

# *The Exclusions of Postcolonial Theory and Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable": A Case Study*

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Outwardly similar trees drawing sustenance from entirely different root-systems and soil-chemistry are really not comparable units. Any generalization based on the understanding of the nature of one can hardly be held true for the other.

Pratap Chandra (*The Hindu Mind* 92)

Their dialogue is not with the West, it is with their fellow citizens.

Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (475)

IT IS HARD to remember that terms such as "postcolonial literature," "postcolonialism," and "postcolonial theory" that are so conspicuous today because of their ubiquitousness came into such wide usage only very recently. Although these words became common currency only in the late eighties, their implied and largely unstated meanings have rapidly assumed the status of self-evident truths. As a result, while they have led to new ways of categorizing and textual interpretation, such discursive effects of these terms have gone unacknowledged by those who have named themselves "postcolonial critics." Since these discursive effects have led to a major shift in the way third world texts and literatures are being received in the first world, it is urgent that the theoretical and methodological assumptions of this emergent critical practice be made visible in terms of their overall implications.

While the field the "postcolonial theory" defines and studies is indeed large and spread over five continents of the globe, I have chosen to limit my investigation of its theoretical underpinnings and the practices they generate with regard to India's textual

productions. I have tried to suggest, through a reading of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, that the constitutive categories of postcolonial theory perform several homogenizing functions which produce an essentialized "native" who is devoid of race, gender, class, caste, ethnic, and religious markers. I further suggest that postcolonial theory's exclusive concern with this essentialized native's "resistance" to "the colonizer," another essentialized construction, is politically retrogressive insofar as it occludes, on the one hand, this resisting native's own ideological agendas and, on the other, the heterogeneity of voices in postcolonial societies.

Ironically, many of these self-identified postcolonial critics pride themselves on having radicalized a moribund, colonial, and apolitical discipline called Commonwealth literature (Parry 32-33). The new name, postcolonial literature, also signifies that the field is no longer closed to political, historical, and ideological implications of literature. In fact, much of the critical theory currently in vogue in the field is overtly ideological in its renunciation of the formalistic and evaluative stances of the universalist humanist critics and in its adaptation of an anti-imperialist stance in the evaluations of literary and critical texts produced in postcolonial societies.

However, despite its radical political and interpretive stance, this critical discourse has come under attack for its overtotalizing tendencies. In a recent article in *Social Text*, Aijaz Ahmad accuses Fredric Jameson of creating "a meta-narrative that encompasses all the fecundity of real narratives in the so-called third world" (1987, 9) when he proposes to construct "a theory of the cognitive aesthetics of third-world literature" (1986, 88n.). Such theorizing, Ahmad charges, produces a "unitary subject," "a singular formation," a "homogenisation" which submerges "the enormous cultural heterogeneity of social formations in the so-called third world" (1987, 4, 22, 10).

Although Jameson's "third world literature" and "postcolonial" literature are quite closely related insofar as "postcolonial literature" refers, largely, to literatures produced in the ex-colonies of the imperial European powers, the latter's area of operation is even larger as it also subsumes settler colonies of the first world. In that sense, postcolonial literature is an even larger "unitary subject."

In fact, the authors of the recently published book called *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* claim to have created a theory that is applicable globally: "[T]his book is concerned with the world as it exists during and after the period of European imperial domination and the effects of this on contemporary literatures" (Ashcroft 2).

Thus we come back full circle to the "universalist" aesthetics, albeit from the left this time. If Jameson propounds about what "all third-world cultural productions seem to have in common" (1986, 69), Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin declare that the term "postcolonial" covers "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2). Although not all the practitioners of postcolonial theory are so explicit about the grounding assumptions of their theoretical framework, the frequent use of terms such as "postcolonial people," "postcolonial culture," "postcolonial literature," "postcolonial texts," "postcolonial writing," "postcolonial practice," "postcolonial context," "postcolonial theory," (and, more recently, the nominal "the postcolonial") in their writing suggests to this reader that a "postcolonial" essence is being posited that is supposedly shared by geographically dispersed and historically, culturally, linguistically, politically, and racially different societies and the texts produced by their members.

This commonality across cultures and literatures is said to be based on their "shared relations to the experience of imperialism" (Brydon 9).<sup>1</sup> It is claimed that "the colonial encounter and its aftermath, whatever its form throughout the post-colonial world, provides a shared matrix of reference and a shared set of problems for post-colonial cultures" (Slemon 165). These shared concerns are then identified as "discursive resistance to colonialist power" (Slemon and Tiffin xx), and "retrieval or creation of an independent identity" (Tiffin 171). These two overarching categories generate several sub-categories such as subversion of imperialist myths, imperialist texts, and imperialist history, appropriation of Western literary forms, search for pre-colonial cultural wholeness, healing of a divided self, recovery and rewriting of history, and so on.

