

Bakha Dismissed by *Untouchable* or The Internal-Textual Dislocation: Notes on narrative text and its "Im-perfections"

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Abstract: The paper aims to reveal how in Mulkaraj Anand's fiction *Untouchable* the very narrative alienates its hero Bhaka. He thus is doubly marginalized. He is marginalized by the society, the obvious conditionality of a sudra boy in an orthodox location. He again is marginalized by the text/narrative itself of which he is a hero. The narrative dislocates him which I refer to as "internal-textual dislocation." There are multiple instances of people and their language which dismiss him to the edge where he does not comprehend the situations around.

There are as many mortifying experiences in Bakha's daylong errand as there are lanes in Bulandshahr. Remember "fear, humility and servility" (53) by touching the man in the bazaar and getting a slap, then alerting the people in the streets about his polluted presence, "Posh, posh, sweeper coming" (59). Remember the little priest of the temple who lied about being polluted by Sohini and whom his brother Bakha had to rescue under the gazing devotees of the temple (69). Then a piece of bread was flung at him when he was walking back from the temple. "All the accumulated fury of the morning was in Bakha's soul and the rage of this fresh insult," tells the narrator (83). Lakha, Bakha's father, added more to the insult by telling his own story at Hakim's clinic (90). The tales do not end here. Bakha goes to the wedding of Ram Charan's sister who had been his wife in a play and which Bakha "always felt proud of" (97). One then sees Bakha's with his own self, his "solitary excursion" in the Bulandshahr hills, sad and lonely (105). Later, he again was humiliated by the little boy's mother while playing hockey (129).

These all are Bakha and the world he lives in. He is the untouchable who is illegally begotten, scoundrel of a sweeper's son, low caste vermin, swine, cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion, scavenger, dog, eater of the masters, sister-raper, and he is yet a Harijan for a Mahatma. There is nothing to wonder about the bitter truths of the world that looks at Bakha with mind and soul of hatred, but what surprises us is when the grand narration of Christ and Gandhi fails to communicate to him. He partly understands or seems to understand them, but mostly does not. They thus distance Bakha.

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My thesis in this context is that Bakha is not merely a dismissed subaltern subject depicted by the novelist, but a dismissed character by the novel's own fictionality: the text that alienates and marginalizes him, not merely the people and society of the novel. It is not only the world that marginalizes and mortifies him but the text too, which otherwise is meant to articulate him and speak about him. He at times is textually-internally exiled. *Untouchable* speaks about Bakha, articulates and represents him, but by the same game of articulation and representation, the boy is alienated. The novel, which is known to preserve and sustain him, marginalizes him by the end. He is marginalized by the world he lives in and also by the words that apparently sustain him.

The novelistic text, its language, the preface written by E. M. Forster, the memory of Christ and the arrival of Gandhi, and the rhetoric of the poet by the end of the novel betray him more than the "touched man" and the priest had done to him. When he is depicted marginalized, the story is a narration of sympathy, pity, love and admiration for Bakha. The rules by which the text is sympathetic towards Bakha, in turn are the causes of his dismissal. The paper tries to show how the narration of dismissal begins in Forster's celebrated "Preface." The dismissal continues when he has to wait for Gandhi to be lifted or when he comes to know that the Mahatma had gone for fasting. There are many such instances of dismissing and dislocating him.

Dismissal and dislocation are the dynamism of the text which can be understood by the textual nuances that a narration cannot be faithful to itself all the time. The story performs faithfulness, sympathy, but it cannot sustain this act because faithfulness and sympathy are performances of faithfulness and sympathy: performance, textual or theatrical cannot be always perfect, honest, and true to whatever the story seemingly intends. As the day gradually sheds its light, the story cannot keep up its promises to be sympathetic and loving to Bakha.

