

ISSN: 2278-9529



GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

July 2015 Vol. 4. Issue IV

www.galaxyimrj.com

Editor-In-Chief- Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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As the Subaltern Speaks: A Carnavalesque Re-reading of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

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Abstract:

Mulk Raj Anand's Bakha is that 'mimicry man' in Dalit literature who ostensibly stands as the brunt of humiliation and alterity as the marginalized. But my argument is that, there is a streak of the carnivalesque that makes its way into the matrix of the novel, thereby turning tables in subtle Bakhtinian subversion and reversal, so much so that the subaltern begins to speak. Bakha does speak—yet not with words as thousands of years' of colonization of the mind had robbed the collective voice away. But his body speaks—with a momentary glint in the angry but silent eye, or a clench of the helpless hands or the heaving of the laden chest or the drawing back of the outraged lips in an irate snarl.

This paper aims at showing how Anand, an avid adherer to the Bloomsbury Group, makes intelligent but tongue-in-cheek use of Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the Carnavalesque and what is known as WUD or 'world-upside-down' in order to figure out a commentary on Bakha's plight and by extension, the plight of all the untouchable Bakhās that people a caste-ridden India.

Keywords: *Carnavalesque, World-upside-down, Alterity, Mimicry, Dalit Assertion, 'Anumana', 'Anubhava'*.

Literature Review:

In 1935, Mulk Raj Anand penned *Untouchable*—the novel that was to earn him the pride of place at the very pinnacle of literary glory. Sporting a generic title that seems to hold out promises of the story of the Dalit untouchables in India, the matrix of the novel zeroes in on a rather interior monologic tale of Bakha—the young sweeper—one single day in whose checkered life unfolds in episodic metanarrative through the novel.

The novel starts out with a vivid conceptualization of the marginalization of this young Dalit named Bakha. As Narsimaih puts it, '....Bakha is one of those millions who crawl and creep and exist almost anonymously'(20)But as life would have it, towards mid-day, and therefore towards the mid-point of the novel (for the novel follows the events in that one single day in Bakha's life), things go crazily awry as Bakha suddenly develops an irresistible itch to peek inside a Hindu temple to find out what exactly goes on inside. As he inches his way up the temple stairs to be able to look into the magical world of the Gods, the humans below take terrible exception

to the audacity of this Dalit sweeper who dared to cross the line instead of respectfully toeing it—as the saying goes.

Sacrilege:

The conservative Hindu society hinged on a caste based hierarchy that was quite stringent in its rubric of norms. The Brahmins were ensconced snugly at the apex of this socio-religious order, while the untouchable Dalits brought up a very miserable rear with the stigma of being non-includable—so to speak—into the circle of touchable classes. The Dalits were ostracized. They were not supposed to interact with the upper classes. They were not supposed to drink from their wells, visit their temples, play with their children or even touch them or cross paths with them.

If ever a Dalit dared to step out of these rules, he was liable to be punished for sacrilege as and however the upper castes especially the Brahmins decided. Three thousand years of prejudice had done its job so thoroughly that even the Dalits themselves began to believe in and accept their untouchability and stigma without raising an eyebrow. This was a colonization of the mind that had ruled the roost for ages too strongly to be wiped out in a matter of years. But every process of colonization looks towards reverse colonization that threatens to overturn years of what comes to be practiced as tradition. But then, it is always with very tentative and gingerly steps that the process of reverse colonization unfolds.

In *Untouchable*:

Thus, as the caste-ridden Hindu milieu would have it, it took just moments for a very angry, outraged, indignant crowd of upper caste ‘Touchables’ to surge around the hapless ‘untouchable’ Bakha in a predatory circle, ‘as in the grand finale of an opera show’ (52). But as the crowd closes in on Bakha in the middle, the readers, who are afforded a *coup-de-ouill* at the incidents as if in aerial omniscience, can visualize a diagrammatic representation of the scene that ironically tells an entirely different story. Apparently, Bakha is hounded by the Brahmins circling him. But the diagrammatic representation of the scene would find a picture of a circular periphery with a centre—and astonishingly—with Bakha at the centre with the apparently menacing crowd at the margin—the periphery.

