



## **Reading Identity, Reading Essence: A Strategic Essentialist Approach to Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable***

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**Received:** 19<sup>th</sup> May 2021

**Accepted:** 21<sup>st</sup> July 2021

**Published:** 8<sup>th</sup> August 2021

### **ABSTRACT**

The term strategic essentialism, coined by Spivak, is generally understood as "a political strategy whereby differences (within Group) are temporarily downplayed, and unity assumed for the sake of achieving political goals." On the other hand, essentialism focuses that everything in this world has an intrinsic and immutable essence of its own. The adaption of a particular "nature" of one group of people by way of sexism, culturalization, and ethnification is strongly linked to the idea of essentialism. Mulk Raj Anand's Bakha is dictated as an outcast by the institutionalized hierarchy of caste practice. He is essentialized as an untouchable by attributing to him the characteristic of dirt and filth. However, unlike other untouchables, Bakha can apprehend the difference between the cultured and uncultured, dirt and cleanliness. Via an analysis of Anand's "Untouchable," the present article aims to bring to the forefront the horrid destruction of the individual self that stems from misrepresentations of personality. Through strategic essentialism, it unravels Bakha's contrasting nature as opposed to his pariah class, defied by his remarkable inner character and etiquette. The term condemns the essentialist categories of human existence. It has been applied to decontextualize and deconstruct the inaccurately essentialized identity of Bakha, which has made him a part of the group he does not actually belong to.

**KEYWORDS:** Strategic essentialism, Identity, Representation, Resistance, individual self

This disease of thinking in essences, is at the bottom of every bourgeois mythology of man.

(Barthes, 1957/1972, p. 75)

## INTRODUCTION

Strategic essentialism is a significant term that was developed within the framework of postcolonial theory in the 1980s. The postcolonial theorist and Indian literary critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is the prime mover of this concept. In her 1985 essay "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," Gayatri Spivak gives a detailed interpretation of the term strategic essentialism (Ross, 2016). Having its root rising from the term essentialism, it can be understood as a strategy or a planned action of minority groups, ethnic groups, and nationalities to represent themselves for accomplishing a joint mission. These minority or ethnic groups show solidarity with each other to achieve a greater goal. And while this togetherness is temporary, great differences and dissent might also prevail between members of these groups and also amongst themselves. They are often hostile towards each other, which gives rise to different disputes. However, it has also been observed that, at times, it is significantly convenient for them to essentialize themselves temporarily. This essentializing helps brings to the forefront their group identity and ideology in a simple manner to achieve a specific goal and supports in opposing the leveling impact of global culture.

strategic essentialism in this sense entails that member of groups, while being highly differentiated internally, may engage in an essentializing and, to some extent, a standardizing of their public image, thus advancing their group identity in a simplified, collectivized way to achieve specific objectives (Eide, 2010, p. 76).

After a short span of introducing this concept, Gayatri Spivak realized that the term was possibly misinterpreted. She was aggrieved with the fact that it was instead wrongly deployed to promote essentialism itself. Oliver Ross pointing to the view presented by Sangeeta Ray on Spivak's dissatisfaction with the term remarks, that the concept of strategic essentialism despite has established itself as of "singular political importance," Spivak is displeased with the operation of the term as a "get-out clause for essentialism." (Ross, 2016). Spivak relatively focused on the fact that strategic essentialism is a kind of theoretical move that was intended to "undermine the vanguardism of a theory of essences as well as a reading of essentialism..." (Ray, 2009, p. 113). Later on, in the work "Other Asias," Spivak disvalued it and suggested that the term must be withdrawn as it was being misused. In an interview, adjusting her perspective on the very concept of strategic essentialism, she puts: "My notion

just simply became the union ticket for essentialism. As to what is meant by strategy, no one wondered about that" (Danius, Jonsson & Spivak, 1993, p. 35).

However, even after Gayatri Spivak's disputes with the term and her eventual abandonment of it, strategic essentialism as a concept maintained itself to be persistently examined and applied as a course of action, usually by those belonging to a minority or in plainer terms "a minority strategy" to impact the mainstream culture and society (Eide, 2010). This concept frequently emerges in feminist literary theory, queer theory, deaf study, particularly in Luce Irigaray, who calls it nemesis.

