

SITUATING POSTMODERN NARRATOLOGY WITHIN THE POSTCOLONIAL GOTHIC MILIEU IN *THE THING ABOUT THUGS*

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Postcolonial Indian writers use different postmodern fictional techniques to distort time and space in order to represent postcolonial Indian reality in fiction. Tabish Khair uses innovative postmodern narrative like intertextuality, self reflexivity, unreliable narration, metafictional historiography in *The Thing About Thugs* to deconstruct the colonial image of the thugs. The identity of the thugs as a colonial construct misrepresented the thugs as ruthless killers. The British used the stereotyped image of the thugs as the binary other to establish themselves as civilized. The British projected the cult of *thuggee* as embodying antisocial practice in India in order to justify their repressive colonial experience. The author blurs the distinction between the time past and time present by incorporating various postmodern fiction techniques to recreate a postcolonial gothic situation. This paper tries to problematize on the stereotypical colonial identity of the thugs by analyzing the colonial narrative in the postcolonial context.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Colonial narrative, Phrenology

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary postmodern fictional writers like Salman Rushdie, Tabish Khair, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Tharoor and Githa Hariharan experiment with innovative postmodern fictional techniques to represent reality in fiction. Tabish Khair uses innovative postmodern narrative techniques in *The Thing About Thugs* to deconstruct the colonial image of the thugs. According to the author, the identity of the thugs was systematically constructed by the British in order to project the macabre tales spun around the deadly image of the thugs as skillful looters and merciless killers. The colonizers, throughout their colonial regime, projected *sati*, child marriage, cult of *thuggee*, as antisocial practices in India, without understanding the socio-cultural background of such practices. In this context one recollects, Fanon, a postcolonial critic, who echoes the prejudice created by the Europeans against the black people in *Black skin, White Masks*. The black color was associated with death, evil, and sin. In the words of Frantz Fanon: “When European civilization came into contact with the black man, with these savages, everyone was in agreement that these black people were the essence of evil”. (**Fanon 167**).

The West objectified the eastern exotic tales in India to colonize India. The prejudice against the thugs was further appropriated by Philip Meadows Taylor’s *Confessions of a Thug* published in 1839. The fear in the British psyche against the thugs is psychoanalytically in Fanon’s term reflects the collective unconscious of the colonizers.

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According to Fanon, “The collective unconscious is quite simply the repository of prejudices, myths, and collective attitudes of a particular group.” (Fanon 165).

Thus, the Western colonial narrative misrepresented the thugs as uncivilized and it positioned itself as the civilized by wearing the civilizing mask of reforming the thugs through Western cultural values. On the contrary, through misrepresentations and prejudices, the British colonized India.

SITUATING POSTMODERN NARRATOLOGY WITHIN POSTCOLONIAL REALITY

The problem with critical approaches to Indian literature is that too often the works are read as either postcolonial or postmodern, as if the two theoretical approaches were mutually exclusive. Instead, contemporary Indian literature is better understood when read as simultaneously postcolonial and postmodern.

In order to justify colonialism, ‘history’ was denied to Modernity’s other- the colonized. The discourses of modernity are deeply concerned with the production of the (neo) colonial present. The ways of ‘knowing’ have long been complicit with the structures of colonial domination; postcolonial discourse makes it explicit that it wants to change them, and the postmodern discourse provides tools and techniques to bring in these changes. According to Homi.K.Bhabha:” Current debates in postmodernism question the cunning of modernity, its historical ironies, its disjunctive temporalities, its paradoxes of progress, its representational aporia” (Bhabha 251).

Postmodern fictional writers use innovative postmodern narratology to distort realism in fiction. Since postmodern novels are self-reflexive in nature, they remind the readers that the work of art is constructed and not real. The plots are described by creating magically real situations which fuse fantasy and reality to blur the crude depiction of reality. Through metafictional historiography, history is blended with the present to explicate the complexities of the present age. The past events are resurrected to explain the present. By blending the high culture with the low culture, postmodern fiction creates a hybrid culture which challenges the so called culturally pure, elitist works.

Postmodern Indian Fiction with its open-ended formalistic techniques within its postcolonial situation has started constructing alternative histories through reclaiming ‘subaltern’ voices- absent and silent in elitist histories and narratives of past and present times. The easy and uneasy affiliations between the stylistic/ formalistic make up of postmodern fiction, and its postcolonial thematic situation need to be probed into in order to find out how representative the postmodern Indian fictions written in post colonial situations are. Realism and Modernism are the ideological defenses of colonialism. Postmodernism offers a platform to reclaim the lost voices in post colonial situations. Thus open-ended, postmodernist narratology replaces closed, absolutist, modernist narratology to meet the demands of the hybrid postcolonial realities.

