

Performing the Sahib : The Reasons and Results of Bakha's Mimicry in *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand

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Mulk Raj Anand is an Indian writer. Who is one of the first Indian writer in English to gain an international readership. *Untouchable*, the most famous novel by Mulk Raj Anand, presents stark reality of Indian society. The novelist has depicted one day in the life of Bakha modeled on the novel of James Joyce- *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines the word Mimic as, "To copy the way somebody speaks, moves, behaves etc" (OALD 808). The *mimic* is a type of character can be found in many east-west encounter books. The *mimic* cannot resist the natural urge to mimic the foreign ways of life. He seems to have found a bountiful treasure of which he cannot take enough. He seems possessed by this alien, yet glamorous foreign culture.

The character of Bakha which he has presented as a protagonist of novel is a *mimic* of the foreigners throughout the novel. He is shown as a boy of eighteen years old, strong and able-bodied. Lakha, his father, is a Jamadar of all the sweepers in the town and officially in-charge of the three rows of public latrines. While working with his uncle, Bakha is caught by the glamour of the white man's life. The Tommies or the Britishers treat him as a human being and he learnt to think of himself as a superior to his fellow outcastes in return. This fact stands as one of the reasons for him to start to do mimicry of the foreigners. Their good treatment towards him makes him feel superior to others. This treatment soothes him, heals him from the wounds of his inferior position. Then whatever attraction he feels about them is not at all wrong. He justifies himself when his friends also like to copy the Britishers. His friend Chota, a leather worker's son, oils his hair and parts it like the Englishmen on one side. He also wears a pair of shorts at hockey and smokes cigarettes just like them. His other friend, Ram Charan, the washer man's son, also apes Chota and Bakha. These three boys are satisfied in their lot of mimicry. Bakha feels attraction for the Britishers because of his pathetic condition. He always thinks about the uncongeniality of his home. He lives in twelve feet by five, dark, dingy, one roomed mud-house. He has a broken string bed, worn-out, greasy blanket and a faded blue carpet. For the first time when he goes to live at the British regimental barracks with his uncle, he looks at the Tommies and stares with wonder and amazement in his heart. During that time, he closely observes the life of the Tommies. He observes that these foreigners sleep on low canvas beds covered with blankets. They eat eggs for their breakfasts. They drink tea and wine in tin mugs. They go to parade. They walk with cigarettes in their mouths and small silver mounted canes in their hands. During his sojourn there with the foreigners, through their glimpses, he collects as much as he can copy them. He gets completely possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life. He begs one of the Tommies for a gift of a pair of trousers in order to wear clothes like the foreigners and to be like them. The man gives him a pair of breeches which he can spare. A Hindu sepoy gives him a pair of boots and puttees. Here, he does mimicry of wearing clothes of the foreigners. He longs to wear their clothes and even begs them for their clothes. This shows he is much possessed by the thought of wearing their clothes. He looks at the British clothing as something superior to his own, as he has been told that they are sahibs, superior people. He feels that by wearing their clothes one can become a sahib too. There is no social, political or cultural pressure on Bakha for doing the mimicry. He is seen willingly imitating them.

The nights have always been cold in his town. But, during winter and summer he starts to sleep with his day clothes on him. The sharp and bitter wind that blows from the brook at dawn has penetrated to his skin and through the overcoat, breeches, puttees and ammunition boots of the military uniform that clothed him. He is willing to sacrifice a good many comforts for the sake of his mimicry. By wearing trousers, breeches, coat, puttees, boots etc. as worn by the British and Indian soldiers in India, he tries to be aware of what he calls 'fashun.'

Lakha, his father, does not like Bakha's fascination for the foreigners. He forces him to leave what he is doing to be like the foreigners. Mulk Raj Anand mentions, his father had once abusively said to him "take a quilt, spread a bedding on a string bed, and throw away that blanket of gora white men, you will die of cold in that thin cloth." (Anand 2). Bakha is haunted by the feeling of becoming like the Britishers. He does not give any attention to the scolding of his father and even his abuses. Thus, in order to become like a sahib, he is ready to suffer.