For a rational understanding of the term strategic essentialism, it is crucial to understand the meaning and usage of the term essentialism itself. Essentialism has a Greek origin. In Western philosophy, the roots of essentialism trace back to Plato. Plato's theory of form discusses how things are formed or shaped and the two constituents' part that things in this world possess a matter and a form that some constructor ultimately brings together. He also propounded that everything in this world has a permanent, immutable, and unchangeable essence of its own. Thus, it is generally understood as "a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the "whatness" of a given entity." (Fuss, 1989, p. xi).

The term essentialism has been understood and applied in varied ways. For example, the article *What's wrong with essentialism?* provides four different interpretations of the term along with illustrations. The first meaning is the linking or attribution of some specific characteristics to each individual incorporated within a group. The second is linking those particular characteristics to that category or group in a manner that it conceptualizes and naturalizes that which might be constructed socially (Bahar, 2021). The third way to understand essentialism is to give rise to a sense of collectivity either as the object or the subject of some political action like the women of the Third world or the working-class people, in a way that presupposes a unified group. The last and the fourth is to keep guard of this unified group and "the treatment of its supposedly shared characteristics as the defining ones that cannot be questioned or modified without undermining an individual's claim to belong to that group." (Phillips, 2012, p. 5). Other interpretations possibly place it within "the discourses of resistance" (Smith, 1988), while some other have identified it as a "legitimation strategy" (Epstein, 1998).

Based on the fact that essentialism relies on the unchanging immutable essence, all essentialized views about race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, or national origin are challenged in post-colonial theory. This is because essentialism, on the whole, relies on discursive practices. It submits that a particular group, individual, ethnicity, gender, or region may have fixed essences and that these essences are static and immutable. It is, therefore, the “assumption that groups, categories or classes of objects have one or several defining features exclusive to all members of that category.” (Ashcroft et al., 2001, p. 77). When these essentialized ideas are normalized, powerful constituencies define and categorize people like the colonizers did in the colonial era. The term essentialism in postcolonial literature, therefore, is viewed as a negative word and is unappreciated.

The concept of essentialism has been primarily discussed among scholars in social sciences, post-colonial studies, and the studies of colonial discourses. They debated the notion of essentialism along with the persistent question that they posed on *race* and *nation*. If viewed pragmatically, essentialism with its different practices and modes of representation has been used by individuals and groups to furtherance the minority struggle, rights, or demands. (Eide, 2010)

Generally, in post-colonial studies, essentialism is prominent as the colonizers in their writings and even in their policies have attached a certain kind of fixed essences to the natives, whether Indians, Africans, or any other member of a colonized nation. These characteristics are generalized and are attributed to the entire subjugated group, and then based on those qualities, policies are developed to deal with the whole population. The qualities they attributed to the natives are hence essentialized; for example, In India, the Hindus were categorized according to the caste system by assuming that they have certain fixed essential qualities attached to them. And hence, essentialism is the argument that “there are fixed truths to be found about identity categories so that there exists an essence...” (Barker, 2004, p. 61). The old Brahmanical system is the actual originator of the caste system in India. Marginalization based on birth is prompted mainly by the caste system. However, casteism, which formally classified the people and group, was the central administration mechanism not only in ancient India but also in colonial India. It was the colonizers who encouraged and strengthened caste-based discrimination. Nicholas Dirks maintains that it was “Under colonial rule caste—now systematic, and systematically disembodied—lived on.” (Dirks, 2001, p. 14) The advantages and disadvantages given to the members of society are purely based on the belief and practices of the caste system. In the famous epic of

Mahabharata, as Mulk Raj Anand explicates, someone shouted, “Caste, caste- There is no caste!” (George, 1994, p. 19). His novel *Untouchable* is a resuscitation attempt of the above statement. His protagonist Bakha is identified as an untouchable in the social hierarchy, which germinates from this very practice.

Identity is a complex concept. Today, in the changing world, the denotative meaning of the term cannot capture the broad range that the idea contains; ergo, the dictionary meaning of the term is not acceptable in any court of definition in recent times. Identity is related to the social construct, which makes its intension far more complicated and ambiguous. The present scenario can be understood at two levels; "social" and "personal." At the social level, identity indicates to a “social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes.” (Fearon, 1999, p. 2) A person's identity at the second level, which is personal, is “some distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable.” (Fearon, 1999, p. 2). And, hence, if taken together, it indicates social categories and an individual's self-esteem and dignity.

