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Depiction of Imperial Cultural Influences: A Study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract:

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) is considered one of the pioneering Indian writers in English of Anglo-Indian fiction who together with R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, gained an international readership. He marked his revolutionary appearance with his protest novel, *Untouchable* in 1935. In this novel, he depicts a day from the life of Bakha, a young sweeper who is an untouchable because of his work of cleaning lanterns in the early 20th century colonial India. Besides aiming at eradicating casteism, the novelist also acquaints the reader with the poor economic conditions of the lower class of that time. This paper analyzes that how the cultural values of the rulers had started influencing the indigenous values of the natives. It will analyze the mixed reactions of the natives to the imperial culture like whether they feel proud in infused with the imperial culture or in their traditional cultural values. Moreover, the core concern of the paper is to analyze the younger generation of the natives under the spell of cultural appropriation and at the same time, it unfolds the attempts of the Christian missionaries to appropriate them as per the native culture to spread their religion.

Keywords: imperial culture, untouchable, protest, colonial India, traditional cultural values, cultural appropriation.

Untouchable presents a day from the life of a young sweeper of eighteen years old named Bakha, his experiences with his father Lakha, with his siblings Rakha and Sohini; with his friends Chota and Ram Charan, with Army officer Charat Singh, and with Colonel Hutchinson, a priest. The novel is set in the north Indian cantonment town Bulashah. Bakha's cleaning the three lanes of latrines, sweeping the temple campus, and the town road in place of his father, being

touched by an upper-caste Hindu in the town and the scene thereafter, waiting for the food from the threshold of an upper-caste woman in the Silversmith's alley, all cast poignant images as these incidents either showcase utter helplessness or mire of untouchability. The appearance of Mahatma Gandhi also contributes much to the plot as he speaks about the abolition of untouchability and upliftment of the poor. Although the dominating voices in the novel aim at the liberation from the practice of untouchability and abject poverty, some voices express the undying influence of the imperial culture on the indigenous people which cannot be denied or subsided.

Clyde Kluckhohn in his essay "Mirror for Man" defines culture as the total way of life of a people; the social legacy the individual acquires from his group; a way of thinking, feeling and believing; an abstraction from behaviour; a theory on the part of the anthropologist about how a group of people behave; a storehouse of pooled learning; a set of standardized orientations recurrent problems; learned behaviour; a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour; a set of techniques for adjusting with the external environment and to other men; a precipitate of history (Geertz 4-5). On the other hand, the meaning of culture for Clifford Geertz is a semiotic one. Agreeing with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he has spun. She considers culture those webs, and an analysis of it is to be interpretive one in search of meaning (Geertz 5).

Mulk Raj Anand shows that how all sorts of obstacles stand nowhere in the way of a fanciful heart with the projection of Bakha. Despite abject poverty at home, Bakha is impressed with the lifestyle of the Europeans. Five members of his family live in a one-roomed mud-house. They sleep on broken string cots in worn-out greasy blankets. He does not like the ways of his home or of Indians. He had worked in the barracks of the British regiment for some years with his remote uncle where he fell in love with the glamour of the white man's life. He had seen the life of the soldiers who lived there: sleeping on low canvas beds covered tightly with blankets, eating eggs, drinking tea and wine in tin mugs, going to parade, going to the Bazar with cigarettes in their mouths. Someone had told Bakha that they are Sahibs, superior people. After seeing them, he had possessed the overwhelming desire to live their life. Remembering such fantasies Bakha whispers to himself that after having such clothes, "I will look like a sahib." 'And I shall walk like them. Just as they do, in twos, with Chota as my companion. But I have no

money to buy things” (3). Since his childhood, whenever he visits the market, he would dream for the western articles by constantly looking at them from some distance. As he intensely longs for the dresses, but the money he gets for cleaning the public latrines is given to his father, who is against such over expenditure. He manages to buy a jacket, an overcoat, and a blanket with a perquisite from the Tommies amounted to ten rupees. Few *annas* remain for the joy of red lamp cigarettes.

