

Society vs. Individual: Analyzing the Character of Bakha in Mulk Raj Ananda's *Untouchable*

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Abstract

In *Untouchable* the writer presents the character of Bakha as vulnerable to collapse due to the practice of the tyrannical ideology of the chauvinistic society where he by no means can cope up with the surroundings, especially with the people who belong to the higher strata. Bakha's life is accursed caused by the unavoidable conflict between the individual and the society. Society as an oppressive weapon always looks down upon him and constantly reminds him of his lowest origin that results in his complete alienation and identity crisis. Thus Bakha becomes a nonhuman and stranger to the society, family and even to himself. This paper attempts to analyze the character of Bakha in terms of the facts behind the conflict between individual and society.

Keywords

Untouchable, Identity, Individual, Society, Caste, Alienation

1. Introduction

Untouchable is Mulk Raj Ananda's earliest novel. But its uniqueness lies not in this, rather in somewhere else, in its originality that is peculiar to Anand himself. In his Preface to this novel E. M. Forster opines, "*Untouchable* could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles." [1] (P. vii). The human concerns which engaged Mulk Raj Anand intensely were deeply related to discrimination, orthodoxy, social disparity, untouchability and the highhandedness of the powerful and the rich. The themes of his novels depict these concerns in an intensely artistic and realistic manner [2] (p. 287). Through the character of Bakha in *Untouchable*, Anand highlights the condition of inhumanity prevalent in the society.

This is the novelty of an Indian writer who is fully aware of the Indian society, her resources and follies, pride and shame simultaneously. Only the writers like Ananda can sketch the character like Bakha, can expose his existential crisis and alienation from the society, fellow men and even from his family. Because no other writers, as Forster indicates, can feel the nightmarish pains and anguish of the people who belong to

a caste that the one-eyed oppressive society has named *untouchable*, or *harijan* or *pariah*. Perhaps, Ananda in his novel attempts to indicate a change in the society which is polluted by fragmentation among its members. But the society is intensely diseased by internal conflicts and strain. "If in the analysis of the social structure of a system these elements are ignored, if the adjustment of patterned relations is the only focus of attention, then it is not possible to anticipate basic social change. [8] (p. 200)." That's why, Gandhism could not solve the problem totally and untouchability still continues in India.

Bakha, the protagonist of the novel *Untouchable*, belongs to a class whose members are treated as 'non-people [7] (p. 43).' This article critically analyzes the character of Bakha and attempts to unveil the social mechanism that makes him alienated from everything.

2. Humanity Cornered

The writer tells that Bakha is a young *man* of eighteen. The significance of the word *man* is noteworthy since the writer could have said *boy* instead of *man*. Maybe Ananda's intention is to make a counter discourse against social follies. Or, he may intend to make the reader aware about the fact that though Bakha belongs to the lowest stratum of the society, he is a man of powerful sense and thinking, like Okonkwo in Achebe's

Things Fall Apart. The very depiction of the outcaste' colony clearly pictures the state of affairs of the living place where Bakha, along with his old father Lakha, younger brother Rakha, and sister Sohini belongs to. The writer says that Lakha is "officially in charge of the three rows of public latrines... [3] (p. 01)." To a non-Indian reader it may sound mockery, but here is the mastery of Ananda of presenting the cruel reality.

Bakha lives in a place which is *uncongenial* to live in. There is the absence of drainage system. There is a nearby running brook containing the dirt and filth of the public latrines. The colony where Bakha lives is *under the shadow* of the town and the cantonment. The description the writer presents to picture Bakha's living colony points to the conclusion that the society where Bakha belongs to consists of racist ideology and lopsided living realities. It is a society where the concept of egalitarianism is alien to the inhabitants. It is a society where the individual is always at odds with the society; there always remains a conflict between the individual and the society. It is a damned society where Bakha is an eternally accursed, a nonhuman being without having central location, rather always rooted to the margin, and thus humanity remains cornered.

3. Eternal Recurrence of Bakha's Pains

The cyclic pains and anguish of Bakha is perpetual; it has been there generation after generations. It is taken for granted. When Bakha was very young he fell in sick and was about to die. But his father struggled to call in a *Hakim* (doctor) and manage some medicine. Lakha was untouchable, so he could not reach the *Hakim Ji*. Bakha is a nonexistence in the eyes of the society, but Bakha's father Lakha does not undergo less. After suffering all through his life Lakha has now resorted to stoic acceptance of vindictiveness of the upper class of the society. Bakha's identity crisis is not exclusive to him; his father suffers from the same crisis. This occurs cyclically over the generations. The book was published eighty years ago, but still we have millions of Bakhas living at the bottom of our society.

4. Alienation Pervades Bakha's Life

Alienation is the basic form of rootlessness. Alienation is a condition in social relationships reflected by a low degree of integration and a high degree of distance or isolation between individuals, or between an individual and a group of people in a community. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_alienation). Hegel uses the term 'alienation' in the same meaning as externalization and estrangement. According to Marx, alienation is the consequence of development of the capitalist mood of production that transforms man's labor into dehumanizing existence. Some describe alienation as consisting in an individual's lack of fulfillment or self-realization in capitalist society.