Based on the two definitions mentioned above, it would be easy to understand the place and recognition given to Bakha by the caste-based society and his natural essences or possibilities of progression that he holds as any other individual born in this world. The protagonist of Mulk Raj Anand's classic novel *Untouchable* is categorized as an outcast by society merely because he is delivered to a scavenger (father) and bred in a family who has been living in a ghetto. He is considered polluted, uncouth, and unprivileged. His status of an untouchable, therefore, naturally ensues from the low rank he belongs to. The job of a scavenger involves a lot of filth, so the caste system marginalizes the untouchables outside the social hierarchy. “Keep to the side of the road, ohe low-caste vermin!... “Why don’t you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed son a bow-legged scorpion...” (Anand, 1947, p. 39)

The cruelty suffered by Bakha is graphic. He is born to be abused, and his identity is confined to 'low-caste vermin,' 'swine,' 'bow-legged scorpion.' This position has been given to him by the high class of society and hence is a manmade rule and not preordained or imposed by nature. He is treated as base-born and thusly essentialized as the underdog of society. The binaries of inferiority or superiority of the subjugated subjects, subaltern class including women, were engendered by the essentialist reading of gender or race. This domination was based on subjugation and oppression. The subject under control was assigned the place of

*subaltern* whose identity and role gradually became their difference. Essentialism is a tool that reduces instead cuts down human identity, which is viewed as multifaceted. (Eide, 2016).

Contrary to essentialism, a strategic essentialist perspective is significant to analyze Bakha's inner character, dilemma, and identity crisis which he suffers. A strategic essentialist reading blurs the prevailing mental image held in common by people about the unprivileged of society. It duly brings out the authentic self of Bakha to the readers, thus bringing to the frontline his potential as a human and his idealized life, which is restricted within the shackles of his essentialized identity of an untouchable.

The strategic essentialist perspective focuses on strategically detaching the subaltern from their essentialized identity. Bakha, although essentialized as an outcast based on his low birth, is much above the untouchables of his caste. He is relatively clean, sharp-witted, and physically strong than others. "For he looked intelligent, even sensitive, with a sort of dignity that does not belong to the ordinary scavenger, who is a rule uncouth and unclean." (Anand, 1947, p. 14) He was different from others, and there was something unique about his personality which other untouchables lacked. Anand writes, "What a dexterous workman!", "A bit superior to his job," "not the kind of a man who ought to be doing this," reveals his distinctive personality and sincerity in his job that stands in sharp contradiction to his outcaste identity. Unlike other members of his caste, he is essentialized as like them by the cruel caste system.

His dark face, round and solid and exquisitely well defined, lit with a queer sort of beauty. The toil of the body had built up for him a very fine physique. It seemed to suit him, to give him homogeneity, a wonderful wholeness to his body, so that you could turn round and say: Here is a man'. And it seemed to give him a nobility, strangely in contrast with his filthy profession and with the sub-human status to which he was condemned from birth (Anand, 1947, p. 18).

The above description defies the orthodox conventions of society that stereotype an individual's character and conduct. Bakha, despite being untouchable, has an excellent physical trait and sound mental health, which shows his solid progenitors and his capability to produce a healthy human race. He is clean, attractive, and a perfect human being as any other high-class person. In the context of strategic essentialism, Bakha's inner self, his self-dignity, self-worth, and self-value segregate him from his low caste that has dogmatized his identity and whole existence. Strategic essentialism, therefore, strongly opposes essentialism and focuses on the fact that it is not lawful to paint everyone with the same brush. According

to the caste, gender, or race, essentializing any individual would debar them from reflecting their true selves and seizing their opportunity to privileges and endeavors to change.

Since ancient times, the human race and culture have been divided into two categories; the weak and dominant, where the weaker section is prone to the oppression and flattery of the dominant class of society and hence become victims of paranoia and internal conflict (Suleman & Rahman, 2021; Suleman, Mohamed & Ahmmed, 2020; Suleman & Mohamed, 2019). Bakha's inner self and identity oscillate between two worlds. The apparent world (the world of the marginalized and the privileged made by the caste system) and the second which he idealizes (the civilized world of the British sahibs). Bakha strategically detaches himself from his own Indian culture and tries to find happiness and dignity following Western culture and lifestyle, which he cannot express overtly. He loves to dress in the 'fashun' of the tommies and dreams of a life free from the curse of untouchability. If viewed from the lens of strategic essentialism, he suffers from a kind of double- consciousness where his outer actions and inner thoughts contradict each other. His personality and thinking are different from others. Despite belonging to a low caste and scavenging for the entire day, he raises questions about cleanliness in his mind. He illustrates his cultured and reformist mentality by drawing a line between the refined attitude and the Hindu community's uncultured behavior. His statement, "I shouldn't have picked up that bread from the pavement" (Anand, 1947, p. 61), shows his sense of cleanliness and uncleanness.