He understands the inhuman words hurled at him, but is distanced when words of love are poured on him. The textual betrayal begins with the image of Christ. Colonel Hutchinson who was the chief of the local Salvation Army "went out wallowing the mire for the sake of Jesus Christ, talking to some Untouchable among the rubbish heaps about divinity and trinity" (135). Hutchinson saw Bakha "udas" (137). Colonel talked to him with love and sympathy but he had little realized that he was not communicating the grand narration of Christ with the boy. He sings:

'Life is found in Jesus
 Only there 'tis offered thee;
 offered without price or money
 'Tis the gift of God sent free.' (140)

Bakha was trying to understand the words of love he rarely is familiar with. "He followed willingly, listening to each word that the Colonel spoke, but not understanding a word" (140). He keeps on asking and the Colonel sings lines from *the Bible*. "But apart from the muffled sound of words he could not catch anything" (141). The texts of scripture fail him. "Bakha was bored by this ecstatic hymn-singing" while he only "was happy and proud to be in touch with a sahib" (142). He "was baffled and bored. He did not understand anything of these songs" (143). The divine grace and the ideas of us all being sinners did not please him and he was not ready to accept that we all are sinners (145).

He runs away from the alien ancient sublime language. The text of love and sympathy, which is different from the world he lives in, is the language which is true, faithful and honest to Bakha, but little communicable to him. The level of communicability that has hitherto been there till Bakha was under the hateful eyes of the people fails when words of love are bestowed upon him. The language of Christ is Anand's language, language close to the point of view of the novelist if not the novelist's. The language is close to the language of Havildar Charat Singh, and the language of the ancient scripture is very close to Gandhi who will be arriving soon in Golbag.

Mahatma comes at Golbagh. "The word 'Mahatma' was like a magical magnet, to which he, like all the other people about him, rushed blindly" (151). The atmosphere was carnivalesque. "Men, women and children of all the different races, colours, castes and creeds, were running towards the oval[""] (151-52). The narrator writes, "Gandhi alone united him with them (the crowd), in the mind, because Gandhi was in everybody's mind, including Bakha's. Gandhi might unite them really. Bakha waited for Gandhi" (153).

Gauri Viswanathan comments:

Mulk Raj Anand's description of the untouchable Bakha's expanding vision of an all-embracing unity, which dissolved caste barriers through the mediating influence of Gandhi, partakes of the language of transcendental mysticism, its lofty and liberal sentiments beclouding the possibilities of real political change for untouchables . . . (221)

One does not know how Gandhian vision with Marxist undertones make the grand narrative mysticism comprehensible to Bakha. He understands Gandhi in patches. Viswanathan thinks, "The most devastating line in this already troublesome passage is the last one (Bakha waited for Gandhi), which inscribes Bakha's expected transformation into the trajectory of a Gandhian passive revolution" (222). She continues:

The phrase "in the mind" already depoliticized the interventionary role of Gandhi, just as Bakha's being lifted "through the barriers of space" detaches him from the material world in which real change is produced.

The historical realities of exclusion conceived as physically established and enforced (that is, the denial of entry into temples and Brahmin households) are transmuted into a vague, metaphysical yearning to enter the debarred space of "a sentient, living, quivering contact with (humanity)." (222)

Gandhi was so very visible to the little boy but at the same time was a mystic alienating Bakha in most of his speeches like the Christian song had some hours ago. Bakha had heard

that Gandhi was fasting for the sake of the bhangis and chamars. Bakha could not quite understand what fasting had to do with helping the low-castes. Probably he thinks we are poor and can't get food,' he vaguely surmised,' so he tries to show that even he doesn't have food for days.' (156-57)

Gandhi's fasting is mimicry as Bakha feels that Gandhi "tries to show." Fasting is performing fasting. Gandhi is more than the Hecuba the actor, performing a distanced Hecuba in time and space on stage in *Hamlet*. Gandhi's performance is on the same worldly stage which Bakha belongs to, but the fact that Gandhi was performing was merely a mimetic act and the act was not Bakha's fasting. He can represent fasting with honesty, truth, and faithfulness, but he has to act fasting, not is fasting. You cannot fast far, but you fast. Bakha does not understand this truthful mimicry. Furthermore, look at the performativity: when Gandhi was speaking thus, Bakha "imagined himself rising on the platform, when all was still and the meeting had begun . . ." and "He seemed to get a thrill, imagining himself in this scene. He felt theatrical" (158). Gandhi was acting Bakha and Bakha was performing Gandhi: he was trying to locate himself in the platform, near the Mahatama. Both were acting upon each other in the realm of fantasy. They both were alien to each other despite they being so close in the carnivalesque location of people.

