The colonial carnivalesque in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, this article argues that the novels *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand and *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh represent the destabilization of traditional, pre-colonial hierarchies, especially those of caste, by employing the mode of the colonial carnivalesque. Their representations of the inversion of caste hierarchies often employ grotesque images involving excrement. This novelistic form of the carnivalesque manifests in images of the world-upside-down, which on the one hand invite laughter or a sense of *Schadenfreude* towards humiliated high-caste figures, and on the other hand elevate Dalits from the mire and filth with which the upper-castes equate them. The essay analyzes whether the critical representations of Untouchability and caste in these novels amount to a critique of the caste system per se, or whether they are confined to a critique of the practices of Untouchability.

Keywords: Dalit; carnivalesque; Mulk Raj Anand; Amitav Ghosh; Ajay Navaria; Mikhail Bakhtin

This article explores of the representation of Dalits (formerly referred to as Untouchables) in two novels: Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* ([1935] 2001), which depicts the events of one day in the life of the Dalit Bakha, and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2009), first published in 2008, which weaves together the stories of several characters (among them the Dalit Kalua) who end up on a ship carrying indentured labourers from India to Mauritius. The term Dalit, meaning broken or crushed in Marathi, for people from "Untouchable" castes in India was widely adopted by Dalit activist groups in the 1970s seeking to "convert a negative description into a confrontational identity" (Rao 2009, 1). The term Untouchable is now

largely considered unacceptable. Representations of Dalits by non-Dalit writers, and in particular Anand's portrayal of Bakha, have been strongly criticized by Dalit writers and scholars in Dalit studies on the grounds that they are pitiful at best and deprive the Dalit characters of agency (Brueck 2014, 10-12; Mukherjee 1991). This critique is certainly justified in the case of Anand's protagonist Bakha, a sweeper who is "incapable of understanding the source of his oppression" (Christopher 2015, 70; but see Gajarawala 2013, 68-81). In Ghosh's novel the Dalit character Kalua remains a marginal figure who only acts when his upper-caste lover Deeti needs him, and this depiction of a Dalit is undoubtedly very problematic.[1] However, my aim in this essay is not primarily to critique the representation of the Dalit characters in these novels, but to analyse of the way in which they are related to scatological images. I want to examine the ways in which Dalit figures are associated with faeces but remain largely "untouched" and unsullied by the contact with excrement. In contrast to these depictions of Dalits who rise above the faeces in which they are covered, the novels revel in the denigration of upper-caste figures, and this gleeful belittling of the native elite is also linked with the scatological.

The two novels, although set in different centuries and published decades apart, employ scatological images in remarkably similar ways. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, this article discusses these inversions of traditional hierarchies by means of the use of scatological and grotesque images as examples of the colonial carnivalesque, and explores the extent to which this mode of inversion functions as a critique of caste in general and Untouchability in particular. The second part analyses the representation of British rule and the role it plays in both novels in destabilising India's caste hierarchy, followed by an exploration of the novels' creation of a carnivalesque heteroglossia. The final part discusses the limitation of the mode of the carnivalesque in relation to the representation of Kalua in *Sea of Poppies* and the short story "Yes Sir" by the Dalit writer Ajay Navaria.

The colonial carnivalesque and the critique of caste

To Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), the European carnival tradition offered a model for the unmooring and (at least temporary) overturning of officially sanctioned order and hierarchy. Thus the central image of the concept of the carnivalesque as outlined in Bakhtin's study of Rabelais's work is that of inversion:

> This downward movement is also inherent in all forms of popular-festive merriment and grotesque realism. Down, inside out, vice versa, upside down, such is the direction of all these movements. All of them thrust down, turn over, push headfirst, transfer top to bottom, both in the literal sense of space, and in the metaphorical meaning of the image. (370)

Bakhtin argues that excrement plays a crucial role in this inversion of the status quo:

> grotesque debasement always had in mind the material bodily lower stratum, the zone of the genital organs. Therefore debasement did not besmirch with mud but with excrement and urine. […] We know that defecation played a considerable role in the "feast of fools". During the solemn service sung by the bishop-elect, excrement was used instead of incense. After the clergy rode in carts loaded with dung, they drove through the streets tossing it at the crowd. […] It can be said that excrement represents bodies and matter that are mostly comic; it is the suitable substance for the degrading of all that is exalted. (147; 151-152)