Bakha pays special attention to personal hygiene, and also keep scolding his younger brother Rakha in this respect. Though his job is dirty, he remains comparatively clean. Onlookers used to appreciate him for his skill and dedication to his work. Superior to his job used to say that he is not suitable for this job because, “he looked 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). After emerging from the latrine when Hawildar Charat Singh says with an ironical smile, “You are becoming a gentleman, oh Bakhya! Where did you get that uniform?” (8). Here, the comment by a high caste Hindu has not been projected for appreciation rather at Bakha’s caste, his job, and his desire to dress like sahibs get ridiculed. Moreover, a desire of a scavenger to become a gentleman has been highlighted and is being noticed by others.

The novelist further suggests reformation to the ways Indians perform ablutions through the perception of Bakha. The time Bakha has spent in the British barracks has polished his sensitivities and lifestyle. Now he feels ashamed recalling the sights of Hindu men and women squatting in the open while gargling and spitting outside the city every morning. He thinks, ‘So shameless’ (11) they are, they do not care that they can be seen sitting like this. He busies himself in a monologue that the white man does not like this and that is why they comment, “*Kola log zamin par hagne wala*” (Black men who relieve yourself on the ground) (11). After reminding such racial comments Bakha thinks why do not they come to these public latrines for the sake of cleanliness, and to save the esteem of the natives. Another thought follows that in that case, his work would increase; more hard work would befall him. Therefore, he desires an escape by exchanging work with his father.

The novelist shows that how Bakha pursues his ambition to live like an Englishman despite the stronghold of social taboos. After cleaning the three lanes of latrines exhausted Bakha reaches him home, asks for water but Sohini, his sister says that there is not a drop of water at

home. She leaves for the well to fetch the water. Instead of relaxing on the cots, he prefers to sit in the broken cane chair, "the only article of furniture of European design . . ." (14) he had been able to acquire the chair despite the family's helplessness just to feel like white men, and he finds himself contented there having a sense of proud over his unique possession.

Thereafter, the novelist acquaints the readers with Bakha's habit he has learnt from the white men at the barracks i.e. how to drink tea? Bakha says that the Englishmen take tea noiselessly without blowing on it. He likes their decent way of having it. When Sohini serves tea to her family members, Bakha takes up the earthen bowl and sips without blowing on it to cool it as his father does. His tongue slightly gets burnt. His uncle believes that the white men deprive themselves of the taste of the tea because they do not blow on it. On the other hand, Bakha considers that his uncle's and his father's spattering sips as "*natu* habits" (24) or habits of the natives. He also tells his father to drink silently. He practices this habit and feels more reverential.

Although Bakha's family circumstances have not permitted him to have any formal or informal education, he still is more inquisitive to know letters. He wishes to learn to read and speak at least the way English men speak. In this quest, he approaches Babu's [clerk's] two school-going sons who also agree when Bakha says that he will pay them. Since the age of six, he has been cleaning the latrines in the barracks, but still longs for learning at the age of eighteen. Mulk Raj Anand writes, "He has often felt like reading Waris Shah's *Heer and Ranjah*" (30). Bakha had felt a burning desire to speak English like, "tish-mish, tish-mish" (30) the Tommies used to speak when he was in the barracks. Despite his hereditary profession of scavenging, he used to dream of becoming a *sahib* in his linguistic and spoken English skills. "Several times he had felt the impulse to study on his own. And he often sat in his spare time and tried to feel how it felt to read. Recently he had actually gone and brought a first primer of English. But his self-education had not proceeded beyond the alphabet" (31). In a hope of actualizing his dream of overcoming the linguistic barriers and mastering desired fluency, Hari turns optimistic on seeing the two school-going boys, and express his undying will.

