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Historical Roots of Racial Alienation: A Dissection of Colonial Discourses in *The Thing About Thugs*

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Abstract:

The most essential and prominent concepts in postcolonial theory are based on a set of anti-colonial discourses such as migration, alienation and diasporic experiences. The roots of these phenomena are particularly linked with colonialism and its after effects. Racial and cultural alienation of the immigrants from the British colonies was largely because of their depiction as uncivilized, barbarous and bizarre in most of the western discourses and narratives about the Orient. In his novel *The Thing About Thugs* Tabish Khair has made a powerful attempt to deconstruct such baseless and stereotypical discourses because of which the binaries such as the Orient and the Occident, the Enlightened and the ignorant 'Others' were propagated primarily to emphasize the superiority of one race of people over the other. In this novel Tabish Khair exposes the imperialist mentality and supercilious attitude of the colonizers towards the colonized. Through the characters like Daniel Oates and Major Grayper, Khair returns to the colonial masters the same attributions they had for the Orientals. Khair unmasks these civilized and enlightened intellectuals as hypocrites, prejudiced and conniving who did not even spare the weakest section of immigrants who were brought to the kingdom with favorable promises but were left to die alone and alienated for want of food, treatment and essential human compassion.

Keywords: alienation, colonialism, discourses, racism, discrimination.

Alienation in the context of diaspora is not just a word that signifies isolation or estrangement but the history of a journey undertaken as a last resort only to end in an ordeal- the ordeal of a constant consciousness of being ‘different’.

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines alienation as ‘the state of feeling estranged or separated from one’s milieu, work products of work or self’ whereas in literary terms alienation ‘is the state of being alienated from something or somebody; it is a condition of mind’.

Besides these definitions, alienation has been interpreted and explained in different ways by different scholars. Here, I would like to subscribe to Kenneth Keniston’s views which sum up this disturbing state in these words-“Most usages of alienation share the assumption that some relationship or connection that once existed; that is natural, desirable or good, has been lost”. (The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society, 1965)

Besides the diasporic populations spread across the globe, there have been innumerable displaced clans, immigrant labor and exiled individuals compelled by social, political, religious or financial predicament or self-imposed exiles in search of better havens than their own native lands. Each of these geographically dislocated and culturally separated groups has its own tale of woes.

There are both historical aspects and existential perspectives of alienation. This article aims to analyse Tabish Khair’s novel *The Thing About Thugs* in order to trace historical roots of alienation in the context of the ‘colonizer and the colonized’. A postcolonial reading of Khair’s novel will help deconstruct the colonial discourses by which the colonizers (The British) constructed racial identities on the basis of somatic features, customs, rituals and social or cultural practices of the non western, precisely the Indians.

The setting of the novel *The Thing About Thugs* is late Victorian London. The city is drowned in crimes with the involvement of the so-called ‘civilized and respectable’ characters from the upper classes of London in morally wrong and inhuman activities. Besides prostitution and consumption of opium (the city abounds in opium dens), the entire London is shaken by a ‘head cannibal’ (a beheader) who chooses his victims from among the poor immigrants from the

colonies and in a gruesome way chops off their heads. Thus, human skulls are procured to cater to a bizarre pseudoscience of ‘phrenology’. Ironically these so called civilized colonial hypocrites attribute the cause to the ‘riff-raff’ from the colonies. Khair scoffs at the junk science of phrenology which is a process of studying the contour of human skulls to determine the psychological attributes of an individual. Khair exposes the English upper class and its sense of superiority and hypocrisy which led many immigrants, lascars and indentured labour from the colonies particularly India or South East Asia to fear and alienation and ambivalence.

Khair, in his *The Thing About Thugs*, basically addresses the misconceptions about and the misinterpretation of the lives and practices of the people from the East, the Orient, prevalent in the western discourses. Khair has attempted to debate the same in the light of the postcolonial literary theory which especially concentrates upon the social discourses between the ‘colonizers’ and the ‘colonized’ and the impact of European colonial rule. Khair re-examines subjects such as otherness, alienation, discrimination and discontent by scrutinizing the very construct of racial and class identities by the colonizers.

Scholars in general agree that colonialism was not natural or spontaneous act by the people who were economically, intellectually (and later technologically) more powerful striving to reach out to those who were backward in these areas but to most of them it was an organized imperial domination of peoples who were part of separate geographical unit, culture or race. According to these scholars such a race of people which decided that they (the white) were superior to others, are people practicing different rituals, worshiping different Gods, speaking different tongues and considered them humans of lesser kinds had no amount of legitimacy for this superciliousness.

We can say that colonialism was nothing short of an ‘extraordinary human disaster’ (Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*) for the native people inflicted by those who had intruded rather than were ushered in. They came and destroyed the social, economic and political structures of the colonies. The colonial history is not only about intrusion into others’ territory or about material and political ambition of the colonizers but more about the undeserved tortures and inhuman oppression of the colonized within and without their own lands. The natives were forced to abandon their age-old cultural practices and imitate those of the colonizers. Under the dominant imperial power and its repressive policies, the colonized people began to alienate from

their own society. Elleke Boehmer, a professor of world literature in English at the university of Oxford and an acclaimed novelist, in her book, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, considers that colonialism is “the consolidation of imperial power and is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation of resources and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands often by force”.

