanic oppression. His overpowering anger was benumbed as he faced the temple that appeared fearful with its gods and goddesses. While attempting to take revenge, Bakha's rebel self confronted the temples, the visible institutions of Hindu religion, with all its horrors for an outcaste like Bakha. Bakha's predicament reminds us of Ambedkar's famous proclamation: "To the untouchables Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors" (*Annihilation of Caste*). Anand brilliantly captures how Bakha's theophobia and xenophobia are at loggerheads with each other while confronting the temple:

The sense of fear came creeping into him. *He felt as if the gods were staring at him.* They looked so real although *they were not like anything he had ever seen on earth.* They seemed hard, their *eyes fixed as they ogled out of their niches, with ten arms and five heads.* He bent his head low. His eyes were dimmed. (*Untouchable* 55) [Emphases mine]. While Bakha started walking with his sister towards the outer gate of the temple, Bakha's incestuous feelings about Sohini crept in his mind:

He loathed the ghost of her would-be husband that he conjured up. He could see the stranger holding her full breasts and she responding with modest acquiescence. He hated the thought of that man touching her. He felt he would be losing something. He dared not to think what he would be losing. He dared not to think that he himself — 'I am her brother,' he said to himself to rectify his thoughts which seemed to be going wrong. But there seemed no difference to his naked mind between his own feeling for her and what might be a husband's love (56).

What Anand hinted at the opening section of the novel came to full swing in the above quoted words. What purpose Bakha's incestuous feelings does serve in the organic or thematic structure of the novel except making an oblique hint at the uncivilized nature of Bakha since civilization is founded by constructing taboo against incest! The association of incestuous feelings with Bakha hardly reifies the critics' claim that Bakha has been elated from the grab of filthiness. Though, on psychological ground, it may be claimed that the passage shows an adolescent boy's sexual fantasy, but even then Anand, the artist fails miserably in placing the thought-process just immediately after Sohini has been molested. What is more, the novel has been occasioned, as it is claimed, to show how an individual undergoes both physical and psychological sufferings because of casteism instead of capturing adolescent fantasies of an outcaste. We wonder whether Anand has taken the hegemonic stance in showing that such kind of thoughts are not uncommon among the Untouchables. Or is it an act of 'othering' Bakha from the so called rational Hindus who are concerned with the sanitation of the soul?

Instead of bringing enough food, crestfallen Bakha returns home with his disturbed heart brimming with humiliations as another insult was added to his ill-fated journey of the day when he went to receive food. He narrates the day's fretful journey to his father Lakha only to hear the similar experience of his father while trying to save Bakha's life. The experienced jamedar knows it well that the upper caste Hindus has had enough power to ruin them at no time. Thus Lakha says: "They are our superiors. One word of theirs is sufficient to overbalance all that we might say before the police. They are our masters. We must respect them and do as they tell us" (71). Lakha's experience throughout his life has made him realise that all the upper caste people are not cruel and "it is religion which prevents them from touching us" (74). Bakha perceived limitations of his life and was searching for the way of salvation. The novel ends with promises that Bakha never saw fructified. Anand provided three options that made Bakha dream about a new India sans casteism. Conversion to Christianity, Gandhi's idea of building swaraj through the emancipation of the Untouchables from the sinful grid of untouchability and the poet Iqbal's declaration of the arrival of machine—flush system—which will put an end to the practice of untouchability are three options left with Bakha to solace his heavy heart. Brushing aside the idea of converting himself to Christianity, Bakha kept his faith on what Gandhi and the poet said.

Appearance of Gandhi and his speech about the 'harijans' ultimately transform Bakha's perception of his own self and the society he is serving to. Gandhi narrated his boyhood experiences with untouchables and pleaded the caste Hindus to treat humanely the so called untouchables considering untouchability as a sin. He concluded his speech with the following words:

Two of the strongest desires that keep me in the flesh are the emancipation of the untouchables and the protection of the cow. When these two desires are fulfilled there is swaraj, and therein lies my soul's deliverance. May God give you strength to work out your soul's salvation to the end (140).

Being utterly moved by the charisma Gandhi left behind, Bakha decided to go on scavenging: "The Mahatma had talked of a Brahmin who did scavenging in his ashram. 'Did he mean, then, that I should go on scavenging?' Bakha asked himself.

'Yes' came the forceful answer. 'Yes,' said Bakha, 'I shall go on doing what Gandhi says.'"

Though Anand left Bakha where he was at the opening section of the novel, Anand provided Bakha rationale to live lovingly the life of a scavenger. Bakha fails to realise scavenging by choice is utterly different from scavenging by social force. It is pitiful to be poor, but it is glorious to emulate poverty. In the essay "The Ideal Bhangi", Gandhi outlined his idea of an ideal scavenger: "The Brahmin's duty is to look after the sanitation of the soul, the Bhangi's that of the body of the society". And in *Untouchable* Bakha is similarly left to look after the sanitation "of the body of the society".

Thus the novel, *Untouchable*, instead of showing Bakha as an idealised hero of the narrative reveals how the author maintains hegemonic distance in stereotyping Bakha as an outcaste. Bakha's behaviour and actions are strongly controlled by dominant discourse of Hinduism. The penchant for liberation latent in his self never met success since the outcastes are destined, the moment they are born, to live their life both socially and literally.

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