Though Bakha has got enough foreign things to make him like them, he does not seem satisfied by having only these things. He goes for other items from the rag-sellers shop in the town. He looks very longingly at the shop. The shopkeeper keeps the scarlet and khaki uniforms discarded or pawned by the Tommies in the

shop. Bakha also watches the pith sola toppies, peak, caps, forks, buttons, old books and other oddment of Anglo-Indian life. As soon as he notices these foreign things in that shop he hungers for the touch of them. He says to himself, "I will look like a Sahib and I shall walk like them. But I have no money to buy things" (Anand 3).

He and Chota start walking like the Britishers but he wants to walk like them wearing their clothes. He has to walk away from the shop rather disappointed and with a heavy heart. He has also got the baksheesh which he has collected from the Tommies amounted to ten rupees. But only by giving ten rupees, he cannot buy all the things in rag-seller's shop which he has wished to buy for himself. So, he decides to buy the jacket, the overcoat, the blanket etc. After buying these things a few annas are left over with him. He thinks to use it for the enjoyment of Red-Lamp cigarettes that he likes. Bakha gets satisfaction after buying the things from the shop which will help to make him a sahib. He himself does not understand why he is following the foreigners. He also follows them in smoking cigarettes like them. He thinks that if the sahibs are doing certain things, it is necessary for him to copy them in it; otherwise, he will remain inferior and will never be superior like them.

Bakha's father does not like that he is spending money on buying things to do mimicry of the sahibs. He does not like Bakha's extravaganza. His friends from the outcaste's colony make jokes calling him 'Pilpali Sahib' means imitation of sahib. Here we can notice that Bakha has an identity which he has been created by his circumstances. As mentioned in *Dictionary of Critical Theory* about the word identity, "This may be either a self-composed image, i.e. the image one has of oneself, or, it may be imposed from outside, i.e. the image others have of one" (Buchanan 242). Even Chota and Ram Charan, cut jokes at his cost on account of his new clothes. Bakha does not feel insulted even if his friends tease him. Many people, along with his father and friends, are against his imitation of the foreigners. But nothing can stop him from following their life style. These restrictions give him more encouragement to continue doing the mimicry. When others tease him calling him Pilpali Sahib, he analyses himself whether he is completely following the Britishers or not. By this analysis he comes to the conclusion that except for his English clothes there is really nothing English in his life. After this he starts to find out the way to become completely like the Britishers. He tries to find out other things more than the clothes to turn him into a sahib.

Bakha thinks that even if he works hard his father still abuses him. His father does not want him to follow the Britishers only because they are not natives but foreigners. His father himself is afraid of the sepoys. But when they call him Jamadar, ironically, he becomes happy. Bakha says, "So proud of his izzat!" (Anand 5) as Bakha is not able to understand this double personality of his father. His father is against Bakha's imitation of the Britishers but he is happy about their treatment towards himself. Bakha also thinks that his father scolds him for following sahibs because he is getting too old and he does not know anything related to the sahibs.

Bakha has worked in the British barracks for a long time. He is ashamed of the native way of performing ablutions. He hates natives gargling and spitting in public. One of the reasons for this hatred is because according to him the sahibs do not like these habits of the natives. The Tommies abuse the natives for behaving like this. Bakha feels embarrassed about the use of bath tubs by the Britishers. But he thinks that if the Britishers perform the act they cannot be blamed because they are sahibs; whatever the sahibs do must be 'fushun' because they are superior to his people.

Bakha thinks that the white men call the natives 'kala log' (black people) because of the cheap habit of the natives of not using latrines. He thinks that the natives must behave like the Britishers to get praise from them.

Bakha observes the furniture of the foreigners. He wishes to have the same type of furniture in his own house. But he is poor and he cannot buy all the furniture he wants. He has only one broken chair to keep in his house. He tries to sit on the edge of his cane chair like the Britishers. The chair has European design and this gives him some satisfaction. He feels that he has totally completed his ambition to live like an Englishman.

Bakha's subject of talk with his friends is the life style of the foreigners. He is all praises for Ramcharan for wearing nice clothes for his sister's marriage. He compliments his fine waist coat and the gold thread on the velvet clothes. Bakha advises him to iron the clothes properly. After looking at the chain on his coat he asks him, "Is there a watch attached to it or is it merely for fashun"(Anand 27).