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986) show how Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque has been adapted to the analysis of a wide variety of cultural practices and texts since the 1970s. They argue that "the current widespread adoption of the idea of the carnival as an *analytic* category can only be fruitful if it is displaced into the broader concept of symbolic inversion and transgression" (18). My own "transposition" of Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque for the analysis of the two Indian novels set during the colonial period involves an abstract use of the notion of the carnivalesque that is largely deprived of the utopian elements of cosmic renewal that Bakhtin saw in the carnival tradition (Stallybrass and White 1986, 26). It is important to note that the transgressive potential of carnival in its European tradition did not automatically work in favour of subalterns: "carnival often violently abuses and demonizes *weaker*, not stronger, social groups – women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who 'don't belong' – in a process of *displaced abjection*" (Stallybrass and White 1986, 19; emphasis in original), nor did it necessarily destabilize hierarchies. As Terry Eagleton (1981) argues: "Carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony" (148; emphasis in original).

When I use the term "colonial carnivalesque" I am not implying that there is anything inherently carnivalesque about colonial rule or that colonialism constituted a carnival-like phenomenon that paved the way for the liberation of low-caste people from the Brahminical yoke. I am arguing that colonial rule produced a climate in which pre-colonial hierarchies could be challenged. India's pre-colonial political and social structures, including caste, were not unchanging and uniform. However, colonialism introduced a different language and practice of governance and law, and Dalit organisations often tried to make use of them in order to enable the political representation of Dalits before Independence in 1947 (Waughray 2016, chapter 2).This challenge to traditional hierarchies rarely worked in favour of subalterns in India, and in many instances colonial rule actually exacerbated the position of

subalterns such as Dalits (Prashad 2008, 137-140) and led to a reconfiguration and strengthening of caste (see Dirks 2001).

This destabilization of traditional, pre-colonial hierarchies, especially those of caste, is represented by Anand and Ghosh in their novels through the mode of the colonial carnivalesque. Their representations of the inversion of caste hierarchies often employ grotesque images involving excrement. This novelistic form of the carnivalesque manifests in images of the world upside down, which on the one hand invite laughter or a sense of Schadenfreude towards the humiliated high-caste figures, and on the other hand elevate Dalits from the mire and filth with which the upper-castes equate them. I question whether these representations of Untouchability and caste amount to a critique of the caste system per se in these novels or whether they are confined to a critique of the practices of Untouchability. In Dalit studies the writing on caste by non-Dalit writers is usually condemned as patronizing and incapable of initiating a far-reaching critique of Untouchability and caste. According to the Dalit critic and writer Sharankumar Limbale (2004), the avowed goal of literature written by Dalits is the "rebellion against the caste system" (32) inspired by the example of the 20th-century Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar, whose *Annihilation of Caste* ([1936] 2014) made a case for the necessity of the eradication of the caste system. So to what extent do the two novels by non-Dalit writers advocate the annihilation of caste by employing the mode of the colonial carnivalesque?

In Ghosh's novel, several and at times contradictory narrative strategies are employed in the representation of caste and Untouchability. In *Sea of Poppies*, caste in relation to the practice of Untouchability is foregrounded from the very beginning of the novel, when Kalua picks up Deeti's husband to take him to work at the opium factory: "Kalua, the driver of the ox-cart, was a giant of a man, but he made no move to help his passenger and was careful to keep his face hidden from him: he was of the leather-workers' caste and Hukam Singh, as a

high-caste Rajput, believed that the sight of his face would bode ill for the day ahead" (Ghosh 2009, 4). At this stage in the novel, the workings of the caste system are narrated in an explanatory way without interrogating its discriminatory and denigrating features. But when Kalua is tormented and abused by the upper-caste "thakur-sahibs" (56), the text creates the grotesque image of Kalua resembling the horse with which his tormentors want him to copulate: "the others whipped Kalua's naked back until his groin was pressed hard against the animal's rear. Kalua uttered a cry that was almost indistinguishable in tone from the whinnying of the horse" (59). Blurring the line between animal and human is a typical carnivalesque strategy, but here it is not a gesture of inclusion (and cosmic renewal) as in Bakhtin's carnival scenes but a sign of Kalua's abjection and de-humanization, with which the text is momentarily complicit (see Bakhtin 1984, 221-226). The narrative voice is here detached and without obvious pity for Kalua's suffering. However, when Kalua is left unconscious and covered in horse manure, the scene is focalized through Deeti, who reacts with outrage and breaks all caste taboos in helping him. Her reaction functions as a critique of the fact that this innocent man can be utterly humiliated with impunity on grounds of his caste. But then the text veers into yet another direction when the unconscious Kalua is the object of her curious and desiring gaze and touch:

As if of its own accord, her hand snaked out and laid itself down, and she felt, to her

> amazement, the softness of mere flesh: but then, as she grew accustomed to his breathing, she became aware of a faint stirring and swelling, and suddenly it was as if she were waking to a reality in which her family and her village were looking over her shoulder, watching as she sat with her hand resting intimately upon the most untouchable part of this man. (Ghosh 2009, 61)

This passage is more concerned with the comedy of the challenging of caste hierarchy than with the critique of Untouchability as such. Thus while the novel, with its shifting focalization and narrative strategies in representing caste, may not explicitly condemn the practice of Untouchability in this episode, it relishes the violation of caste boundaries.

Sea of Poppies significantly links the humiliation of Kalua and Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the upper-caste zamindar, through scatological images. Neel is at the top of the native Bengali hierarchy in terms of class and strictly observes the rules of caste: "Though not Brahmins, the Halders were orthodox Hindus, zealous in the observance of upper-caste taboos" (Ghosh 2009, 41). The text emphasizes how these caste taboos revolve around the image of excrement: "Neel had been brought up to regard his body and its functions with a fastidiousness that bordered almost on the occult" (209). In his mother's case this preoccupation with the caste rules regulating pollution leads to a horror of Dalits, whom she perceives as the embodiment of the excrement they handle: "

> Her most potent fears centred upon men and women who emptied the palace's outhouses and disposed of its sewage: these sweepers and cleaners of night-soil she regarded with such loathing that staying out of their way became one of her besetting preoccupations. (210)

This essential link between the dread of faeces and caste taboos is not consciously recognized by Neel, who claims not to believe in caste:

> for the fact was that he did not believe in caste, or so he had said, many, many times, to his friends and anyone else who would listen. If, in answer, they accused him of having become too *tash*, overly Westernized, his retort was always to say, no, his

> allegiance was to Buddha, the Mahavira, Shri Chaitanya, Kabir and many other such – all of whom had battled against caste with as much determination as any European revolutionary. (279)

The novel acknowledges the pre-colonial indigenous challenges to caste hierarchies, yet belies their significance for Neel as it delineates in minute detail how Neel's body has to unlearn the lessons of caste. When Aafat, his cell-mate suffering from opium withdrawal, defecates uncontrollably, he is described as "the incarnate embodiment of [Neel's] loathings" (336). Neel's initial, violent reaction of hallucinating "lashings of shit" coming alive and penetrating his body is represented sardonically (337). The other inmates watch him in "amazement" until they provide him with the utensils of a sweeper: a jharu or broom and a scoop (337). The text depicts Neel touching the handle of the sweeper's broom as a moment of transformation that enables his rebirth as a better man:

> Closing his eyes, he thrust his hand blindly forward, and only when the handle was in his grasp did he allow himself to look again: it seemed miraculous then that his surroundings were unchanged, for within himself he could feel the intimations of an irreversible alteration. […] his hand was affixed upon an object that was ringed with a bright penumbra of loathing. (337)

Structurally Neel's abjection in prison is linked to the scene of Kalua's torture by the upper-caste men through the images of excrement and the jharu which functions as a symbol of Untouchability. Neel's degradation through faeces constitutes a form of carnivalesque retribution; the novel visits the punishment for the crimes of Kalua's upper-caste tormentors upon Neel.

Whereas caste is only one concern among many in *Sea of Poppies*, the interrogation of the practice of Untouchability is the primary focus in Anand's novel, which provides a third-person account of one day in the life of 18-year-old Bakha, a latrine cleaner and sweeper. Latrine cleaning as a caste occupation is represented as a form of denigration, and its effects are demonstrated in the coarse demeanour of Bakha's father and his brother Rakha,

> the true child of the outcaste colony, where there are no drains, no light, no water; of the marshland where people live among the latrines of the townsmen, and in the stink of their own dung scattered about here, there and everywhere. (Anand [1935] 2001, 75)

The novel provides an image of Dalit figures as debased and deadened through century-long discrimination:

> The taint of the dark, narrow, dingy little prison cells of their one-roomed homes lurked in them. […] For in the lives of this riff-raff, this scum of the earth, these dregs of humanity, only silence, grim silence, the silence of death fighting for life, prevailed. (27)