While these categories may fit a certain number of texts from postcolonial societies, written during a specific period, I wonder if that is enough justification for creating a meta-theory that supposedly has the explanatory power of interpreting *all* postcolonial literatures. I agree with Ahmad that this kind of framework makes it “extremely difficult . . . to speak of any fundamental differences between national formations — of let us say, Peru and India — or of fundamental differences within particular national formations — differences let us say, of class, or of gender formation; you are forced, by the terms of your own discourse, to minimize these kinds of difference; . . . you are forced, by the terms of your own discourse, to borrow at least a large part of your vocabulary either from the ideology of anti-colonial nationalism, or, worse still, from some essentialist model of a binary difference between East and West” (1989, 130).

Instead of making us aware of these significant differences both across and within national formations, which are ultimately the product of history, the theory locks us into the binary oppositions of colonizer/colonized, domination/resistance. The monolith created by the unitary discourse of the postcolonial theory stands in place of the plurality, heterogeneity, and specificity of literatures subsumed under the unitary name assigned to them. The interpretive discourse of the theory homogenizes and standardizes these diverse literatures through its assumption of endless substitutability and comparability of “postcolonial” texts, a practice most visible when critics, after commenting on one or two cross-cultural texts, conclude with a final summation such as the following: “For these as for other post-colonial cultures, the challenge is to use the existing language, even if it is the voice of a dominant ‘other’ — and yet speak through: to disrupt (or do ‘violence’ to) the codes and forms of the dominant language in order to reclaim speech for oneself” (Monkman 96).

Foucault’s cautionary words about founding concepts, about “those ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is recognized from the outset” (22), would prompt us to examine the grounding assumptions of postcolonial theory *before* we begin to build on it. I have deep reservations about the postcolonial critics’

insistent reiteration of commonality of postcolonial cultures, postcolonial literatures and postcolonial texts, this commonality defined only as "subversive" resistance to "the coloniser." I want to suggest that this experience of colonialism is not similar as the binary oppositions of postcolonial theory claim. Instead, the ideologies of colonization were differently employed to suit the local exigencies and differently experienced. For example, while the indigenous people of the Americas, Africa, and Australia were designated as "savages" who needed to be "civilised" and/or "exterminated," the imperialist ideologies around India were far more ambivalent. While, on the one hand, India's "ancient civilisation" and "spirituality" were applauded in the colonialist discourse, it also argued that the Indian civilization had become moribund because of its age and needed the infusion of virility and worldliness from the Anglo-Saxons. Those who emphasized India's spirituality declared it uninterested in worldly affairs such as administration and defence of territorial borders and therefore in need of Anglo-Saxon guardians (Chandra chs. 1 and 4).

This colonialist discourse, we must not forget, was produced jointly by the British colonizers and the Indian bourgeoisie. This collusion of the Indian elite with the colonizer is also reflected in the preservation through codification and legal authorization of those indigenous cultural, legal, and religious belief systems which safeguarded the privileged status of the Indian ruling class. Thus, while the indigenous cultural, legal, and religious belief systems were brutally suppressed in Africa and the Americas, the posture adopted in India was that of non-interference with local customs, even in the face of demands for change by local interest groups. Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1858 gives us an indication of the ideology of preservation, known as the policy of benign neglect, that was followed in India's case:

Firmly relying ourselves on the truth of Christianity and acknowledging with gratitude the solace of religion, we disclaim alike the right and the desire to impose our convictions on any of our subjects. . . . We do strictly charge and enjoin all those who may be in authority under us that they abstain from all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of our subjects on pain of our highest displeasure. (qtd. in Moorhouse 124)

Indian historians have shown how this policy of non-interference on the part of the British government actually led to an ossification of Indian society. In the name of non-interference, the British government refused to address demands for legislation to put an end to untouchability, child marriage, and dowry, and to promote women's rights, property reform, and so on. Also in the name of non-interference, a patchwork of educational systems was deliberately maintained which, many historians suggest, exacerbated divisions along caste, religion, and class lines.<sup>2</sup>