Chota, one of his friends, offers Bakha a packet of Red-Lamp cigarettes for smoking. Both of them smoke cigarettes only to follow the British habit of smoking the same cigarettes and not because they love smoking. His friends arrange hockey matches with the boys of thirty-first Punjabis team. The sons of the sahibs give used hockey sticks to the boys from the outcaste's colony. Bakha comes to play hockey. He brings a new hockey stick from Havildar Charat Singh to play hockey. He also brings along a new ball. Bakha plays hockey and he is a champion at it only because he knows that the Britishers take a sincere interest in playing games. Some of his friends are seen wearing shorts like the sahibs to play hockey.

Havildar Charat Singh looks at Bakha and notices that he is wearing a uniform. He says sarcastically, “You are becoming a gentleman, Ohe Bakha! Where did you get that uniform?” (Anand 8). People like Charat Singh are astonished by Bakha’s strong urge of doing mimicry. Though Havildar Charat Singh helps Bakha by giving him a new ball and a hockey stick he does not seem much happy about Bakha’s increasing fascination for the Britishers.

Once, Sohini, Bakha’s sister, prepares tea for her family. She pours some of it into two earthen bowls. Bakha comes to drink the tea. He offers a bowl to his father and takes one for himself. Bakha deliberately avoids the habit of blowing on tea to cool it because this is one of the habits he has learnt at the British barracks from the Tommies. He considers that both his uncle’s and his father’s spattering sips are ‘natus’ (native) habits.

The whole day brings a lot of problems and tortures for Bakha because he imitates the Britishers. But the only compensation he gets throughout the day is his love for the life of the foreigners. The good treatment which he receives from the white people offers him another real solace in his troubled life.

He also thinks that one can read the newspapers after having been to school and that, without taking education one cannot read or write. He further thinks that after having good education one can communicate with the sahibs. So if one wants to talk with a sahib he must be an educated person. Bakha also thinks that being uneducated, the people have to run to the educated people to get their letter read. The novelist mentions, “He had felt a burning desire, while he was in the British barracks, to speak the tish-mish, tish-mish which the Tommies spoke.” (Anand 30).

Bakha’s urge to learn and to educate himself arises from his views that by education and having some learning he can make himself like the Britishers. This urge of Bakha has grown when he used to live at the barracks of the British regiment with his uncle. He not only wishes to learn some English but also to read some books. His feeling of reading some book is also related to his observation of the reading habits of the sahibs in their free time. Bakha’s urge to speak English is of course because of the impression of the Britishers he has on his mind. The Britishers speak English which is different from his own native language. He thinks that if they speak in that language, it must be a superior language and it can make him like the sahib. During his stay at the British barracks, he tells his father about his ambition to be like the sahib. At that time, his uncle advises him he would have to go to school if he wants to be a sahib. “He had begun to work at the latrines at the age of six and resigned himself to the hereditary life of the craft, but he dreamed of becoming a sahib.” (Anand 31). When Bakha was a child, he liked to look at his mother adorned with silver ornaments. He also desired to wear rings on his fingers when he was a child. But now he has stayed at the British barracks and knows that the English do not like jewellery. So, he is filled with disgust for the designs of the native ornaments that he comes across. When he passes in front of the jewellery shop, he passes without noticing the big ear-rings and nose-rings and hair flowers and other gold-plated ornaments. Even when he used to like the native jewellery as a child, he starts to hate its sight as a grown-up mimic.

One of the reasons of his mimicry is because he is born in a lower caste. The people from his surrounding give him the feeling of an untouchable constantly. Dr. B. K. Rawat in his, *Mulk Raj Anand: A Critical Study* puts that, ‘The simplest way for Bakha to imitate the Tommies was through ‘fashun’ by which he learned the art of wearing trousers, breeches, coat, boots etc. He was trying to rise above his caste by westernizing, yet he only received insults from his friends about his dress.’ (Rawat 44).

Being an outcaste, Bakha is not allowed to go to the village well to fetch water. When Sohini, Bakha’s sister, goes to the well, a priest gives her water and calls her at the temple to sweep the courtyard later. He comes to know that the priest is shouting at Sohini. Then Bakha tries to go near her but the priest shouts at them, “Get off the steps, you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service; you have defiled our temple! Now we will have to pay for the purification ceremony. Get down, get away, you dog!” (Anand 53).