Yet Bakha is specifically raised above this image of Dalit desolation. Even latrine cleaning, which he does skilfully and gracefully "as easy as a wave sailing away on a deep-bedded river" (8), does not besmirch this character. In fact the most elaborate descriptions of Bakha's beauty and his inherent dignity are provided in the context of his handling of faeces:

> This forgetfulness or emptiness persisted in him over long periods. It was a sort of insensitivity created in him by the kind of work he had to do, a tough skin which must be a shield against all the most awful sensations. […] 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 a 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. (12)

The novel pits Bakha's grace in the midst of filth and his wholesome masculinity against the low morals and puny body of the Brahmin Kali Nath in a carnivalesque juxtaposition. The representation of the Brahmin's obsession with his bowel movements and "the urge of excretion" (Anand [1935] 2001, 21) comically draws attention to the fact that faeces are inside him; he is the butt of the carnivalesque:

> His small, cautious steps and the peculiar contortions of his face showed that he was a prey to morbid preoccupation with his inside. He seemed to be immersed in thought, but was really engrossed in the rumblings of his belly. (18-19)

Only upper-caste figures are depicted as actually defecating, such as the boy relieving himself in the drain, which Bakha is supposed to clean; or associated with the anus, like Havildar Charat Singh, "who suffered from chronic piles" (7). Bakha is never represented as emptying his bowels, even though we are privy to almost all movements during this significant day. Caste is not attacked explicitly in these scenes, but the mode of the colonial carnivalesque

makes a mockery of caste hierarchy by irreverently letting the muck stick to the upper castes. As Louis Dumont (1980) observes: "the impurity of the Untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahman. […] untouchability will not truly disappear until the purity of the Brahman is itself radically devalued" (54). In both novels, the status of the characters vis-à-vis images of excrement appears to be overturned in a carnivalesque mode. The carnivalesque lends itself to a critique of caste in these instances but it also opens up a space for the denigration of colonialism and its civilizing mission.

Mocking British colonial rule

In *Sea of Poppies*, colonial rule is not given much credit for challenging caste hierarchies or paving the way for a more egalitarian culture in India. The novel condemns colonial rule in its entirety and depicts it as corrupt and serving only British economic and political interests. At Neel's trial the judge emphasizes that Neel's conviction for forgery and his punishment would prove the impartiality of colonial rule and the superiority of Anglo-Indian law in terms of its blindness towards privileges of caste:

> we see no merit whatsoever in the contention that men of high caste should suffer a less severe punishment than any other person; such a principle has never been recognized nor ever will be recognized in English law, the very foundation of which lies in the belief that all are equal who appear before it. (Ghosh 2009, 250-251)

The text immediately invalidates this statement, though, and ridicules it, since colonial rule of law is represented as always on the side of the British: "in this system of justice it was the English themselves […] who were exempt from the law it applied to others: it was they who had become the world's new Brahmins" (251). Colonial rule may be the catalyst of Neel's

carnivalesque debasement and rebirth but it is significant that the plot to deprive Neel of his property was orchestrated by Baboo Nobokrishna Panda (or, in the anglicized form of his name, Nob Kissin Pander), Benjamin Burnham's employee, who uses the corrupt systems of colonial law for his own ends of "justice" as he finds Neel's family guilty of caste snobbery: "the Rajas of Rashkali were well known to be bigoted, ritual-bound Hindus, who were dismissive of heterodox Vaishnavites like himself: people like that needed to be taught a lesson" (227). Nob Kissin Pander, with his cross-dressing and gradual transformation into Taramony, his deceased spiritual teacher and aunt, and his crucial role in assisting the transformation of several characters (Paulette, for example) is a carnivalesque force in the novel, and he is particularly proud of his role in Neel's metamorphosis:

> It was somehow thrilling to imagine that he, Baboo Nob Kissin Pander, had played a part in humbling this proud and arrogant aristocrat, in subjecting this effete, self-indulgent sensualist to privations that he could not have envisioned in his worst nightmares. In a way it was like midwiving the birth of a new existence. (404)

Thus while the novel represents colonialism as enabling inversions of indigenous hierarchies, it never depicts colonial rule in a positive light, nor does it portray the native elite in India as its helpless victims. Colonial rule is represented as capable of disempowering the native elite if that serves imperialist interests, but it is never depicted as being on the side of the subalterns. When Kalua and Deeti find a way of escaping their persecutors by indenturing themselves, this is not represented as a "gift" by the colonizers but as an escape route created by the vagaries of colonial trade and empire building.