The point is that a theory which talks of "the native whose entire economy and culture are destroyed" (JanMohamed 79) is not applicable to India's experience of colonialism. Hence, while JanMohamed's theorizing on colonialist literature of Africa under the rubric of this theory is insightful, his attempt to apply it to the colonialist texts on India is questionable. Peter Worsley's comments about the need to remember the differences which have emerged from our different historical circumstances are quite apropos in this regard:

The colonial relationship was a relationship between societies, each of which had its own distinctive social institutions and its own internal social differences, its own culture and subcultures. Despite the political power of the conqueror, each colony was the product of a dialectic, a synthesis, not just a simple imposition, in which the social institutions and cultural values of the conquered was one of the terms of the dialectic. Histories of colonialism written by imperialists ignore one of these terms: history is the story of what the White man did. Nationalist historiography has developed a contrary myth: a legend of 'national' resistance which omits the uncomfortable fact of collaboration. (4)

The homologies created in the name of shared colonial experience, I believe, present a rather attenuated and impoverished version of cultural productions from my part of the world, that is, India. The theory thematizes India's literary texts only in terms of search for identity and resistance to the colonizer, entirely overlooking collaboration. It then carefully selects the texts that will fit these moulds. When they are commented on in the company of texts from other postcolonial societies, as is the prevalent mode of postcolonial criticism, their Indianness is further flattened in

favour of this homogeneous postcolonial consciousness. What does not fit this typology is either forced into a straitjacket or silently passed over. As a result, while there is a spate of critical activity around a few authors like Salman Rushdie or R. K. Narayan, hardly any attention is paid by postcolonial critics to writers such as Nayantara Sahgal or Shashi Deshpande, perhaps because their texts are not about "resistance" to the outside "imperialists" but about such matters as gender and class in Indian society.

The binary oppositions of postcolonial theory claim that the subjectivity of the postcolonial cultures is inextricably tied to their erstwhile occupiers. The formulations of postcolonial critics suggest that the members of the postcolonial societies do nothing but search for or mourn the loss of our pristine pre-colonial identities or continuously resist the pronouncements of the colonizers about them. These critics insist that "the empire writes back to the center" (Rushdie, Ashcroft), implying that we do not write out of our own needs emerging from our own particular space and time but rather out of our obsession with an absent other, in whose scheme of things we, assigned the margin, play only a bit part.

This kind of theorizing constructs for us only one modality, one discursive position. We, the heterogeneous subjects from post-colonial societies, according to the framework of this theoretical discourse, are forever forced to interrogate European discourses, of only one particular kind, the ones that were produced by racists and imperialists. I would like to argue that there are several facets to our lives as postcolonial subjects and framing us in the binary oppositions of postcolonial theory is both disparaging and reductive. We must ask, then, whether the category called "postcolonial" is not over-determined, whether it is not possible that our cultural productions are also created in response to our own cultural needs and desires to interrogate "our class structures, our familial ideologies, our management of bodies and sexualities, our ideologies, our silences" (Ahmad 1987, 21).

These words of Aijaz Ahmad invite us to get out of the colonized/colonizer binary opposition and think about "the colonized" as subjects in their own right whose subjectivity is composed of many other things besides their relationship, both past and present, with "the colonizer." The literatures produced by the postcolonial sub-

jects, I am thinking of the Indian literatures here, are not in conversation (perhaps soliloquy would be the more accurate term because literatures of "the centre" do not seem to answer back or be theorized in the same terms) with a distant outsider but with those at home (the so-called "margin"). They are, like any other literature, in a "dialogic" relation with other social discourses that circulate in a society (Bakhtin 259-422; Burke 1). To disregard all these other discourses that contribute to the complex network of meanings that traverse literary texts, like all other social texts, and to focus on only one out of several dialogic stances is to ignore the cultural and ideological work done by literary texts and literatures in the place of their production.

When postcolonial theory constructs its unitary subject, it erases the Bakhtian "heteroglossia" (263-64) of social discourses in postcolonial societies that arises from conflicts of race, class, gender, language, religion, ethnicity, and political affiliation and forms, in Jameson's terms "the social ground of a text" (1981, 75). When it focuses only on those aspects of the text that "subvert" or "resist" the colonizer, it overlooks the fact that the text is also implicated in what Bakhtin calls the "socio-ideological" realm (Bakhtin 291). That is to say that postcolonial writers and their texts may possess a "political unconscious" just as the Western texts do, even though Jameson thinks that their allegories are "conscious and overt" unlike their "covert" Western counterparts (1986, 80).