In *Thing About Thugs* Amir Ali faces alienation mainly because of his ‘Oriental’ background and his exilic status that he himself chooses temporarily to escape punishment in a legal case and travels to London with an English Captain, William Meadows. The captain was searching for a man from India with a distinct skull shape to help him advance his phrenological research in England. Amir, in order to save his life in a murder case he was accused of, confesses to be a former thug. Thus, Meadows gets the man he was looking for and takes him along. But even Meadows patronage cannot save him from being subjected to racial bias and alienation. Amir and several other immigrants, mostly lascars and indentured servants from India, undergo terrifying ordeals leading to a traumatic sense of isolation and alienation. One can note Amir Ali’s helplessness and a sense of loss and regret in these words: “Perhaps that is why I feel a certain dread at times. Having come so long a way; heading into nothing, running away from everything. I had only hoped to survive, not to flourish.” (Khair 166)

According to Keniston, most usages of alienation share the assumption that some relationship or connection that once existed and that is natural and desirable has been lost. Tabish Khair not only assumes but also attributes the alienation of his characters to the loss of connection ‘that once existed’ and was ‘natural’ and good. Alienated and abandoned Karim in *The Thing About Thugs* tells the tale of his woes in his broken, mispronounced English with the fluidity of ‘Hindustani’ to the kind English ladies and gentleman who interrogate him. He says:

“I was born in Calcutta and was a Mussulman- but I Christian now. I have been in dis coundree ten year. I come first as servant to a military officer, Englishman. I lived with him in Scotland six, seven mont. He left Scotland saying he come back. But he not and in a mont I hear he dead, and then I come to London. I wish very often return my coundree where everything sheap (cheap) living sheap, rice sheap.....” (Khair 159-160)

The alienation experienced by Khair's characters in *The Thing About Thugs* is exilic as well as existential by nature. Karim, Gunga and even Amir Ali find their lives insignificant and isolated in London. Alienation might exist with or without exile. Exiled characters are generally alienated politically or socially and find it very difficult to condition their minds and practices as per the customs of their new geographical locations. But if, the decision of migration (or immigration) was due to a sudden exigency or for better prospects or for a temporary refuge, the mind and hearts of the exiles (here self imposed) yearn for a glimpse of their own social environment. A strong sense of alienation haunts the self-exiled characters. C. D. Verma argues: "Departure or going away is not a sudden or abrupt, unconscious act on the part of the exile hero. Before actual physical departure, the mind of the exile hero is in a 'critical' state when he questions the authenticity of social environment." (Verma 69)

Alienation from one's culture, society and one's own self as a consequence of colonization and the imposition of the ideas, practices and religious faith of the colonizers on the colonized, dominated colonial writings and continued as a thematic concern in postcolonial literature. Dane Kennedy in his 'imperial History and Postcolonial Theory' states that "decolonization robbed imperial history of most of its practical incentives. Yet it continued to cling to the methodology and 'mentality' of the official mind". Khair also attacks the same mentality in his novel. Khair puts the colonial racism to a serious scrutiny and hits back at the West's 'colonialist attitude and the way they stereotyped the Eastern world.

Evidently postcolonial literature is meant essentially to address the problem of formerly colonized people after the decolonization of their countries and is built around the themes such as racialism, colonialism, hybridity and otherness. Alienation is always there in its core and alienation of a man is nothing short of his dehumanization. A man's estrangement from his own community and culture eventually leads him to his estrangement from his own self.

As a postcolonial or to say an anti-colonial writer of the late postcolonial and postmodern period, Khair feels that the reactions or replies to those denigrating narratives, statements and opinions about the Orient, precisely Indian, have yet not been suitably answered back. In the lines coming up from *The Thing About Thugs* where Tabish Khair exposes colonial supremacy and hypocrisy and their inequitable, inhuman treatment of the indigenous people (the Indians) through Karim whose sense of alienation is heart wrenching. Selling biblical tracts on the streets

of London for his livelihood, Karim not only had to learn English hymns to please the 'kind ladies and gentlemen' but even had to change his faith or had to pretend to have changed his faith to avoid those disdainful, scornful glares from 'the only civilized people'. Khair writes:

“.....and it would almost always charm the gentleman or lady into purchasing a tract. But with his consumption exacerbated by the recent winter cold, it was seldom that Karim had the energy or voice for his livelihood now. Instead he tagged along with the rest of his gang of 'jahajbhais' pilfering, scavenging, grateful to Amir for providing them with a warm and free shelter.” (Khair 160)

Karim met the fate that many other servants and labourers did. Many of them were denied return to their homeland and were left to starve; exposed to harsh conditions; often suffering deadly diseases. Alone and alienated they always feared a horrifying end in a land that was never theirs. Those who survived the painful conditions were left to the mercy of their cruel masters.