In both novels, the mode of the colonial carnivalesque is predicated on the context of colonialism as a structure that destabilizes indigenous hierarchies of power. Yet its

mudslinging is not only directed at the caste and class hierarchies of the native society: the colonial rulers are also given the carnivalesque treatment -- as in the case of Burnham in *Sea of Poppies* or of the missionary in *Untouchable*. Burnham is linked to the other carnivalesque scenes in *Sea of Poppies* that involve references to excretion and caste inversion by means of the image of the sweeper's broom, with which Paulette is urged to hit him until he ejaculates. The sweeper's broom, or jharu, stands for the whole complex of Untouchability and pollution in the novel since sweepers and Dalits in general are associated and equated with debasing matter by several characters in the novel (Neel's mother, for example). Burnham specifically chooses this broom as "the perfect instrument for my abasement" (Ghosh 2009, 315), which leaves the colonial villain of this novel reduced to a comic, worm-like creature after his flailing and "excretion" of spunk: "yet he would not rise to his feet, no, he lay flat on the floor and squirmed over the parquet like some creature of the soil" (316). In contrast, the missionary in Anand's novel is a more benign character but one that is relentlessly mocked and caricatured, together with his missionary work:

> he was marvellously active for his three-score years and five, laying himself in hiding as of yore in deep pits of filth or behind heaps of dung, to wait for some troubled outcaste who might be tired and hungry and would listen in his despair to the gospel of Christ. (Anand [1935] 2001, 113)

Despite the missionary's mimicry of subalternity and his efforts to copy the native's dress and language, his proselytizing mission is depicted as a resounding failure and his sermon to Bakha on Christianity's egalitarianism gets lost in his broken Hindustani and is cut short by the missionary's domineering wife. In these scenes, which debase and ridicule colonial figures (who in fact humiliate themselves willingly and with fervour, albeit for different

reasons), the mode of the colonial carnivalesque renders the imperialist discourse of a civilizing mission absurd.

In both texts the carnivalesque images that mock the colonizers furnish a critique of colonialism. In Anand's novel, however, colonialism is represented as ambivalent, since Bakha's sense of self-worth is partly inspired by the presence of the British soldiers: "The Tommies had treated him as a human being" (Anand [1935] 2001, 2). The British colonial regime is perceived by Bakha as unequivocally positive at the beginning of the novel, and his ambition is to emulate the sahibs. Anand's novel excuses Bakha's mimicry as "naïve" but also acknowledges it as a preliminary stage on the way towards a "new world":

> The vagaries of Bakha's naïve tastes can be both explained and excused. He didn't like his home, his street, his town, because he had been to work at the Tommies' barracks, and obtained glimpses of another world, strange and beautiful; he had grown out of his native shoes into the ammunition boots that he had secured as a gift. And with this and other strange and exotic items of dress he had built up a new world, which was commendable, if for nothing else, because it represented a change from the old ossified order and the stagnating conventions of the life to which he was born. He was a pioneer in his own way. (Anand [1935] 2001, 69)

The notion of colonialism as a potentially enabling phase relates to the outcastes' problematic positioning in the political landscape of early 20th-century India, which was increasingly dominated by the nationalist movement for independence. Colonialism's challenge of pre-colonial hierarchies, including the caste system, had made the British appear as "natural" allies to some subaltern leaders such as the 19th-century reformer Jotirao Phule from Maharashtra (Phule 1991). However, the most significant leader of the Dalits in the first half

of the 20th century, B. R. Ambedkar, who was of low-caste descent himself, was clear-sighted as to the opportunistic and self-serving motives of the British, and he made strategic use of the British tendency to divide and rule to advance the Dalit movement by campaigning for separate electorates for Untouchables in the early 1930s. He and Gandhi vied for the position of representing India's Dalits, when Gandhi opposed Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates for Untouchables. Gandhi's subsequent commencement of a "fast unto death" resulted in the Poona Pact in 1932 and Ambedkar's withdrawal of this demand (Zelliot 2013, 129-139). Ambedkar aimed specifically at the annihilation of caste, whereas Gandhi wanted to remove the blot of Untouchability from Hinduism. Ambedkar is conspicuous by his absence from Anand's novel, but the repeated references to "uppish" Dalits register the fear of a growing assertiveness of Dalits that is associated with Ambedkar's more aggressive and confrontational approach (Anand [1935] 2001, 40, 65). Ambedkar's hostility towards the caste system per se made it difficult for the nationalist narrative of the nation to accommodate Dalits, since Dalit activism was seen as a threat to national unity and was interpreted by non-Dalits as a distraction from the goal of independence. The following section of this article explores *Untouchable*'s attempt to negotiate its anti-caste stance with a largely positive representation of Gandhian nationalism – arguing that, in the process, the anti-hierarchical carnivalesque nature of the novel makes room for a potentially more anarchic Bakhtinian heteroglossia, which threatens to destabilize *Untouchable*'s critique of caste.