Tragedy becomes inevitable when someone has to believe that he does not have any other identity than the one that is imposed on them by society. Due to the restrictive and sometimes oppressive role society often plays in relation to individuals, society works against individualism.

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4.1. Alienation from Religion

He belongs to the *Harijan* caste. *Harijan* means *children of God*. This name was given by Mahatma Gandhi. But is not it ironical? Where is Hari (God) when Bakha has no access to normal religious performance? How can he reach Hari when the temple is forbidden to him? Bakha is the child of God, and, how funny that he is totally alienated from God. God is dead in the life of the Bakhas. Bakha has very little idea about divinity. He asks who is Hari? Or who is Narayan? Who is Shanti Deva? "Was he in the temple?" [3] (p. 49). He cannot dare enter the temple because 'Somebody might come and see him roaming about and think he was a thief.' (Ibid) Bakha hears the shouting of the worshippers: "A temple can be polluted according to the Holy Books by a low-caste man coming within sixty-nine yards of it, and here he was actually on the steps, at the door. We are ruined. We will need to have a sacrificial fire in order to purify ourselves and our shrine." [3] (p. 53)

Perhaps Bakha cannot realize the divinity that is available in the temple; he cannot realize how a man can pollute a temple, the place of Hari, because he is made totally alienated from spirituality, the spirituality made cheap by the priests. A temple is for the worshippers, neither for God not for the priests. If it is so, how a man contaminates the temple by just footing there?

4.2. Alienation from Fellow Men

Bakha's alienation originates from his fellow men and

surroundings. He feels hesitated to enter the house of Ram Charan where his (Ram Charan's) sister's marriage ceremony is going on, though Ram Charan is his play-mate. He is not invited by Ram Charan's mother Gulabo or by Ram Charan himself. "He began to walk back. He felt shy. He did not know how he could approach the house where festivities were going on. "All the members of the washermen's brotherhood will be there, dressed in their best clothes, singing strange southern music. How shall I be able to stand there and look?" he felt ashamed to picture the scene." [3] (p. 80)

Bakha has a soft corner in his mind for Ram Charan's sister. Here also he is made emotionally handicapped by the society. But he is not free from the grip of libido. He thinks about the girl and once he pictured her quite naked when he felt "as if he could forcibly gather the girl in his embrace and ravish her [3] (p. 79)." But instantly he corrects himself. He understands that this is 'unholy design'. So Bakha is surrounded by his fellow men but artificially. Living inside the society he is a stranger even to his fellow men.

4.3. Alienation from Own Family

Bakha has no mother. In a motherless family he is frequently abused by his father. To his father he is 'a good-for-nothing scoundrel'. In normal speaking too his father uses extreme abusive terms to call him. 'Son of a pig', 'Husband of your mother' etc. these are the common terms Bakha is called with by his father. Sometimes, Bakha feels homeless or *unhomely*. He is in deep ache that he is homeless and unwanted by his father [3] (p. 111). Bakha has not been brought up with fullest psychological support from his father. He can remember that once after his mother's death his father locked him out all night for not looking after the house properly.

Undeniably Bakha loves his family. But there is a vacuum somewhere here. He works hard, does dirty and filthy job and maintains his family. But here also he is an outsider to his family members. His personality has been grown up in such a situation where care and affection is alien to him. There may be an invisible family bond but it is quite meaningless to him.

4.4. Alienation Everywhere

Untouchability reduces a man of the lower strata of society to nothingness [9] (p. 388). Bakha belongs to the class of Untouchables. They are now called Harijans who have traditionally occupied the lowest place in the caste system. They are called untouchable because they are considered to be outside the confines of caste. Their impurity derived from their traditional occupations like sweepers, washers of clothes, leatherworkers, and those whose occupation it was to kill animals. As Bakha is untouchable, he is a forbidden entity, not a human being. He can touch nobody except the people of his own community. He buys some jalebis. But the confectioner does not give it directly. The confectioner throws the sweet 'like a cricket ball'. The narrative goes on: "[Bakha] placed four nickel coins on the show-board for the confectioner's assistant who stood ready to splash some water on them, and

he walked away embarrassed, yet happy [3] (p. 37)."

Even Bakha has no right to buy something only because he is an outcaste. Why does he feel 'embarrassed', though he has bought the sweet by money? Not only this, as the narrator says, Bakha faces much more prices of something only because he belongs to the lower caste, because "shopkeepers always deceived the sweepers and the poor people, charging them much bigger prices, as if to compensate themselves for the pollution they courted by dealing with the outcasts [3] (p. 37)."