Colonialism was a hugely traumatic experience for the colonized and for many cultures it would remain a profoundly long and nightmarish vision of the past that will continue to haunt their present and future. Having been displaced and alienated from his indigenous language and then from his faith, Karim gets some consolation in the company of other unfortunate brothers whom he calls 'jahajbhais' (brothers from his native land, India, shipped to England).

As a postcolonial writer like Salman Rushdie and Chinua Achebe, Khair's reactions to those colonial discourses come naturally. Being a responsible citizen of a nation that suffered the worst impact of colonialism, Tabish Khair could not remain unaffected. He has tried to give a fitful reply to those Orientalist narratives through his studious analysis in one of his powerful non-fictions *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere*. Khair is aware that the colonizers had and still have many tales about the (previously) colonized peoples most of which were/are condescending and mere concoctions. In their drawing rooms conversations, club discussions or dinner parties the English gentlemen relished to share half-cooked or twisted stories, strange and baseless opinions about the colonies ridiculing the natives for their looks, skin colour, traditions, practices and rites dismissing them as uncivilized, eccentric, barbarous and even disgusting. Ironically, the English writers and reporters would pick such stories from

these meetings and with much colour and tempting garnishing; fake, baselessly contemptuous narratives would be created. Typical words would be devised to demean and damage the image of the Indian, the African, the Burmese and other non western, non-Christian countries under their authoritarian regime. The observation Daniel Oates makes in *The Thing About Thugs* about Amir Ali whom Captain Meadows had brought from India, reflects the general opinion of the Occident about the Orient:

“Surely sir, it could be a cult, as young William suggested. Someone like that thug our good Captain Meadows has imported into the land. I must confess that with his pointy moustache, flowing tresses and dark, shifty eyes, he looks the very part of a vindictive murderer; a practitioner of barbarous, unspeakable rites. It surprises me that the learned Captain harbours him in his house.” (Khair 130-131)

Many scholars of Oriental studies delve into Said’s theory of Orientalism to deconstruct the Orientalist discourses about India. Tabish Khair also engages with Said’s theory in *The Thing About Thugs* which has many strong references to the colonial discourses about India. There was an obvious inconsistency in the way they, the Orientalists, portrayed India through narratives which only sought to deprecate the East. Khair’s novel is a powerful attempt to deconstruct those discourses that were pervasive throughout the British society. Biased and ethnocentric British writers on the one hand and the sensationalist western press on the other left no meanness aside to emphasize that the Christians were indisposed to all evils and their society was (or is) far more superior to those of the East. In their arrogance they went on to the extent where they claimed that only their civilization could be the touchstone of all ideal human values. To them the Orientals from ‘Hindoostan’ or other parts of the empire were ‘burden’. They were heathens or pagans and were even corrupt- socially as well as morally. Complaining of the ‘burden’ (Orientals) from the empire a clubman in *The Thing About Thugs* says, “We ship them civilization and they ship us problem”. (Khair)

Khair scrutinizes the British writers and intellectuals by re-examining the West’s Orientalist narratives. The author brings out the arrogance, the patronizing superiority and the imperious attitude of the West. In the Eurocentric connotations the Orientals were culturally and educationally inferior. Hence the term Orient was used rather offensively as a label for the people of Asia.

After Amir's arrest on suspicion of being the 'head cannibal' (owing to his confessed history of 'thuggee') and later being released as innocent, Daniel Oates urges Superintendent Grayper and Captain Meadows to think out the 'oriental theory of atrocities' in these words:

"The Orientals are very apt to rush into extremes and they seem to have an idea that social and eternal salvation can only be obtained by means most repugnant to civilized and well balanced minds. The Orientals, however, unlike Negroes, who are also capable of such acts, are particularly devious, a characteristic evidenced by the Rookery Beheader. All rational consideration and logical thinking points a finger of accusation at an Oriental man whether or not it is this man, now released acting singly or in tandem with a larger cult of heathens. It seems hasty to have released the man as early as he has been released." (Khair 187)

Tabish Khair often states that he writes basically for the South East Asians. Known for his vehement criticism of the East and West divide and the West's unconcealed bias of the East, Khair refuses to yield to the West's disdainful and condescending looks towards the East. Though being himself based outside India, his native land, for more than two decades now, Khair is proud of his Indian identity and continues to articulate his strong objections to the baseless, stereotypical image of the Indians (or the Asian for that matter) in the Western social and political discourses.

Khair's characters and their sense of alienation are not ascribable to any forced exile. His characters are subjected to humiliation and alienation either because of their diasporic status or at the treacherous hands of those colonial masters who perpetuated hatred against those of the East, historically termed as the Orientals and traditionally designated to comprise East Asia, Southeast Asia and Eastern Central Asia.

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