A carnival of heteroglossia

In the final part of *Untouchable*, caste is interrogated in relation to Gandhian discourse and nationalism.[2] This last section of the novel opens up a veritable carnival of heteroglossia: many different, contradictory voices vie for Bakha's attention without Bakha (or the text) coming to a definitive conclusion. Nationalism and the movement for independence appear to

be portrayed positively when Gandhi is represented as unique in being able to attract such a varied crowd -- a crowd that stands here for India's multitudes: "Men, women and children of all different races, colours, castes and creeds, were running towards the oval" (Anand [1935] 2001, 126). Gandhi is depicted as the unifier, the orchestrator, and harmonizer of this heteroglot crowd, so that Bakha feels drawn in even though

> [there] was an insuperable barrier between himself and the crowd, the barrier of caste. […] He was in the midst of a humanity which included him in its folds yet debarred him from entering into a sentient, living, quivering contact with it. Gandhi alone united him with them, in the mind, cause Gandhi was in everybody's mind, including Bakha's. (128)

While Gandhi is represented as emphasizing the centrality of "the emancipation of the Untouchables" to "*swaraj*" or self-governance (140), he partly puts the onus of their emancipation on Dalits and encourages them to emulate upper-caste customs: "In order to emancipate themselves they have to purify themselves. They have to rid themselves of evil habits, like drinking liquor and eating carrion" (139). Gandhi wants to hold on to caste in terms of inherited professions as a "noncompetitive functional division of labor" but without the stigma of Untouchability -- in other words, caste without a "hierarchy of privilege" -- but the text's representation of Bakha's life casts severe doubt on the feasibility and desirability of this vision (Chatterjee 1993, 174). Gandhi's reasoning in terms of caste and Untouchability is challenged and refracted by other voices and contrasting opinions; the westernized barrister Mr. Bashir, for example, irreverently attacks Gandhi's stance on Untouchability as self-contradictory: "Gandhi is a humbug. […] He is a hypocrite. In one breath he says he wants to abolish untouchability, in the other he asserts that he is an orthodox Hindu" (Anand [1935]

2001, 141). The Ambedkarite call for the annihilation of caste is represented by the poet Iqbal Nath Sarshar, whose radical stance is diluted, however, by the poet's conviction that this can be achieved through the introduction of the flush toilet in India.

This carnival of competing voices accentuates rather than dissolves the ambivalence of the Dalit question during the movement for independence. None of the nationalist solutions for integrating the Dalit question smoothly into the nationalist narrative is depicted as very convincing; Gandhi suggests upper-caste Hindus can change their attitude towards Dalits out of "love" for him and, patronizingly, recommends that lower castes adopt customs associated with higher castes in order to raise their caste status (Anand [1935] 2001, 139). The poet, who often sounds like Nehru, advocates modernity (in the form of the flush toilet) as naturally doing away with caste. This carnivalesque cacophony draws attention to the fact that it is *almost* impossible to write a truly nationalist novel from the perspective of an "Untouchable" because the inclusion of Dalits in the script of the nation remains tenuous and half-hearted at best (Hubel 1996, 147-178).