When postcolonial theory uses expressions like "the native voice" (Parry 39) and "'literary' texts of colonised or post-colonial peoples" (Slemon and Tiffin xiv), it assumes the writers of "postcolonial texts" to be spokespersons for the whole society. Even a Marxist critic like Jameson forgets all about social divisions when it comes to what he has called "third world literature," and declares that it is about "the experience of collectivity itself" (1986, 86).

Jenny Sharpe, in her analysis of colonial discourse theory, comments on its "tendency to presume the transparency of the intellectual who transmits narratives of resistance" (138). This presumption leads to the postcolonial critics' "strategy of according to post-colonial 'literary' texts an 'interpretive' power which



dominant theoretical practice would normally arrogate to the literary critic" (Slemon and Tiffin xviii. The comment is made in editorial capacity, about the stance of the essays anthologized in the volume). These assumptions and strategies are problematic because they suggest that texts somehow transparently reflect their writers' intentionalities which can be equally transparently grasped by their readers. Such a viewpoint also implies that the author's "authority" is not to be questioned by the reader.

The assumption of the transparency of meaning in postcolonial texts, the assumption that their allegories are "overt," is a problematic concept and takes too much for granted. For one, it totally overlooks the communication problems that arise when texts of one culture are read by readers from another. Secondly, it does not take into account the mediations that take place between the writer's intention and the finished literary text. Finally, it conflates the "voice" in the literary text with the voice of "the colonized people."

One aspect of this conflation is the scarcity of critical readings that interrogate the postcolonial texts for their "political unconscious," for their "strategies of containment," "repressions," "ideological closure," "absences," "omissions," and "silences" (Jameson 1981, 49, 53). Since the postcolonial texts are only read for their "subversive" content, their "deconstruction" of the Western imperialist episteme, their own "socio-ideological" imperatives are seldom deconstructed.

I wish to point out the ideological implications of such critical readings by analyzing Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* in terms of its "absences" and "strategies of containment." I hope to show that texts written by ostensibly radical writers with radical cognitive intentionalities need not necessarily be radical or subversive and ought to be subjected to a "hermeneutic of suspicion" (Fiorenza 15; Ricoeur 32-34) like any other text.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, published in 1935, is one of the canonical texts of Indo-Anglian literature. It has been reprinted several times and has been translated into about twenty languages. Although the critics are divided about the novel's artistic merit, there is general agreement that the novel broke new ground in terms of its subject matter and its ostensible sympathy

for that section of India's downtrodden called "the untouchables." Anand himself has suggested that his purpose in writing it was to arouse "*Karuna* or compassion for one's fellow beings" (1979, 7), which, once aroused, would lead to social change. The critics have generally concurred with this belief in the efficacy of sympathy for the downtrodden in bringing about social change and Anand is credited with having found "a voice for millions of inarticulate suffering human beings" (Niven 15).

However, as readers, we must examine and remain aware of the difference between "a voice for" and "a voice of." We must take account of the fact that *Untouchable* represents the untouchables as they appear to the gaze of an upper class, upper caste *kshatriya* Hindu, albeit a Marxist. This caste and class distance between the writer and the people he represents results in the erasure in the novel of the voice of the untouchable community as a dissonant discourse in the Indian social fabric. This absence is then substituted by the voices of the nationalist bourgeoisie "speaking for" the untouchables. These displacements and substitutions in the text are "the political unconscious" of the text which we must bring to the surface if we really wish to hear the voice of the untouchables themselves. For despite the doubts expressed by Gayatri Spivak, the subaltern does sometimes speak, although not necessarily in the texts of bourgeois writers.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, the homogenizing discourse of the postcolonial critics about "the colonized" resisting the empire is totally oblivious to the ideological complicities of such resistance. They have failed to explore the issues of voice, of subject position, of agency. This failure has serious political consequences insofar as it leads to the erasure of the struggles of those not represented or misrepresented in bourgeois nationalist texts. As Himani Bannerji's work on political theatre in West Bengal so persuasively argues, the radical politics of a writer need not translate into a radical text. She shows how the Bengali Marxist playwrights, despite their "good faith and political intention," often end up "subordinating the culture and politics of the very people they wished to help or idealized by offering a decontextualized, embourgeoisified version of their story" (138, 136).

*Untouchable* performs a similar act of subordination, the more regrettable because of its author's "good faith and political intention." This gap between its intention and execution, its overt radical surface and its covert bourgeois nationalist unconscious warns us against the homogenized "native" constructed by post-colonial theory. E. M. Forster's comment in the "Preface" of the novel is a good antidote against such unitary constructions of the colonial subject: "*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 have been involved in indignation and self-pity. Mr. Anand . . . , a Kshatriya, . . . has just the right mixture of insight and detachment." According to Forster, Anand's best qualification to author the novel was the fact that he could "understand a tragedy which he did not share" (10-11).