The discerning reader distinctly smells a definite literary rat as Mulk Raj Anand goes on to corroborate this hunch by recounting how “ Bakha rushed back to the middle of the courtyard, dragging his sister behind him and he searched for the figure of the priest in the crowd. The man was no longer to be seen and even the surging crowd seemed to show its heels as it saw the giant stride of the sweeper advance frighteningly towards the temple. ...His fist was clenched. His eyes flared wild and red, and his teeth ground between them the challenge: ‘I could show you what that Brahmin dog has done.’ ”

Suddenly, thus, in a strange twist in the situation, the hunted turns hunter—the prey turns predator—the accused turns accuser and the dominated dominates. And along with that, a whole

hierarchy of social construct that was used to feeding upon ages of caste bias and the resultant domination of the lower caste by the upper caste, comes crashing down to the terra firma of primal instincts as the incensed Dalit takes centre stage as subject-at-the-centre and addresses and accuses the crowd at the periphery as the object-at-the-margin.

As one mulls over the lines where the crowd had gathered to ‘watch the fun’—so to speak—and then, to their consternation, find tables turning so much so that they quietly choose to melt away into invisibility before the furious eyes of the enraged Bhangi, one realizes that the literary fun comes not from Bakha being put down in public but just the other way round. The readers enjoy a few moments of the delicious ‘serves-them-right’ pleasure that comes out of seeing the age-old prejudice of years being set on its head.

The Carnavalesque:

Mulk Raj Anand then, uses the Carnavalesque modality to open up a few moments of egalitarianism, freedom and exuberance through an ironical reversal of roles that affords a brief but idealistic vision of a rubric of social construct that leaves caste based mental biases behind.

When Mikhail Bakhtin first broached the clou of ‘carnivalisation’ as he called it, in the chapter titled ‘From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse’ in his book, *The Dialogic Imagination*, he tried to point out how the carnivalesque makes a thousand and one inroads into our daily existence ironically or otherwise.

Positing the theory of the Carnavalesque as a powerful post-Renaissance methodology, Bakhtin theorises the Carnavalesque as a hidden transcript of a ‘second life’ which offers a sneak peek into what could/should be, as in contrast with what is. The carnivalesque implies freedom, egalitarianism and exuberance. Hermeneutically, the carnival evolved as a festive ritual before Lent as the last day of eating meat after which meat was to be shunned for the Lentian Fast. Hence ‘*carnelevare*’ or putting aside flesh was the basic idea behind the carnival. Thus when Bakhtin talked about the carnivalesque he sketched out the systematic rubric of a pageantry of sorts where a utopian construct is edged forth, where the conventional *scalanaturae* of social hierarchy and accepted notions of culture are set on their heads. Authoritative voices of society are defied and silenced through an ostensible veneer of jest. The beggar can get anointed as king and the poor man can have his fill of ranting at the rich—and all of that would be accepted in the name of ‘Humour’—the life of the carnival—which subverts and undercuts the seriousness assigned to social norms and customs to afford them authenticity. Thus, in the process, an alternative world order is formulated in which, rank is toppled, hierarchy is subverted, barriers are broken, stigmas are nullified and in short, the ideal often becomes real. Thus even if it is for a short time, the carnival affords an ‘upside-down world’ (UDW) view that dares to challenge and put to serious question the accepted templates of social norms.

The carnivalesque thus hinges on a few factors that serve as literary gimmicks that bring about the sense-through-nonsense that the genre aims at.

The carnivalesque looks forward to a kind of exotic and esoteric free-mixing of what could otherwise be termed misalliances. Under that methodology, unlikely people are grouped together. Thus, the rich and the poor, the young and the old, Heaven and Hell, the pure and the impure, the touchable and the untouchable come together in preposterous liaison.

Again, as a corollary to this outrageous carnivalistic misalliances, there follows some behavioral eccentricity that have a great deal of socio-psychological purport. Otherwise socially unacceptable behavior, thus is often allowed and accepted in the carnivalesque, thereby making room for the unspoken to be voiced, the separated to be united and the unheard of to happen.

But then this could also lead to some not-so-easy phases. Bakhtin had it that the carnivalesque even allowed for sacrilegious events to occur without the fear of punishment. Thus, the carnivalesque often set the existing socio-religio-psychological order of the day on its head.