Even though carnivalesque heteroglossia is let loose at the end of *Untouchable* and takes an irreverent look at Indian nationalism in its various guises, this does not obliterate the novel's ultimate affirmation of nationalism. Gandhian discourse may be represented critically by the text, but Gandhi is ultimately embraced by the novel's carnivalesque mode, as it portrays Gandhi as kindred spirit, a carnivalesque figure, a saint with a devilish chin:

> There was a quixotic smile on his thin lips, something Mephistophelean in the determined little chin immediately under his mouth and the long toothless jaws resting on his small neck. But withal there was something beautiful and saintly in the face. (133)

Gandhi stands for adopting something new and revolutionary in lieu of "the old civilisation" in a passage echoing the earlier one that had referred to Bakha as a "pioneer" paving the way to a "new world" (69):

> It was as if the crowd had determined to crush everything, however ancient or beautiful, that lay in the way of their achievement of all that Gandhi stood for. It was as if they knew, by an instinct surer than that of conscious knowledge, that the things of the old civilisation must be destroyed in order to make room for those of the new. It seemed as if, in trampling on the blades of green grass, they were deliberately, brutally trampling on a part of themselves which they had begun to abhor, and from which they wanted to escape to Gandhi. (127)

Both Gandhi and the "Nehruvian" poet are represented as welcoming drastic changes, and the text implicitly suggests that Independence will spell a brighter future for Bakha and his fellow outcastes. The novel's endorsement of nationalism is also underscored in the way in which the colonial spell is broken for Bakha by Gandhi at the end of the novel:

> Bakha saw a sallow-faced Englishman, whom he knew to be the District Superintendent of Police, […] at this moment Bakha was not interested in sahibs, probably because in the midst of this enormous crowd of Indians, fired with an enthusiasm for their leader, the foreigner seemed out of place, insignificant, the representative of an order which seemed to have nothing to do with the natives. (134)

What ultimately redeems nationalism in the novel, however, is the way in which Bakha is initiated through Gandhi into the heteroglossia of the Bakhtinian public square. In earlier

scenes the city and the bazaar are represented as the spaces most hostile to Bakha; isolated, intimidated, and silenced, he is at the mercy of the powers that maintain the caste status quo. Only the nationalist march opens up a different space where Bakha may feel self-conscious but remain unmolested in the throng and be indirectly educated on matters of nationalism and modernity. Even though Bakha remains rather baffled at the end of the novel, his presence in the midst of this nationalist crowd absorbs him into the "spectacle of historical change" that Bakhtin sees embodied in the carnivalesque public square (Hirschkop 1999, 284). *Untouchable* does not unequivocally privilege any point of view propagated in this nationalist "public square", but the very use of this carnivalesque trope, with its unruly heteroglossia and irreverence towards hierarchies of any kind, gestures at a desire for democracy.

Sea of Poppies is similarly fascinated by heteroglossia's ceaseless becoming. In Ghosh's novel the image of carnivalesque heteroglossia is best figured in the ship – an enclosed and multi-vocal space where class and caste barriers crumble. The man signing up the *girmitiyas* (indentured labourers) emphasizes the insignificance of caste: "Caste doesn't matter […]. All kinds of men are eager to sign up – Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis" (Ghosh 2009, 216). The text tries not to romanticize this form of servitude or indeed the space of the ship by describing it as reeking of the vomit and excrement of the seasick and dying in the hold of the former slave ship. The ship is depicted as creating an egalitarian space among the indentured labourers ("we're all sisters now, aren't we?" [247]) and a place that allows one's radical re-invention:

> It was now that Deeti understood why the image of the vessel has been revealed to her that day, when she stood immersed in the Ganga: it was because her new self, her new life, had been gestating all this while in the belly of this creature, this vessel that was

> the Mother-Father of her new family, a great wooden *mai-bap*, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come: here she was, the *Ibis*. (372-373)

Ghosh's novel registers and relishes the disruption and overturning of old structures and hierarchies and the consequent creation of new kinds of communities, in particular potentially more democratic and emphatically heteroglot communities such as that of the ship's indentured workers -- or that of the enclave for foreigners in Canton in *River of Smoke* (Ghosh 2011), the second part of the trilogy. The novel follows the disruptive flows of colonial trade critically but also with intrigued curiosity about the newness it willy-nilly engenders. While it persistently caricatures colonial figures and exposes "the glaring absurdity of free market ideologies" (Ahuja 2012, 82), its fascination with global, cosmopolitan encounters and networks is equally pronounced. By using the mode of the colonial carnivalesque both *Sea of Poppies* and *Untouchable* make a statement in favour of exuberant heteroglossia, with its promise of democratic transformation.