Even a cursory comparison of Anand's *Untouchable* with texts written by the untouchable contemporaries of Anand makes it quite apparent that "no untouchable could have written the book" that Anand has written.<sup>4</sup> For an untouchable author would probably not have created a hero with an "almost physical inability to revolt," a detail that Naomi Mitchison, ironically, found the most "admirable" about the book (qtd. in Cowasjee 181). An untouchable author, going by what I know about the literature produced by the untouchables, would have produced a hero capable of thinking his own thoughts and making his own decisions.<sup>5</sup>

However, the discourse of sympathy presents the protagonist, Bakha, as a mere passive recipient of others' actions and discourses. Throughout, he (together with his father and many of the other untouchable characters) is routinely described in the novel as, for instance, "naive" (15, 67, 177), "servile" (22), "humble," "afraid of everything," "cringing" (68), "resigned" (76, 134), "numbed" (107), "slavish" (123, 151), and "docile" (134). He is frequently compared to animals — "an Arab horse" (63), "not unlike an ape" (161), "a black bear" (170) — and is devoid of "the superior instinct of the self-conscious man" (108). His general characteristics are "a resigned air of fatalism" and "intense

docility" (134). Though he is frequently associated with fire imagery (26, 59, 81, 85, 134) and there is a "spirit of fire" "smouldering" (134) in him, the text repeatedly douses it, so that by the end of the text, he is "in a curious conflict of despair, . . . smothered by the misery, the anguish of the morning's memories" (176). The only two rays of hope that he feels can ameliorate his situation are Gandhi's program on the untouchables' behalf and "the machine."

Gayatri Spivak suggests that bourgeois discourse presents the subaltern as "an object of knowledge . . . who is patronizingly considered incapable of strategy towards us" (1989, 273). Insofar as the text suggests that the solutions to Bakha's misery can only come either through a change of heart among the upper caste Hindus through the labour of such charismatic individuals as the Mahatma or through the magic of technology and not through strategic action on the part of Bakha and others like him, the textual discourse can be called patronizing.

It is in the refusal of the text to consider the possibility of strategic action on Bakha's part that one must look for the repressions and omissions of the text. I read the text's dousing of the smouldering spirit of fire in Bakha as the symbolic containment of a deep fear of violent destruction of the status quo through the hands of India's untouchable minorities who constituted one fifth of India's population at the historical juncture the text describes.

Indeed, the text can only speak of this unspeakable fear at the level of symbolism. The description of the fire that Bakha lights every day to burn human excreta is very interesting from this perspective: "The burning flame seemed to ally itself with him. It seemed to give him a sense of power, the power to destroy" (26). However, the contradiction at the heart of the text is the denial of power and agency to Bakha.

This absence at the center of the text is what Jameson calls the "absent cause" (1981, 35) and Macherey "the play of history beyond its edges, encroaching on those edges." And if we desire to reveal its unconscious, we will have "to trace the path which leads from the haunted work to that which haunts it" (94).

What haunts Anand's text and what it tries to displace, repress, and deny are the actions and discourses of the untouchables them-

selves at this crucial period in India's freedom struggle. In its repression of their voices and in its displacements, the novel closely aligns itself with the version of nationalist historiography. The narrativization of nationalist history, according to the Indian historian Ranajit Guha, upholds "Indian nationalism as a phenomenal expression of the goodness of the native elite." It presents them as "promoters of the cause of the people" not "as... exploiters and oppressors." The "history of Indian nationalism is thus written up as a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian elite" (38).

This version of history denies the virulent critique of Gandhi and other leaders of the Indian National Congress made by the untouchables. While the nationalist version of history, adhered to by the critical readings of the novel, presents Gandhi as some one who fought "single-handed for the eradication of untouchability" and "initiated revolutionary social action and won many rights for the neglected strata of society" (Sinha 30), it completely excludes the version of the untouchables themselves whose leader, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, called Gandhi an enemy of his people (272). The following extract from B. C. Mandal's opening address to the All-India Depressed Class Conference in Madras in 1929 encapsulates the untouchable leadership's distrust of the nationalist leadership:

The jugglers talk of equality and fraternity but their sympathies are lip-deep. They have been giving us bluffs for the last five thousand years. The so-called patriots of India demand political rights, but they are not ready to give social right [sic] to their own countrymen. My friends, do not depend upon anybody, try to raise yourselves, have faith in God and in your own selves.

