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THE POSTCOLONIAL CONCEPT OF MIMICRY IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S 'UNTOUCHABLE'

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ABSTRACT

The postcolonial concept of mimicry as a term originated from the word mimic i.e. to copy. So, mimicry is seen when members of a colonized society (say India) imitate the language, dress, politics or cultural activities of their colonizers (say, western world i.e. British or French). Hence, mimicry is a concept where one copies the person in power, because one hopes to have access to that same power for oneself and while copying the master, one has to intentionally suppress one's own cultural identity just the way Bakha did in the novel '*Untouchable*'. Homi Bhabha is one of the major critical theorists of postcolonial discourse who vividly explored and talked about many postcolonial issues in postcolonial contexts among which "mimicry" is one. According to Bhabha, "Mimicry", in colonial and postcolonial sense, is when people of the colonized country imitate the behaviors, attitudes, language and culture of the colonizers. Bhabha says mimicry is a colonial ideology which creates colonial subjects where the East or the less powerful willingly accepts their inferiority and thus this difference of the natives from the superior colonial master forces them to imitate. This paper demonstrates the postcolonial concept of mimicry through the novel '*Untouchable*' where the novel's central character Bakha's over enthusiasm for the British clothes and way of life indicates his escape from his deplorable and oppressed identity of an untouchable, but in reality this escape or freedom from his inferior identity is a reflection of the hidden concept of mimicry in the novel.

Keywords: Untouchable, Mimicry, Bakha, Homi Bhabha, Imitation, Postcolonial, Sahib.

Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand, one of the greatest novelists in Indian Writing in English and is considered a pioneer of the Anglo-Indian fiction and best remembered for his demonstration of the lower classes of people in India and their miserable situation. His main motive and concern is to attack the social snobbery and prejudice, superstition, discrimination and untouchability. As a writer he calls for an attitude filled with love, respect and sympathy for the people living under the poverty mark and leading a life worse than an animal.

The disrespect, subjugation and frustration in Bakha's heart attracts him towards the western way of living which is far more respected and superior than his miserable life of a sweeper boy that too with a title of being 'untouchable' hence throughout the novel in order to escape from being subjugated and get rid of this pathetic disrespectful life Bakha attempts to imitate or mimic the British way of living. He wished and desired to completely look like a 'sahib' i.e. one among the British barracks under whom he even worked for some years on a sort of probation with a remote uncle and thus from there only Bakha was caught by the glamour of the white man's life.

The Postcolonial notion in which the West dominates the East gave rise to the Concept of Mimicry as the feeling of superiority of the colonial masters over the natives. Thus leading the members of the colonized nation to look at themselves as the 'Other', the inferior human beings and ultimately forcing them to imitate their superiors and masters in terms of everything. In other words, the postcolonial studies brought up the issue of subordination of the eastern countries in the hands of the ruling classes and the resultant effect of this domination was 'Mimicry'.

Thus, 'Mimicry' ultimately becomes an opportunistic method of copying the person in power in order to escape from the title of inferior or other of west. Therefore, the West which is always regarded as educated, civilized, reformed, disciplined and knowledgeable indirectly or directly forces the east which is considered as illiterate, barbaric, primitive and ignorant to suppress its own cultural identity and imitate or mimic them.

In Anand's '*Untouchable*' the same thing happens with Bakha the untouchable boy. The novel presents how untouchability cages the lower caste Hindus with iron chains from where it is difficult to come out. Bakha, the protagonist of the novel falls into the same vicious cycle of untouchability from which he wants to escape and therefore unconsciously he is attracted to the English soldiers and their life style in the army barrack. "Bakha was a child of modern India. The clear cut styles of European dress had impressed his naïve mind." (*Untouchable*, 2)

Thus, Bakha imitates the English in order to create an impression but in his mind there was an intense desire to become superior so that he can turn into dominator from the dominated. "The Tommies had treated him as a human being and he had learnt to think of himself as superior to his fellow- outcastes." (*Untouchable*, 2). This line shows how Bakha was affected by the western style of living and in their influence how he even tried to consider himself better than the fellow untouchable people of whom he himself was a part.

Also, Bakha's desire to be an English man is about having the position and power of the English colonizers who are superior in comparison to the Hindus. This unconscious desire to uplift his position is a desire of a **lower class colonized Indian** like Bakha, who is "**the mirror image**" is according to Homi Bhabha. Hence, Mimicry according to Bhabha is not merely the imitation of the human behavior but also the imitation of attitude, lifestyle and the whole outlook of the West by the East.

According to Homi Bhabha, the instinctive urge on part of the colonized or one can say the inferior imitators, to mirror back an image of the colonizer i.e. to mimic the West, the superior creates neither any particular identity nor any difference rather it only creates a sort of "**partial presence**", which is the basis of **mimicry**. In other words, the copying of the western culture by the east can never provide them with a clear identity rather it diminishes and fades the true native identity of the less powerful imitators.

Therefore, mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable '**Other**' or 'inferior of West', as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not exactly the same hence presenting the culture or lifestyle of inferior imitators only as copy of the West. But still the imitators like Bakha in the novel '*Untouchable*' mimic these western culture and style in order to escape from their suppressed and disrespectful identity of **harijan** or untouchable in the stereotypical Indian society, because for such inferior examples of 'Other' like Bakha with such suppressed titles which our Indian society impose on them, the partial copied western identity is far more better and enough in comparison of the original disrespectful and deplorable identity of East.