Gandhian speech of the novelistic text was mostly incomprehensible to Bakha despite the fact that the text was meant for the untouchables. "Bakha did not understand these words. He was restless. He hoped the Mahatma wouldn't go on speaking of things he couldn't understand" (163). Gandhi goes on speaking and Bakha keeps on staring at him. He suddenly understands some of Gandhi's visions: "Bakha felt thrilled. A tremor went down his spine. That the Mahatama should want to be born as an outcaste!" (164-65). Performance again! The irony is that Gandhi distances himself further by wishing to be born as untouchable because this again is performative desire, honest though, but a theatrical desire. Gandhi wants to enact re-birth by claiming to be born an untouchable. He moves into myth and leaves the boy alone. And yet Bakha certainly understands that Gandhi is a good man (171), he certainly is.

Poet Iqbal Nath Sarashar confuses Bakha when he was listening to him talking to Mr. R. N. Bashir, in one corner, alluding to *the Vedas* and *the Upnishads*,

baroque exuberance and Marxian materialism. What Bakha understood was about the machine that would come "to remove dung without anyone having to handle it . . ." (174).

The crowd followed Gandhi and disappeared, and Bakha's face, "which had paled and contracted with thoughts a moment ago, reddened in a curious conflict of despair. He didn't know what to do, where to go" (174). But till the machine comes he has to go on scavenging. "He began to move. His virtues lay in his close-knit sinews and in his long-breathed sense. He was thinking of everything he had heard, though he could not understand it all" (175). As the sun descended, the sublime Gandhian text too disappeared as the words of Christ had. The truth of his untouchable existence awaits in the lanes and latrines of the town. Gandhian textual hope was in bits and pieces comprehensible to Bakha, but he again is thrown back into the world of "touched man" and the priest. The novelistic text betrays him because he does not much understand them. Gandhian discourse confirms that he is an untouchable and the poet's announcement dangerously consoles him that his work would be replaced by machine but not his caste.

The final two novelistic texts of Christ and Gandhi have performed writing with im-perfections, not in the sense that they are incorrect, but in the sense that they do not communicate to Bakha except the facts that he is able to interpret some from them. The meaningfulness is vague, amorphous. When others speak to him daily when he walks down the town lanes he understands them. He knows he is an untouchable, but Christian and Gandhian grand narratives alienate him.

And finally here is E. M. Forster's minute on Indian untouchable. He writes in the Preface:

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. And no untouchable could have written the book, because he would not have been involved in indignation and self-pity. Mr. Anand stands in the ideal position. By caste he is Kshatriya, and he might have been expected to inherit the pollution-complex. ("Preface," 9)

The phrase "outside" is a very illusive orientalist term. Then the claim that no European could have created the character of Bakha is Arnoldian in tone and content. Viswanathan says, "Forster's dismissal of the untouchable's right to literary self-representation might likewise be dismissed summarily as a thoughtless, insensitive response . . ." (222). Anand from his ideal position ultimately brings Gandhi to send Bakha in textual maze of love, sympathy, care, and hence alienation. In "On the Genesis of *Untouchable*" Anand writes, "I read my novel to Gandhijee and he suggested I should cut down more than a hundred

pages, especially those passages in which Bakha seemed to be thinking and dreaming and brooding like a Bloomsbury intellectual" (179). Even Gandhi does not like thinking things. The alienating texts I am referring to begins with Forster and ends with Gandhi's own thoughts about Bakha whom he had already alienated in his fictional meeting in Golbag.

Works Cited

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