(qtd. in Kamble 75)

The novel, conceived, written, and revised several times from 1928 to 1934, provides a narrative of Gandhi's fast unto death in September 1932 but renders only Gandhi's version of the events, the version that is also enshrined in the nationalist historiography. In the speech quoted in the novel, Gandhi claims that the fast was undertaken against the British Government's "policy of divide and rule in giving to our brethren of the depressed classes separate electorates in the Councils that will be created under the new

constitution" (164). What is not mentioned in Gandhi's or the novel's discourse is that the "brethren of the depressed classes" had themselves asked for them. No less than sixteen deputations were made by them to the Simon Commission that came to India in 1928 to gauge public opinion about drafting a Constitution for India, in tonalities that bitterly mock the claims of Gandhi and the Congress Party about working in their best interest.

Indeed, although Gandhi claims in the novel that "I undertook to fast unto death for their sake" (165), that is, the untouchables', Gandhi's fast was seen as "political blackmail" by the untouchables' leadership (Kamble 138). Gandhi's claim that he was a "self-chosen untouchable" (*Gandhi's Great Fast* 31) and therefore entitled to speak on their behalf was met by them with derision and outrage (Ambedkar 65). However, their version of Gandhi's fast and its culmination in the signing of the Poona Pact, the compromise agreement between him and the untouchable leadership, is represented adequately neither in the narrativizations of nationalist historiography nor in Anand's novel.

The nationalist historiography, Gandhi, and Anand all represent the untouchables as "mute passive figures . . . [whose] problems have been solved by the generosity of others" (Joshi 2). Although some critics feel that the novel undercuts Gandhi's perspective by juxtaposing it against two other perspectives, that of a Muslim lawyer and a Hindu journalist, his version of the motivation of his fast is allowed to stand. Also, both the alternative perspectives come from members of the upper middle class. The "heteroglossia" of the novel is, ultimately, constituted of middle class voices alone.

The novel does not only render Bakha mute, it even appropriates his subjectivity to suit the dominant discourse. Thus the narrator informs us that Bakha has heard that "Gandhi was fasting for the sake of the bhangis and chamars" (158-59). However, according to Ambedkar, the "fast was not for the benefit of the Untouchables. It was against them and was the worst form of coercion against a helpless people to give up the constitutional safeguards . . . and agree to live on the mercy of the Hindus. It was a vile and wicked act" (270-71). A reader familiar with the views of the untouchable leadership can only find a bitter irony in the novel's

presentation of the Congress party's version as the truth. Such a reader would also wonder why the solutions provided by dissidents like Ambedkar are written out of a text which purports to be sympathetic to the untouchables. He and his followers at this time were dramatizing their protest by public acts of defiance such as burning of the sacred Hindu text, *Manusmriti*, mass scale conversions to Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism, publicized drawings and drinkings of water from caste wells and tanks, and persistent petitioning to the government for admission of their children to publicly funded educational institutions (Ambedkar 275). One wonders why Bakha could not have heard of these doings of his fellow caste members if he did manage to hear so much about Gandhi.

Bakha's rejection of the option to convert to Christianity also seems an act of exorcism on the part of the author, given the fact that history tells us otherwise. According to the novel, Colonel Hutchinson, chief of the local Salvation Army, has been "a complete failure, the number of conversions to his credit for the last twenty years being not more than five" (138). The text paints Hutchinson as a clown and a hen-pecked husband whose evangelism has a quixotic edge of unreality. We are told that Bakha's father Lakha has turned down Hutchinson's offer "to convert them to the religion of Yessuh Messih and to make them sahibs like himself" on the grounds that "the religion which was good enough for his forefathers was good enough for him" (140).

The fact is, however, that there were several mass conversions of the untouchables at this time. Those who did not convert used the threat of conversion as a lever to get better treatment from the upper caste Hindus. Gandhi writes extensively about the people "who threaten to leave Hinduism and take to Christianity or Islam" (*The Removal* 153). The following comments made by Gandhi in *Harijan* of 1 May 1937 give an interesting insight into the motives of such convertees as well as the important concessions they were able to extract through such tactics:

The newspapers have given publicity to the threat of certain Harijans in certain villages to transfer their allegiance to the Christian Missions seeking to wean them from Hinduism under promise of better treatment, and especially freedom from Begar to which they

are subjected by Savarna Hindus. It seems that representatives of the Hindu Mission and of the Harijan Sevak Sangh visited the aggrieved Harijans and got the Savarna Hindus to promise better treatment. (*The Removal* 145)

The documents of the time are full of such instances, testifying to the will and political astuteness of the untouchables. Anand's novel, however, makes no space for such oppositional activity. Bakha's conversion to Christianity is refused as a possibility. So is the possibility of his joining in solidarity with the political organizations of the untouchables.