In fact, I think the mimicry of Bakha can be seen from two prospective. One is from the larger point of view in which he stands between the British colonizers and the Indian colonizers and where he in the form of an

eastern representor or East copies the culture of the British colonizers i.e. the West. The other angle is within the Indians, who view Bakha as a 'creature' between the upper class Hindus and the lower class Hindus and therefore he represents the lower strata of society who are considered as untouchables as they are the cleaners of the dirt of others and hence the Hindus view them as dirt and thus how Bakha like all untouchables struggles to prove himself as a normal Hindu boy though being an untouchable, a sweeper.

As for Bakha, copying the barracks of British regiment was a ray of hope to become like them one day. Bakha gazed the Tommies, with wonder and amazement when for the first time he went to live at the British regimental barracks with his uncle. He saw, the lifestyle of the Tommies, how they were living, sleeping on some different, low canvas beds enclosed compactly with blankets, eating eggs, having tea and wine in tin beakers, going to parade and then returning to the market with cigarettes in their mouths and seeing all this Bakha was obsessed with overwhelming desire to live a life like them. He knew they were sahibs, superior people. But "...he felt that **to put on their clothes made one a sahib too**. So, he tried to copy them in everything, to copy them as well as he could in the exigencies of his peculiarly Indian circumstances". (*Untouchable*, 3)

The novelist presents that how Bakha chases his ambition to live like an Englishman, after cleaning the three lanes of latrines he reaches home, asks for water. Sohini, his sister tells that there is not a drop of water and she leaves for the well to fetch the water, meanwhile Bakha instead of relaxing on the cots, prefers to sit in the broken cane chair, "the only article of furniture of European design . . ." (*Untouchable*, 14), which he somehow acquired even when his family was helpless, just to feel like white men, and he was very happy and satisfied for his unique prize possession.

Mulk Raj Anand in the novel '*Untouchable*' clearly demonstrated that India was a caste ridden society in eighteenth and nineteenth century where a harijan was not considered to climb the ladder of caste and culture. Hence, imitation or Mimicry became the only way to make them become like the high caste people. Through his novel Mulk Raj Anand clearly throws light on the purpose of mimicry and what mimicry can give and serve.

The reason for mimicry in Indian novels such as '*Untouchable*' can be because of the basic instinctive nature of Indians. India is a land of instinct and hence because of its instinctive nature it copies the western culture very passionately. Bakha is also a child of modern India and very naturally and involuntarily he tries to copy the British gentlemen once he got attracted by their lifestyle.

For Bakha his intense desire to get rid of his miserable life filled with humiliation and oppression attracted him and forced him to follow the British barracks. As **E.M Forster** rightly says in the preface of the novel "...a sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when touches them. They have to purify themselves, and then rearrange their plans for the day. Thus, sweepers or untouchables are disgusting object to the orthodox and as they walk along the public roads, it is their duty to call out and warn others that they are coming." (*Untouchable*, 8 (Preface))

There is also another very important instance in the novel that clearly reveals Bakha's fascination towards the Western culture and the extent to which he tried to mimic the clothing and culture of the British barracks. Bakha had begged an English barrack (Tommy) for a pair of trousers and that person gave him a pair of breeches also a Hindu sepoy, who was kind enough made a donation of a pair of boots and puttees. For the other items Bakha went to the rag-seller's shop in the town. He visited the wooden stalls which had the scarlet and the khaki uniforms rejected and used by the Tommies, pith solar topees, peak caps, knives, forks, buttons, old books and many more things representing Anglo- Indian life. Bakha yearned for the touch of all those English clothes. But he had never gathered up the nerve to go up to the shopkeeper and ask him the price of anything, in case it should be a price he could not pay and lest the man should discover from his talk that he was a sweeper-boy.

'I will look like a sahib,' he had secretly told himself. '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.' (*Untouchable*, 3-4). Although he couldn't buy all the things in the rag-seller's shop he wished to, he still bought the jacket, the overcoat, the blanket he slept

under. His father Lakha, was angry at his overindulgence, and the boys of the outcastes' colony, including "...Chota and Ram Charan, cut jokes with him on account of his new rig-out, calling him Pilpali sahib (imitation sahib)". (*Untouchable*, 3- 4)

Bakha always knew, that except for his English clothes there was nothing English about him and his reality was miserably dark and deplorable but he continued his new custom, firmly wearing those English clothes day and night and even protecting them from the formlessness of an Indian blanket, though he quivered with cold at the night.

Conclusion

Hence, the concept of mimicry for Bakha was not merely copying the colonial masters because he wanted to be one like them but also because while copying the British barracks he was somewhere able to escape his previous identity of a sweeper boy who is considered as an untouchable in the eye of the stereotypical Indian society in which he lives, where the high class Hindus consider the low class untouchables like Bakha as mere dirt because these sweepers like Bakha clean their dirt.

The novel presents how Bakha as well as other Indians worship the Western constructs and culture as for them it is a way to reinvent their identity and hence this novel '*Untouchable*' by Mulk Raj Anand, clearly demonstrates the postcolonial concept of mimicry by making Bakha as the mouth piece or the dominant reflector of the mimicry in the novel.

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