

**Pursuit of Identity by the Protagonists in Untouchable and Hairy Ape: Perpetual Sufferings of the Downtrodden**

Fiza Jefreen  
Canadian University of Bangladesh, Canada  
fizajefreen@gmail.com

**Abstract**

In both Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Eugene O'Neill's *Hairy Ape* the writers showed the sensitiveness, sufferings and inner conflicts of the protagonists. Both Bakha and Yank suffers from identity dilemma because of the upper class society, which dehumanizes the lower class in order to suppress and dominate them. This research is aimed to show how the hegemonic influences compel the downtrodden to go on a journey searching for their own identities. Both of the downtrodden protagonists experience a sense of fragmentation and ultimately realize that they do not belong to the human race. In the beginning both Bakha and Yank had false notion of identity. On one hand Bakha attempted to find his identity by mimicking the people who subjugated his class, and on the other hand Yank by thinking that he belonged to the mechanized society. Using the examples of Bakha and Yank this study shows how the hegemonic structure of society subjugates the downtrodden and forces them to start struggling for searching their identities.

*Keywords:* Class System, Hegemony, Belonging, Dehumanization, Identity, Technology

**Introduction**

Though Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Eugene O'Neill's *Hairy Ape* is set in different countries and in different context, both of the books touches upon a disturbing issue; the cyclic sufferings of the downtrodden and their constant struggle to find a place and identity in a society where the upper class people of the society make sure they remain as social outcast. This research is aimed to find out how and why the upper class dominates the lower class and can the downtrodden people achieve success in changing their fate.

**Research Methodology**

On the basis of thorough reading of the novels, analytical research methodology has been adopted by the researcher. Descriptive, Theoretical and interpretative methods have been used in this paper.

**Hegemonic structure of the society**

French Marxist philosopher Althusser opines that a society exerts power in two ways,

- Repressive State Apparatus, (RSA) which establishes power by force
- Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), which interpellates the individuals by institutions such as law, education, church, religion, trade union etc.

Again, Italian Marxist and theorist Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony shows how power is exercised to subjugate the lower class through ideas and knowledge.

These type of hierarchical structure of the society causes the marginalization of the downtrodden which can be seen in characters like Bakha or Yank.

### **Yank's strife to belong and his search for identity**

Eugene O'Neill criticizes the whole structure of the society and presents a dark view of mechanized America where the lower class people of the society has been enslaved by capitalism in his play *The Hairy Ape*. In an interview he denies to call United States as the most successful country of the world, instead he calls it "the greatest failure".

The protagonist of this expressionistic play, Yank had a sense of belonging as he thought he belonged to this mechanized society. Though the downtrodden like Yank did not have materialistic satisfaction, but Yank thought that he has the power to run this mechanized society with his labour and his contributions are acknowledged. This non materialistic satisfaction is what which gave him the reason to live.

But all of his illusions get shattered when he encounters with Mildred, a representative of the dominant class. Mildred was horrified seeing Yank and she calls her a filthy beast. From this point his illusions gets shattered and his spirit gets disintegrated in such a way that he himself starts thinking himself as an ape. From this point his strive to belong and his pursuit of identity in this hierarchical society starts. He goes from one place to another and from one option to another, in labor organization, in church but he does not find his answers in any of these places. Instead, he gets punished by law and gets more and more marginalized. He feels utter sense of isolation and alienation in the society which has dehumanized people like Yank to subjugate them.

Yank's co worker Long thus say-

*"They dragged us down' til we're on'y wage slaves in the bowels of a bloody ship, sweatin, burnin up, eatin'..."*

Yank's effort to recover his sense of belonging and find identity fails terribly,

*" Christ, Where do I get off at? Where do I fit in?"*

In the final scene Yank went to the zoo and seeing the gorilla in the cage he sighed and thought that maybe he belonged to it as this society run by the upper class dehumanize the downtrodden in such a way that they are compelled to feel a sense of fragmentation and suffer from loss of identity. Before dying in the final scene Yank looked at the beauty of the nature and realized that this beautiful world is not for the downtrodden like him. His world and life ends in abandonment, in despair and in death.

*" The hairy ape at last belongs "*

### **Bakha, downtrodden and hegemony**

Written by one of the greatest novelists of Indian Literature Mulk Raj Anand, "*Untouchable*" revolves around an 18 years old sweeper Bakha who is considered "untouchable" because of his lowly birth and profession. Bakha's daily experiences compel him to feel a sense of humiliation and rejection and to question his existence in a society, run by the elites.

Bakha's daily routine shows how downtrodden are exploited by the upper class. Bakha is able bodied and strong and he has strong desire to study. Despite being physically and mentally fitted for changing his life, the hegemonic structure of society functions such a way that downtrodden like Bakha can not change their fate and die as downtrodden. In Bakha's case the elites use politics and religion to suppress them. In this novel Mulk Raj Anand presents a power structure of society which exploits and subjugates the downtrodden for its will and use.

Bakha has to face degradation and humiliation throughout the day, he is given food by throwing, he is not allowed to study with the elites, he has to announce his coming when he

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passes by the elites, so that he doesn't accidentally touches them and makes them “dirty”. His sister Sohini has to wait for hours and charity to get some water, he is not allowed to enter in the temple premise.

Yet the hypocrisy of the upper caste becomes clear, when Bakha’s sister Sohini, is assaulted by an upper caste “Pandit”, the same upper class people who would not sit, eat or touch them, but doesn't mind assaulting the untouchable girls. Bakha, despite being deeply hurt and angry for his sister, could not do anything because they are marginalized in a terrible way.

### **Bakha’s search for identity**

**Mimicry.** Feeling a sense of rejection and existential crisis Bakha starts looking for his own identity. He wanted to to escape the fixed reality to which he was born. Bakha tries to “mimic” the “Sahib” and their culture by behaving like them and by dressing up like them. By doing this Bakha wanted to make himself identified to someone of the upper class and wanted to escape from the hierarchical system.

But Homi Bhabha, one of the most important figures of the post colonial study in his *Of Mimicry and Man* says that by copying them the colonized becomes “almost the same, not the quiet”, as the colonized can never be completely like the colonizer, who is assumed to be the holder of superior culture and race and the colonized are looked as “inferior other” So, by mimicking also Bakha could not change his position as an inferior being, as he was merely entering into another form of subversion and power structure.

**Changing Religion.** Bakha thought changing religion could have given him solace and solve his identity and existential crisis. He thought of converting into Christianity as it doesn't have any caste system. But soon Bakha realizes that Christians and Hindus all are same and converting religion is not going to solve his crisis.

**Technology.** At the end of the novel Bakha had a ray of hope, he heard someone saying that a machine will be invented soon so that the manual collection of the excreta will not be needed.

It is a matter of question if Bakha could change his reality with technology, as in Yank’s case technology made the downtrodden more dehumanized.

### **Conclusion**

Literature is not read in isolation. It acts like a mirror of society. Bakha and Yank are representatives of all the downtroddens. Both of them longed for identity and sense of belonging, but their longings ended with despair. They searched for one option to another option to find some satisfaction that they belonged to this society, but the hierarchically structured society, being the root of their exploitation doesn't let them find one. The society works the way that the downtroddens accept subjugation “spontaneously” as the upper class, for their own benefit use religion, education, ideology etc to subjugate them. When the downtroddens tries to question this, the elites use “force” with the help of law, Yank is an example of that as he was taken to jail at one point of his resistance. As the downtroddens like Bakha and Yank don't have any political power to fight back, they have to accept their subjugation and their pursuit for identity and their sufferings become eternal.

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