At several places in the novel, he shows disgust with the Hindu men of the upper class who are in reality double dealers and whose diabolic activities renders from their pseudo-religiousness. He can figure out the sensual nature of Brahmin pandits like Kalinath, whose lust does not know any distinction between castes. It sees no dirt and no untouchability. For Bakha, the meanness of the high caste is disguised under their fake nobleness. Bakha abhors these men who shamelessly relieve themselves on the ground. He continuously muses over the norms of society where, touching an untouchable (human being) is considered anathema while respecting and feeding a dirty bull is seen as an act of benediction. He finds the Hindu men brazen and hypocritical who pick animals over humans (untouchable). Bakha, in actuality, is psychologically detached from the false virtue of the Hindu community. Michael Kilburn aptly proposes that "strategic essentialism is like role playing, briefly inhabiting the criminal mind in order to understand what makes it tick" (Reilly, 2016, p. 120). Therefore, the term analyses Bakha's the hidden facade and his resistance to the double standards of the Hindu community. Strategic essentialism focuses not only on condemning the "essentialist

categories of human identity but emphasises that one cannot avoid using such categories at times in order to make sense of the political and social world” (Morton, 2004, p. 75).

Having said this, it is also essential to understand that the temporary essentializing of all the untouchables could direct them to essentialize themselves strategically to revolt and end the system of oppression and subjugation. Essentialism is used in two ways, either to subjugate or to liberate people. In contrast, strategic essentialism is not a universal notion or a way of carrying out a political purpose but rather a temporary political stratagem to achieve a specific goal (Eide, 2016). In the novel, it is only Bakha who can sense wrong and right. Even Bakha’s father, Lakha, is quite convinced that the discrimination done by the so-called flag-bearers of religion is purely based on religious grounds, which they must not oppose. He says, “We must realise that it is religion which prevents them from touching us.” (Anand, 1947, p. 68) He accepts his dehumanizing existence and abides by his essentialized identity, and had "never renounced his deep-rooted sense of inferiority and the docile acceptance of laws of fate" (Anand, 1947, p. 68) Bakha and Lakha, who are not only from the same group but also tied by blood have different nature and outlook. And hence, it is not always apt to essentialize people from the same category as they may have other behavior and ideologies in life. However, strategic essentialism also encourages all the untouchables to realize the inhuman treatment meted out to them for the cause of self-liberation. There are fleeting moments in Bakha’s life where he dreams of seeing all the untouchable revolting together for the liberation struggle. He supports the introduction of the dung-cleaning machine and desires to assert his inner self and make conscious decisions. Still, he is more cautious about his outer actions and his essentialized identity, which does not allow him to question or take issue with the untouchable deep-seated system.

Strategic essentialism aims to take up the subaltern class issue and de-contextualize the essentialized identity of the individual. In feminist and postcolonial studies, it has been a much-debated concept concerning minority representation and feminism (Eide, 2016). Spivak focuses that it is vital to handle the idea gingerly to refrain from both dominating or altering the voice of the subaltern class. Spivak pinpoints that for making the voice of the subaltern heard, one must take a subaltern stand or position to facilitate a pragmatic discussion between the mainstream and the marginalized class.

Notwithstanding her guard against the regulative use of essentialist categories such as humanism, nationalism, even feminism, Spivak calls for strategic negotiations through a persistent (de)constructive critique of theoretical from subalternized essentialist position... strategic essentialism not only operates as a political force, but also as an intellectual artifice which serves as the ‘conscious adoption of an



essentialist mode of enunciation in order to precisely reveal the non-essentialist character of the histories of difference...Spivak challenges colonial discourse from a provisionally subaltern position (Kumar, 2009, p. 94).

## CONCLUSION

It has been rightly said “the reality of the human world is in it’s entirely made of representation: in fact, there is no sense of reality for our human world without the work of representation” (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 9). And hence, one must not be misrepresented to make real sense of the individual existence. It is simply our perception about individuals which either imprison or liberate them. It is significant to be conscious of the negative influences of essentialized perceptions which can promote misrepresentation and misjudgment about an individual. The novel is intrinsically based on the question of identity, which is undervalued and misperceived. Strategic essentialism exposes the inaccurate essentialization of the protagonist’s existence and consequently attempts to locate his subdued potentials. It reveals the crisis faced by the subaltern Bakha and his natural essence, which lies behind his tattered existence.

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