The paper situates postmodern fiction within postcolonial Indian context by identifying the colonial narratives. Colonial situations are elitist in nature; where as postcolonial situations are multicultural in nature with a curious mix of vibrant reality. Since postcolonial situations are hybrid, they demand innovative fictional techniques to represent reality. Postmodern fiction offers a creative space to represent postcolonial reality. Tabish attempts to disempower the colonial language in the postcolonial context through hybridization. As a postmodern writer located in the postcolonial space, he has created a new 'english' by inserting the regional words like thuggee, bhawnee and many more into the English language. Further by mixing the Indian sensibilities with the British culture, he has created a hybrid fictional reality which mixes the high culture with the low culture.

The macabre tale of crime and suspense is narrated through different unreliable voices beginning from the narrator's own voice at his grandfather's library in Phansa. Tabish Khair employs self reflexivity throughout the novel to distort realism which promotes colonial narrative. The personal narrative of Amir Ali, the central character, contradicts the notes compiled by Captain Meadows's Diary. In the letters addressed to Jaanum, Amir Ali admits that his father died when he was young, but in William T. Meadow's account about thugs, there is a lengthy description of Amir Ali's initiation into the cult of thuggee by his father. The very idea of representing truth has been deconstructed by juxtaposing truth with falsity. Amir Ali weaves a narrative to escape from the hands of British. In his letters to Jaanum, his true intentions are revealed:

But when I had spun him a story about Habibullah being a thug, I had not realized I was spinning myself into a web of my own making. Stories, true or false, are difficult to escape from jaanam. Especially the stories we tell about ourselves. In some ways, all of us become what we pretend to be. (**Khair 108**).

As a post modern novel, here the readers are not allowed to reach the meaning easily. They are expected to be active co-creators of meaning to understand the difference between myth and reality in the case of thugs. Anarchy of meaning is created through multiple narratives. To deconstruct the distorted reality created by the British, the narrator's voice from his grandfather's library in the present fuses with the Victorian past through Amir Ali's letters to Jaanum. Postmodern narratology distorts time and space by shifting to multiple narrative realities created by William T Meadow's *Confessions of a Thug*, Daniel Oates's journalistic account of mysterious murders, and Amir Ali's letters to Jaanum.

Through descriptions of a certain hybrid existence, the powerless Indian characters are yoked with the mighty English characters of Victorian England to evoke a gothic milieu which is stranger than magically real situations. Foggy London streets, opium dens, library of skulls, unpleasant graveyards recreate the uncanny landscape of Victorian England. Indian characters in the novel create a vibrant mix of postcolonial reality. Amir Ali, the central character remains a silent subaltern

character who is able to express his feelings only through a collection of letters written in Farsi to Jaanum. The letters written in cursive Farsi reflect the linguistic alienation of the central character, Amir Ali, who shares his ideas not in English but in Farsi to Jaanum. Epistolary narrative carries an element of personal truth but it is not penned in the colonial language. The marginalized Amir Ali remains voiceless in the presence of the colonizers. His silence reflects his fear against the colonizers. Tabish deconstructs the colonial agenda by giving voice to the marginalized character in the novel. Qui Hy, a subaltern character, finally helps to trace the criminals through her connection with other marginalized characters named “the mole people” in the novel.

PROBLEMATIZING THE WESTERN SCIENCE

The popularity of phrenology is problematized throughout the novel. Phrenology is the scientific study of skulls to determine the character of a personality. Western science served the colonial zeal by associating the size of the skull to the character of the person. In the Victorian London, a group of underground ruthless killers engage in a series of beheadings. Lord Batterstone, a firm believer in phrenology, hires a group of underground ruthless killers to collect skulls of different sizes and shapes to authenticate his belief in phrenology. A series of beheadings haunt the streets of the uncivilized London society. John May, Shields and Jack mercilessly behead marginalized people to win favours from Lord Batterstone. Lord Batterstone maintains a collection of skulls in his personal chamber. The author vividly describes the passion of the skull collector:

Lord Batterstone finished labelling the latest skull that John May had procured for him. He placed it gently back in its place on the shelf. The room was full now. He had all the varieties he could have hoped to find on this fair isle, almost all. His theatre was complete (**Khair 178**)

William T. Meadows plays the role of a reformer by trying to disapprove Lord Batterstone’s belief in Phrenology. He brings the reformed thug Amir Ali to England as a living witness to prove Lord Batterstone wrong. By wearing the civilizing mask, the colonizer engages in his civilizing mission of reforming the thugs.