If the text cannot entertain even such non-violent actions as conversions to other religions or organized political action, it would be futile to expect the text to have represented the possibility of violent action by the untouchables. However, as this passage by Gandhi in *Young India*, dated 14 May 1925, suggests, many untouchables were thinking along those lines:

There are some who would use violence against the offending party and wrest reform from them. I met such friends in Poona. They wanted to present an address to me. In the address they said that if the higher classes did not mend their behaviour towards them, they would use physical force and teach them a lesson.

(*The Removal* 152-53)

The possibility of revolutionary violence, however, is totally absent from Anand's text, just as are absent the dissenting and angry voices of the contemporary untouchable leadership.

The text, thus, successfully contains the realities of the volatile social order at this period of Indian history. It reassures its bourgeois readers, both in India and in Britain where it was originally published, that the simmering unrest among the untouchables would not lead to a violent destabilization of the status quo. In the discourse of the text, the untouchable himself remains mute, the object of bourgeois discourses about what to do about him. At the end of the novel, he decides to obey Gandhi: "Yes, I shall go on doing what Gandhi says" (177), at least until the flush toilet comes to his rescue. The closure, thus, leaves him waiting, waiting for the Mahatma, or "the machine," to lift him from his subjection:

As the brief Indian twilight came and went, a sudden impulse shot through the transformations of space and time, and gathered all



the elements that were dispersed in the stream of his soul into a tentative decision: "I shall go and tell father all that Gandhi said about us," he whispered to himself, "and all that the poet said. Perhaps I can find the poet on the way and ask him about his machine." And he proceeded homewards. (177-78)

This is the classic ending in the vein of "calm of mind, all passion spent." There are no deadly nightmares here that will disturb our sleep. Bakha, we can rest assured, will go on cleaning the latrines and taking abuse from the upper caste Hindus. The narrative has successfully erased his disruptive potentiality as well as the reality of protest undertaken by many like him.

History has gone on in its inexorable way and, despite the erasure of the untouchables' voice and agency from the novel and from the mythopoeic discourse of nationalist history, the untouchables themselves continue to battle for justice and equality in the militant style of Dr. Ambedkar. The newspapers in India often carry stories about mass murders of untouchables by the rural upper caste oligarchies because of their refusal to work for inadequate wages. Two years ago they protested against the upper caste Hindu version of *Ramayana* telecast on the Indian television by going on strike in several cities of northern India. And they staged a massive rally in Bombay when caste Hindus tried to force a ban on Dr. Ambedkar's highly critical book on Hinduism. These are just a few examples of the militant political protest by untouchables, a large number of whom now call themselves Dalit Panthers, a name that symbolizes their mood of militancy. (The literal meaning of the word "Dalit" is "ground down.")

If we take the versions of nationalist historiography and Anand's *Untouchable* at face value, without comparing them with those provided by the Dalits themselves, we run the risk of being caught off guard by history. For it often is the case, as in *Untouchable*, that the active agency of the marginalized people has been written out of the nationalist bourgeois text. The Indian freedom movement, whose discourse of the struggle against the colonizer the postcolonial theory celebrates, was also seen as oppressive and exclusionary by many segments of the Indian society, and they described it as the movement of "capitalists, landlords, money-lenders and reactionaries" (Ambedkar 247). And so, while the

nationalist bourgeoisie fought for India's independence, they fought against the nationalist bourgeoisie's disregard for their concerns.

I am afraid that when the discourse of postcolonial theory constructs a unitary "colonised consciousness" (Slemon and Tiffin xxi) on the basis of literary productions of the nationalist bourgeoisie, it ignores the complicity of these cultural productions in hegemonic discourses. For it may turn out — at least in India's case that probability is quite high — that the discourse of "resistance" to the colonizer masks its own privileged position by writing out or misrepresenting those resisting its claims of glory.

When postcolonial theory constructs a "collectivity" through phrases such as "the colonized," "the native," "the Other," and, in the feminist versions of postcolonial theory, "the colonized woman" (Katrak), it writes out of its discourse the constituencies that were excluded by the nationalist struggles, the "slaves of slaves" in Gandhi's terminology (qtd. in Ambedkar 36). Its assimilationist moves obliterate the double colonization that the marginalized have been subjected to at the hands of the nationalist bourgeoisie.