Anand's *Untouchable* as Carnival:

Discussing the carnivalesque in *Untouchable*, I would zero in on the one signature scene in the novel—the earlier-mentioned scene that occurs plunk in the mid-point of the matrix of the novel. Bakha the untouchable suddenly has this mad wish to see what's up there in the Hindu temple. And all hell breaks loose. As the crowd closes in on Bakha, the whole charade takes on the look of a show—a carnival—where a throng in the subject position, aims its collective gaze on one object in the limelight. Normally, the untouchable at the receiving end of the gaze of the touchables is not supposed to talk back. Yet Bakha talks back. The subaltern does speak, if not in words, then in body language that was quietly menacing enough to make the jeering crowd begin to back out.

All the paraphernalia of the carnivalesque falls into place as Bakha squares the crowd. The 'free-mixing of misalliances' earlier discussed happens as the touchables of society stand alarmed at the silent encoding of a message of violence on the part of one who is not even supposed to speak as they decode the ostensible note of latent revolt in Bakha's stance. The 'world upside-down', or (WUD) as Stallybrass, P. & White, A. (1986) in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, London: Methuen. term it in carnival jargon, surfaces, to the bewilderment of the touchable upper class as the sacrilegious threatens to subvert the accepted rubric of religious hierarchy. A lot gets voiced in the voiceless standing back of the subaltern. Alterity is thrown to the winds as Bakha turns around to glare at the ring of upper class people around him. Though glare silently is all Bakha can do after ages of socio-psychological conditioning that the panopticon of societal norms subjects him to, it proves to be enough to shift his position instantaneously from the object to the subject—from the periphery to the centre.

Yet, just when the readers begin to look forward with delicious anticipation to an angry outburst from an enraged Bakha, Bakha decides to simmer down as he leads his violated sister away from the upper caste crowd, whose seemingly invincible stance was shaken up a good deal by Bakha's

threatening rebelliousness. Thousands of years of social conditioning checks his steps for fear of goodness knows what. Bakha—all the Bakhas in the Hindu society, for that matter—have carefully been subjected to a well-impacted brainwashing with ideas of the invincibility and power of the Brahminical upper caste so much so that they fail to figure out clearly why they are following the pro-upper caste norms with such fidelity or alacrity and what could happen if they stood around and refused to follow those rules that ostracized and denigrated them with such viciousness. It is the same nebulous impression of guilt that holds Bakha back from revolting. It is this pre-conditioning that prevents Bakha's balled up fists from landing those well-deserved blows on the cynical complacency of the upper caste, smug with the certainty of years of preferential treatment.

This pre-conditioning surfaces even more clearly when Bakha tries to talk it out with his father Lakha. Sensing Bakha's itchiness for revolt, Lakha tries to cool him down by recounting why they, the untouchables should not contemplate revolt. Lakha goes on to count the blessings of the Upper caste moneyed lot, who, according to Lakha, deserve to be respected and never answered back to as they have done a lot for the likes of Lakha in need. Ages of socio-psychological pre-conception speaks through Lakha.

Research findings:

Mulk Raj Anand, writing in the beginning of the twentieth century, might or might not have been acquainted with the Bakhtinian tradition of the carnivalesque as Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* saw the light of day in 1965. But *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* came out in 1929 making it possible that hints of the carnivalesque could have been a deliberate ploy by Anand to employ the western thoughts to sort out Indian problems. As it is, Mulk Raj Anand was closely associated with the Bloomsbury Group, which could account for the perceptible leftist hint in his writings.

But one snag that hitches the fictional matrix of *Untouchable* back is the fact that Mulk Raj Anand not being a Dalit himself, the novel is written from 'Anumana'—a vicarious perspective that could or could not be as authentic as literature written from 'Anubhava'. And the very same reason takes away something out of the vehemence of Dalit Assertion that finds its way into the fourth world literature of authors like Sharan Kumar Limbale, R.S.Rokade, Jyoti Lanjewar and Arjun Dangle. In *Untouchable* it is always second person narration vouching for first person experience.

But then, as Marlene Fisher puts it, '...Anand's first novel, then, is at one and the same time a fine piece of creative work in terms of its own artistic integrity and an indication of its author's humanistic commitments and future novelistic directions'. (32)

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