While walking on the roads, Bakha listens to people shouting 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.” (Anand 38). He has to bare the words, “Dirty Dog! Son of bitch! The offspring of a pig’ every day. He had to announce his coming by saying, ‘Posh keep away, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming!’” (Anand 38).

Bakha has to beg bread at every house for his living. A woman flings a piece of bread at him from the top floor of her house. The betel-leaf seller also flings the packet at the untouchable as a butcher throws a bone to a dirty dog.

All these incidents in Bakha's life show that he has no place in his own society. Every one abuses him. He tries to come out of this trap of casteism by mimicking the sahibs. It is only the Britishers who treat him well, as a human being. Shaileshwar Sati Prasad refers in his *The Insulted and the Injured* that, "for it is in the regiment that Bakha comes across the people who are willing to give him his due as a human being." (Shaileshwar 43).

Mulk Raj Anand also mentions about the good treatment by the Tommies to Bakha. He writes "The Tommies had treated him as a human being and he had learnt to think of himself as superior to his fellow-outcastes" (Anand 2).

Bakha suffers a lot from his own people. People avoid touching him from the fear of getting polluted. Schools are also not for the untouchables. In this condition it seems natural for Bakha to look at the westerners for a new hope. So, it is mentioned by Satendra Kumar in his *Unheard Voices of Dalit Literature* that, "In such a humiliating situation, it is only natural that Bakha would develop a disdain and contempt for the so-called upper caste Hindus and turn to Tommies for inspiration. And why not because they treat him as human being, which is what he had expected from his fellow Hindus and which is what he had not got." (Satendra 140).

Bakha's father abuses him for doing mimicry of the Britishers and not doing his duty well with a whole heart. His father scolds that, "Won't you give me some rest in my old age? There you go trying to be a sahib when you are a sweeper's son" (Anand 108). Colonel Hutchinson asks Bakha about the reason of his sadness. Bakha gets surprised because he has expected that his friends or someone from the outcaste's colony will come to console him. The Colonel further asks him that if Bakha is ill. Bakha is confused by the flood of kindness. The Colonel also tries to tell Bakha that he is not superior or sahib, he is just like Bakha, an ordinary person. But for Bakha, all the sahibs are sahibs.

Later Bakha thinks, "He was a sahib all right. And this sahib had condescended to pat him on the back, to speak kind words to him, even to ask him why he was looking so sad" (Anand 116). Thus, Bakha yearns to do mimicry of the Britishers because only they treat him well in the midst of his harsh environment.

Conclusion:

Bakha has chosen to do mimicry because of the above-mentioned reasons. But by mimicking he also seems to be trying to seek his own identity. He has no identity for himself being an untouchable in his native society. During the whole day he follows the British life style completely and when he sleeps, he dreams about wearing a sola topee on his head and people dressed in the uniform of English Army Carrying clarinets, bugles, flutes, super-saxophones and drums accompanying him in a procession. This shows that, even in his dreams Bakha thinks about himself as a *mimic*. His dreams show his unconscious mind. The bullying from his own people forces him to seek his identity and he finds his new identity as a *mimic*. Premila Paul in her *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand: A Thematic Study* writes, "It results in an existential realization of his true plight; it has also the salutary effect of making him aware of his lack of identity and consequently launching him on the quest of it" (Premila 16).

This mimicry helps him to have his identity as a mimic and become superior like sahibs and not as an untouchable as the people treat him. Mulk Raj Anand also mentions that, "It was a queer mixture of own and romance the alternation of his hatred for his own town and the love for the world to which he looked out. He didn't like his home, his street, his town, because he had been to work at the Tommies barracks and obtained glimpses of another world, strange and beautiful. He was a pioneer in his own way and was completely unconscious that it could be applied to him." (Anand 69). Most of the people including his father, friends, Charat Singh and some people in the society directly or indirectly through their positive or negative responses influence Bakha to be a *mimic*.

Thus, Bakha seeks his identity as a *mimic* throughout the novel through a journey of a day. Perhaps he unconsciously gets attracted to everything western and becomes a *mimic* in a complete possession of a foreign culture in his soul.

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