If postcolonial critics indeed wish to pursue "a reading and teaching practice that speaks directly to geographically, culturally, and economically marginalized peoples themselves" (Slemon and Tiffin xx) they will need to pay attention to the "political unconscious" of the texts they study. They will need to pay attention to the caste, class, race, gender, and ethnic affiliations of postcolonial writers and how these are mediated in their texts. Only then can we decide if a particular writer represents marginalized people. The claim of postcolonial theory that "postcolonial literature" is the repository of the "voice of the native" is unsustainable and politically retrogressive. I am, of course, not denying the claims of native Canadian writers like Maria Campbell and Beatrice Cullen or South African writers like Bessie Head and Miriam Tlali to be spokespersons for their people. However, I am suggesting that this judgement be made *after* their texts have been put through a critical reading that employs a hermeneutic of suspicion.

That kind of reading can be done only by moving out of the binaries of the Manichean allegory which frame the discourse of

postcolonial theory. Insofar as the binary frames employed by postcolonial theorists speak of only one modality for postcolonial literatures, that of the parodic confrontation between the colonizer and the colonized, they erase the local and the specific concerns expressed in these literatures, "their dialogue . . . with their fellow citizens." A theory which creates a unitary postcolonial subject by erasing the difference between and within postcolonial societies and replaces it with the difference between the "centre" and the "margin," leaves no room for the consideration of the burning issues that confront postcolonial societies today: the gap between the rich and the poor, the extreme suffering of the poor, minority and women's rights, the rise of fundamentalism and militarism, and separatism. The texts that deal with these issues, therefore, do not get taught or analysed.

It is necessary, I believe, to dismantle the prison hold of binaries and work for theoretical perspectives that can come to grips with the pluralistic and heterogeneous nature of the "socio-ideological" discourses of postcolonial cultures. So long as postcolonial critics continue to use binary frames like the colonizer/colonized, domination/resistance, so long as they continue to ignore a large body of texts that do not fit this theoretical framework, they will only perpetuate the cultural imperialism of the universalist or totalizing critics in a new garb.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Although Brydon seems to be the only postcolonial critic who has commented on the pitfalls of using "essentializing oppositions that pit a 'colonial mind' implicitly against an imperial mind, . . . implying that all colonial experiences are similar" (10), she does not suggest a way out.
- <sup>2</sup> One of the claims postcolonial theory makes is that English language and literature played a major role in destroying indigenous cultures. In India's case, however, English education was a privilege accessible only to the ruling class. The demand of underprivileged sections of the Indian society that the British government provide "a compulsory and free system of education" was never met because it was considered too expensive as well as socially disruptive. See Ambedkar (14-16) for the resolution about education passed at the Depressed Classes' meeting in Bombay on Nov. 11, 1917.
- <sup>3</sup> Spivak adopts too pessimistic a view, I think, when she suggests that all she can do as a critic is "to inspect soberly the absence of a text that can 'answer one back' after the planned epistemic violence of the imperialist project" ("The Rani" 131).

- <sup>4</sup> It seems absolutely astounding to me that Anand does not refer at all either to the oppositional acts or the oppositional discourses produced by untouchables at this time all across India. They are too numerous to catalogue here but Ambedkar, Jatava, Joshi, Kamble, and Khare provide detailed accounts of the resistance, in both words and deeds, put up by the untouchable communities against caste Hindus during the time period covered in *Untouchable*. The discourse of the untouchables at this time is not literary but political and we will have to look at political pamphlets, memoranda and representations to government commissions, manifestoes, conference proceedings, speeches, and statements if we want to hear the voices of the untouchables themselves. While Anand may not have been aware of these activities on the part of the untouchables since he was living in London during these years, he could have familiarized himself with these currents of the untouchables' resistance had he attended the Round Table Conference that took place in London during 1930-33.
- <sup>5</sup> During the last fifteen years, untouchables, many of whom now call themselves Dalits, have produced a significant body of literature in regional languages, especially Marathi. Very little of it has been translated in English. For Dalit poetry in translation, see Hiro, Joshi, and Omvedt and Zelliot. Hazari's *Untouchable* is, perhaps, the only untouchable autobiography written in English.
- <sup>6</sup> This is a revised and expanded version of the paper I presented at the Department of English, York University, in January 1990. The comments of Professors Douglas Ewen, Terry Goldie, Marlene Kadar, and Patrick Taylor have helped me immensely in further clarifying my ideas.

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