Thus severe lack of belongingness occurs to Bakha. Wherever he goes and whatever he does, he feels dispossession and dislocation. Nowhere does he belong to and nothing can certify his existence as a human being. Everywhere his existence is denied. But Bakha is a conscious being. He can think, therefore he exists. He is analytical. Whatever happens around him is always scrutinized in his conscious mind. He is not dull at utilizing his sense of reality instantly. For example, when Bakha is frequently abused by those who are physically touched /affected (!) by him, he analyzes it minutely, or he cannot understand it straight away, rather, he speculates over the incident, though sometimes can understand nothing. He goes on the market road and unconsciously is accused of having touched someone. The man shouts at him: "Keep to the side of the road, you, low-caste vermin! Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cockeyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself." [3] (p. 37)

Bakha became amazed and embarrassed. He is startled because he perhaps cannot understand how he *defiled* someone by touching him. He became *deaf* and *dumb* and his senses became *paralyzed* after he is accused. Here we see the active consciousness of Bakha who feels his state of being a stranger to the people he is facing. The man shouts at him: "Don't you know, you brute, that you must not touch me!" He called Bakha 'dirty dog', 'son of a bitch', 'the offspring a pig' etc. Words like *dog*, *bitch* and *pig* connote non-humanity signifying Bakha's full absence of personality of flesh, blood and soul.

Here is the complete denial of humanity, though already the society itself has made so. It has fragmented itself into several levels where Bakha posits at the bottom. After fixing the position of Bakha in the society, it is easy to justify calling him by the names *swine*, *dog*, *bitch*, *pig*. Perhaps Bakha takes it for granted, though with critical speculation.

5. Split Personality of Bakha

Bakha's taking his stranger position to the society for granted originates from his fragmented psyche. He is the hero of the novel but he is a hero without sword. This is because of his split personality for which only the society, that separates subaltern ideology from the mainstream, is responsible. Bakha's split personality is evident everywhere in the text. His consciousness is active but psychic mechanism is partially

paralyzed due to the lack of confidence, though he has nothing to be confident of, as prescribed by society. For this Bakha is less rebellious than his fellow Chota. Chota wishes and suggests him to 'catch hold' of the Brahmin to teach him a lesson. But Bakha's torn personality oscillates: "This is strange, Bakha felt, that Chota should think of the same thing at the same time as I. But he felt unequal to the suggestion as he felt unequal to his own desire." [3] (p. 89)

One feeling unequal to one's desire indicates fragmented personality when the person cannot take active decision and confident of personal desire. Feeling unequal is not inborn to Bakha, rather society has instilled the idea of inequality into the mind of Bakha. Here lies the universal conflict between the individual and the society. The two are at war without any negotiation and substantial solution. Though the writer may offer a suggestion for substantial solution by adopting Gandhism, we are not convinced to what extent Gandhism can ensure the subaltern's ability to *speak* and Bakha's ability to create a counter discourse.

6. Bakha's Conscious Ego

Bakha is not dull at speculating over the incidents happening around him. He is fully aware that he belongs to the lowest stratum of the society and so must maintain the systems ascribed by the society. His conscious mind feels: "For them I am a sweeper, sweeper- untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!" [3] (p. 43). He can comprehend the fact that the Muhammadans and the sahibs do not mind touching them. It is only the Hindus and the outcastes who are not sweepers mind touching them. So problem is inside them, not outside. At least Bakha is able to discover this reality. It is a social hole where everyone is vulnerable to fall into. He can recognize that it is a social lesion that has been growing up for long, and one day will reach a state that it will have no cure.

7. Bakha's Mimicry

Colonial discourse encourages the colonized subjects to mimic or imitate the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions, and values [4] (p. 139). Bakha is on the way to mimicry. Being a marginal he sees the English as the best source of life worthy of living. Bakha worked in the barracks of a British regiment for some years and was 'caught by the glamour of the white man's life'. He is obsessed with *sahib*. "I will look like a sahib", he desires. This process of liking British style of living attracts him which is very natural, because Bakha has never been recognized as human being in his own society. He is an outsider, though the people of his society exploit him by enjoying his labor.

But the British treated him 'as a human being', and he learnt to think of himself as 'superior to his fellow out-castes'. For the first time in his life he can feel that he is a human being and worthy of living. We are not sure whether we will explain it through normal postcolonial perspective. But in Bakha's case

it deserves special concentration. He does not belong to the *Babu* class, nor has he got special favour from the British. Even he is not educated who can think about personal interest in relation to British education and other opportunities. So point is somewhere else where Bakha is denied by his own society and recognized by the Europeans.

8. Conclusion

For the human beings society fulfills all the needs and provides security. Without society human's life is just like fish out of water. [10] (p. 132). The main procedure of every society is to produce for the fulfillment of needs and to create social institutions. Any type of state of being out of this procedure will be termed as the state of being alienated. Due to the state of being alienated the existence of man becomes merely the existence of material human being. Social isolation occurs to Bakha where he suffers from being segregated from his own community. [5] (p. 71). Bakha suffers from the same problem of segregation. He suffers and is subjugated because of 'the social stratification of Indian society [6] (p. 8).' He looks at everywhere and finally sees nothing which can confirm his existence as a human being. Society cannot guarantee his basic identity and conversely, society stands at odds with him.

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