The limitations of the colonial carnivalesque

In terms of the representation of colonialism, the mode of the colonial carnivalesque provides a means of exploring its dynamic in a way that does not "victimize" the colonized.[3] The mode of the colonial carnivalesque enables both writers to engage with caste critically but also comically. My use of the notion of the carnivalesque emphasizes its transgressive potential, as well as the limits of this transgression. The colonial carnivalesque is a mode of writing which allows for the condemnation of the practice of Untouchability and a critique of the caste system in these novels without, however, pleading unequivocally for its annihilation. In terms of a critique of anything, the carnivalesque may never be unambiguous; in its very nature, it elevates and denigrates in the same gesture. The carnivalesque is

intrinsically transgressive of any kind of hierarchical structure, including that of caste, but it can also undermine the critique of caste that is presented in a more "serious" form. The carnivalesque can therefore be a rather blunt weapon in the fight against Untouchability. This may be the reason why Ghosh's representation of Kalua's moment of resistance to caste oppression steers clear of the carnivalesque mode. When Bhyro Singh, Deeti's relative, whips Kalua brutally and wants to kill him in order to wipe out the shame he and Deeti brought onto his family by their violation of caste norms, Kalua dares to protest; Bhyro Singh cannot believe the outcaste's audacity in questioning the appropriateness of his punishment -- or indeed in claiming the right to speak:

> Malik – what have I ever done to you?
>
> The question – as much as the bewildered tone in which it was asked – further enraged Bhyro Singh. Done? he said. Isn't it enough that you are what you are?
>
> These words echoed through Kalua's head as the subedar walked away, to begin his next run: Yes, what I am is enough … through this life and the next, it will be enough … this is what I will live through, again and again … . (Ghosh 2009, 506)

Kalua then kills him, in a spectacular act of resistance to caste discrimination that signifies a rebellion against the logic of Untouchability condemning him to a status of immutable inferiority. The mode of narration does not tap into the carnivalesque; instead, this scene is depicted in a more serious mode that allows for his heroism to be read as such, whereas the carnivalesque taints everything it touches with mockery and the grotesque.

It is not surprising that Dalit literature's depiction of Untouchability and caste discrimination usually refrains from using the comic mode and instead foregrounds Dalit agency, courage, and resistance, which is more akin to Kalua's representation in the scene

discussed above than the comic inversions of the mode of the colonial carnivalesque. The Dalit writer Ajay Navaria's (2013) short story "Yes Sir" is one of the rare instances in Dalit writing where comedy is derived from the inversion of caste hierarchy. Set in contemporary India, this story is narrated from the perspective of Ramnarayan Tiwari, a Brahmin peon or office factotum, who resents the fact that his boss, Deputy General Manager Narottam Saroj, is a Dalit. He is convinced that the Narottam's promotion is not due to merit but solely the result of job reservations for low castes in the public sector, a programme of positive discrimination that was established by the Indian state shortly after independence. However, when Tiwari realizes that Narottam recommended him for promotion to the position of clerk, he is overcome by gratitude and offers to clear a blockage in Narottam's toilet, an activity that is not part of his current job duties and traditionally considered polluting and beneath a Brahmin. The scene when he happily pokes around in the toilet is funny ("It's all going down all right, sir, slowly", [Navaria's 2013, 64]), but the laughing reader is as much the butt of the joke as is the peon. Since the hierarchical roles of peon and Deputy General Manager already do not match caste hierarchy, the humour derives from the knowledge that a Brahmin cleans a Dalit's toilet; a subordinate in the office hierarchy doing a menial job for his boss would not elicit laughter after all. Therefore this scene is only perceived as funny if the reader is familiar with the logic of caste and adopts the perspective of the upper-caste peon for whom this voluntary act of pollution would be a departure from the norm. Here the logic of carnivalesque inversion as a comic device is itself interrogated, since the reversal of hierarchies always also includes a preservation or cultural memory of these hierarchies. "Yes Sir" makes it apparent that the carnivalesque relies on the internalization of caste hierarchy in order to function as a source of comedy.

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Notes

[1] Upper castes are the so-called *dwija* or twice born castes according to the *varna* scheme, comprising the Brahmans (the priest caste), the Kshatriyas (the warrior caste), and the Vaishyas (traders); below them in the caste hierarchy are the Shudras (labourers). Outside of this scheme fall the outcastes, whose touch signifies ritual pollution (Dangle 2009, ixx-xxi).
[2] On the representation of Gandhi in Anand's novel, see Baer (2009, 586-591).
[3] See Amitav Ghosh (2012) in interview with Elleke Boehmer and Anshuman Mondal: "There is a certain kind of sentimentalism […] which demands that when one's writing about bad things one writes in this victimhood vein. But that doesn't appeal to me at all" (35).

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