The novelist unfolds Bakha's fascination for the western hats. Bakha has always looked with longing at the solar *topee* [hat] that hung on the peg in the verandah of the 38th Dogras' quarter-guard. The novelist writes:

Ever since he was a little child he had contemplated it [hat] with the wonder-struck gaze of the lover and the devotee. Whenever he was given the chance of going out sweeping in the compounds of the 38th Dogras' barracks, he invariably chose the quarter-guard-side, for there he could steal glances at the object he coveted, and plan various devices to win it. Those were nice thoughts, those connected with the schemes he concocted in order to possess that hat. (92-93)

Every single time whenever he has visited the place his eyes have constantly glared at it. He has always wished to own this one as he has no money to buy from the market. Now, when he has been called by Havildar Charat Singh to receive a gift in the form of hockey as the former has been a hockey player, Bakha's every sinew gets dominated with the thought of possessing it. He even starts planning ways to steal it, but the presence of the guards prevents him from materializing it. Moreover, the thoughts of kindness and expectations of Havildar Charat Singh functions as a moral guide in diverting Bakha's over possession with the hat, and changing his thinking.

After being reprimanded for wasting the afternoon from his father, Bakha leaves the home dejected and sits near the *pipal* tree beside the public latrines. He starts cursing his destiny for disgraceful events of the day. He wishes for isolation. Colonel Hutchinson, the priest and chief of the local Salvation Army notices him who perceives his sadness and asks him for his well-being in broken Hindi. He tries to define himself, "'I am a padre [priest] and my God is *Yessuh Messiah*,' and ' If you are in trouble, come to Jesus in the *Girija ghar*'" (115). Bakha gets baffled that how he knows about his misery. When Bakha asks that who Jesus is, the priest tells him to visit the Church with him and starts enchanting a song, "'Life is found in Jesus / Only there 'tis offered thee / Offered without price or money / 'Tis the gift of God sent free'" (116). Although Bakha does not understand what he is saying; he follows the sahib because the sahib bore trousers. And "Trousers had been the dream of his life" (118). The priest had been visiting the outcaste colony for a long time, had learned broken Hindi too to reach among the natives. He had been appreciated by the outcaste natives for his incriminatory behaviour. He was a missionary, who had been encouraging people to change religion. Some natives had converted to Christianity too. But when it comes to Bakha, the Priest fails to convince him completely in

the first attempt. Here, Efforts from this priest bring into mind Rudyard Kipling's Phrase, white man's burden.

Towards the end of the novel, Bakha attends the address of Mahatma Gandhi in Bulashah. Gandhi was not permitted to speak on *swaraj* (self-government) Gandhi is welcomed by the congregation with great warmth and enthusiasm. He speaks on the issue of untouchability and asserts his firmness for its abolition. He announces a more polite term *Harijans* (men of God) for untouchables. Bakha feels privileged being a part of the congregation, and for being acquainted with Gandhi's vision. He also listens that the task of scavenging would be done with machines, and wishes to share the supposed liberation with his father. Though the masses support the Gandhian ideas like *swadeshi* (use of local article) and self-governance, Bakha fancies for the English lifestyle and likes other Gandhian ideas. Moreover, the influence of western culture does not lessen on account of Bakha, he still seeks glamorous cultural appropriation.

The imperial powers leave their influence on the indigenous subjects advertently or inadvertently and in the case of Bakha, it becomes indelible. Bakha and his friend Chota represent the fancies of the younger generation attracted towards the charm and glamour of western life. The western manners, lifestyle, presentation, discipline of army life and certain habits impress them like dress up, smoking cigarettes, drinking tea voicelessly, using latrines for relieving themselves, devoting time for sports, preference to education etc. Besides these external charms, Bakha is influenced by their behavioural practices like he is not treated as untouchable the way he is treated by the Hindus. Their religion does not discriminate the way his does. His experience of being touched by an upper Hindu man in the town and the created scene thereafter, flinging off the bread from the upper storey at him, the attempt of the Pundit in the temple to molest his sister Sohini, and thereafter the created drama of being polluted, and waiting for the mercy of some upper caste Hindu at the well to take water, the humiliation from upper Caste Hindus resulted from their having purification bath after an untouchable's touch, all contribute for the disliking of native socio-cultural milieu. Moreover, one explicitly sees a transitional shift towards the white men's culture where there is comparatively less discrimination, and emphasis is on education overtly.

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