The lifeless skull is represented as the unnameable thing throughout the novel. The ominous search for the skulls continues throughout the novel exposing the darker side of the uncivilized Britain. The real thugs who are after the human skulls are of English origin and not Indian. The skull is moreover an object and it functions as an eerie metaphor predicting unnatural death through beheading. The thugs and the things are juxtaposed to create a gothic narrative milieu which connects the colonizer and the colonized. Elements of mystery shroud *The Thing About Thugs*. In the words of Binayak Roy:

“The ‘Thing’ is something as inscrutable, as unnameable, though located at the heart of the material universe, as the being of the other. Both challenge human ingenuity to transform them from the incomprehensible matter into lucid symbol.” (**Roy 147**).

The author deconstructs the Western myth created against the thugs by Intertextual references to Philip Meadows Taylor's fictitious book, *Confessions of a thug*, published in 1839. Philip Meadows romanticized the cult of *thuggee* by sensationalizing the rituals involved in the life of thugs. This oriental work of art gripped the imagination of the western audience. As we recollect here, Edward Said pointing out in *Orientalism*:

"The orient that appears in orientalism, then, is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire." (Said 203)

Thus, the West objectified the East as the land of exotic adventures filled with ruthless thugs. Tabish Khair deftly uses the exact description of the thugs from an orientalist's point of view to reaffirm his strong point that the cult of the thugs was systematically constructed by the British to colonize India. The spelling of the central character Aamir Ali in *Confessions of a Thug* has been changed to Amir Ali by the author. However, certain passages from the original book published in 1839 have been used to recreate the past. Intertextual references to Kali-worship, mentioned as invocation to Bhwanee and holy recitation from the passages of the Kuran during the initiation of the thugs create an exotic narrative for the West. Description of Amir Ali's father who participates in a ritual finds a place in both the texts:

My father, as the leader of the whole, carried a lota filled with water, suspended by a string which he held in his mouth, down his right side. Had that lota fallen, what a dire omen would it have been to him! Nothing could have averted his death in that year, or at furthest in the year following. (Taylor 38)

The very art of killing the victims silently through strangulation is exaggerated throughout the novel to depict the thugs as dangerous people. On the contrary, the real character, Amir Ali contrasts with the macabre image created against the thugs. Amir Ali's silence depicts the truth that he is not a skillful killer but a marginalized subaltern character victimized by the Western society.

Stylistically, linear colonial narrative has been employed by the British to misrepresent the thugs in the colonial cultural production; however, Khair challenges the colonial narrative through distorted fugitive narratology to distort time and space in the postcolonial context. Thus, fragmented narration functions as a counter hegemonic tool to subvert the linear progression of time. According to Daniel Rogabete, a postcolonial critic:

"The novel combines voices, discourses and languages in order to create a detective story where the suspense lies not in the revelation of the final solution of the enigma, which can be guessed from the very beginning, but in the reasoning leading to the truth. This endeavour takes the reader along the complicated paths of prejudices, stereotypes, false convictions, invented stories and erroneous Eurocentric perceptions of the Orient." (Rogabete 130)

CONCLUSION

While reading and rethinking Tabish's critique of the orientalist representation of a set of Indian people- thugs, in considering how he highlights the ways within which the identity of the thugs was constructed from a detached western colonial viewpoint. We find out how important such retelling of history as he undertakes it. His account alerts us about not accepting the colonial stereotype of the thugs, as we come to know how arbitrary it is. Khair succeeds in his attempt to make us agree with him that the oppressive terms of colonial discourse need not be accepted uncritically, and postcolonial representations must always challenge them. Through metafictional historiographical ways, Khair helps us in our understanding about how colonial discourses have functioned historically in our Indian context. However, though Tabish is interested, as we have discussed, in highlighting arbitrariness of western construction of its eastern other, he is not offering any alternative, fixed identity to the thugs. Rather his account is more about stressing the idea that we should resist the desire to replace one colonial absolute narrative by another humanist narrative. The issue with him is not here to replace one stereotype by another, rather he seems to be in tune with Bhabha, who says, "The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations" (Bhabha 107).

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