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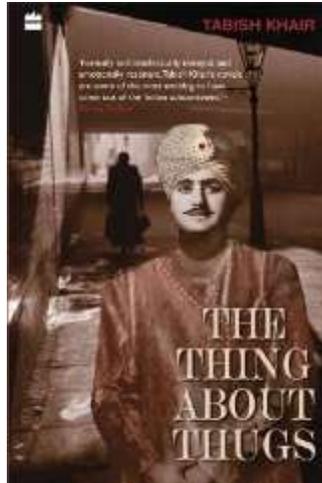
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London Dreams: Analysis of Tabish Khair's *The Thing About Thugs* as an Anti-Colonial Discourse

C. Amutha Charu Sheela, M.A., M.Phil, M.B.A.



This royal throne of things, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars
This Other Eden, demi-paradise
This fortress built by nature for herself

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This blessed plot...this realm, this England
-- *Richard II*, William Shakespeare

Reality of England vs. Textual England

The image of England one comes across in the English literary texts makes one's heart longing for the sight of those majestic castles, cathedrals, rivers rippling under the cool shade of elms, dancing daffodils, her cliffs and hills amidst the snows, sandy beaches, lovely English villages and bustling towns. The colonies perceived of England as the seat of learning, where the very best of art, literature and science flourished.

But when R. Parthasarathy, the Indian English writer, sailed to England with a craving nurtured by English literary texts, he was shocked to see the reality. He laments thus, "an England I was unable to come to terms with. The England I had known and loved existed nowhere except in my mind. This other England, I did not know even existed" (Guy Amirthanayagam 1980:66). The contradictions between the ideal textual England and real England one encountered metamorphosed the attitude of other writers towards England and the English.

Ethnic Biased Characterizations

Also, as theorized by Edward Said, literary textual representation from the West tended to stereotype the Oriental and colonized people: lazy Indian, violent and murderous Arabs, stupid Irish, and inscrutable Chinaman etc. The Variety and richness of non-western traditions and their vibrant culture have been ignored. The facets of India projected by the Europeans paint her as poverty stricken, uncivilized and barbaric. These repeated misrepresentations in their writings made the rest of the world to believe India to be a disgraceful and a shameful country.

James Clifford opines, "The Orient functions as a theater, a stage on which a performance is repeated, to be seen from a privileged stand point". (Clifford, James 1986:12).

The British images of India in Western minds formed by misrepresentations and wicked interpretations of Indian culture and history led to questioning, hostility and hatred **towards** the British. Many Indian texts challenged and disputed

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the British eye on Indian life. This paper is an attempt to analyze such efforts through a reading of Tabish khair's *The Thing About Thugs*, one of the twelve novels short listed earlier for *The Hindu* Fiction Award.

Tabish Khair's *The Thing About Thugs*



<http://www.manasianliteraryprize.org/tabish-khair>

Photo Credit: Lars Kruse

Tabish Khair was born and educated mostly in India. He is an acclaimed poet and novelist who has authored various books. At present he resides in Denmark. He felt the urge to respond when he repeatedly came across ill-researched articles in newspapers denigrating Asians or colored immigrants. *The Thing About Thugs* is a novel in which he answers, interrogates and inverts the stereotypes by touching upon the issues such as racial difference, treatment of religion, caste, class, barbarism, culture, civilization and interracial relations.

The readers visualize the nineteenth century foggy Victorian London through the eyes of the central character AmirAli, a reformed thug, who is brought

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to London for an experimental study by his mentor Captain Meadows, who wishes to chronicle the secretive, strange cult of Thuggery. Since the author **attempts** to rewrite history, he puts all the doubts of the readers to rest by stating clearly in the very beginning that “any story worth retelling is a true story” (Tabish Khair 2010:4).

The Real London Portrayed

The London which unfolds before the reader in the text refutes and challenges the common man’s image of the noble England of Shakespeare and Milton and the fabulously rich, romantic, beautiful and wonderful land of Wordsworth, Keats, Shelly and Byron. This is the Wrong England with all its brutalities, handlings, betrayals, hanging, beheadings etc. The streets are bleeding. The dark lanes are lined with poorhouses falling to pieces, inhabited by poor people, rough neighborhood, slimy and stinking, full of dogs and homeless people. Khair’s description of poverty in London inverts the received textual images of England, as a land of affluence.

Pretending to be a Thug!

As the novel proceeds, we come to know, AmirAli is not a real thug, and he pretends to be one, in order to deceive Meadows.

The Thing About Thugs throws open the question whether the thugees, the notorious highway men of the 19th century India were brutal murderers and regular robbers or British fabrication to maintain a strong control over the natives.

The tone of horror in which AmirAli accounts his thugee life in India is a fabulous, imaginative and wild story which conforms to the British image of the Indians as inscrutable, wily and unreliable.

English Doggery!

Soon the story of Indian thugee life is replaced by English doggery! The word *doggery* means dog-like behavior or conduct. It also meant a place where liquor was sold.

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As the plot deepens, a series of gruesome – beheadings take place in the dingy by-lanes of London. The authorities suspect the hand of people from the colonies because beheading is a heathenish rite which is a very common sight in the far flung out posts of the Empire. This perception also arises because they cannot imagine the English collecting heads to perform tantric rites in Stonehenge and Voodoo in Westminster. Even the press ascribes this beheadings to cult and foreigners. They even propound a theory called Oriental cannibal theory. It says,

The Oriental theory of the atrocities is worth thinking about.... we all know how political fanaticism will drive a Nihilist to the commission of murder, but it is not so generally known that religious fervor drives some sects to the most terrible acts of self – mutilation in Asia and Africa . 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 (Tabish Khair 2010:164).

Racist Attitudes

This theory exposes the racist attitudes of British .The history of race prejudice and race stereotyping is very complex. Europeans perception of Indians was influenced by the experiences of slave trade, interactions with petty officials and domestic servants. The presence of a race which is looked down as inferior gave them a sense of superiority... “that he belongs to a race whom God had destined to Govern and Subdue” (Jawaharlal Nehru 1960: 327). The series of brutal beheadings, the arduous act of head cannibal makes Amir Ali realize that this is the imagined India by the British which Captain Meadows expects from him, “This is India as you people imagine it. You have made it come alive here in the streets of London. (Tabish Khair 2010:192).

Imagined India: Western Fantasy

The author seems to convey that this imagined India is merely a western fantasy. Said argues that the western views are not based on their observation but the outcome of the West’s dreams and fantasies which are fundamentally

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imaginative and fabricated construct that would appeal to the western audience.

Probing Said's argument Bhaba points out these imaginary colonial stereotypes are often projected as horrors. The colonial discourse is very often populated with terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy. Bhaba writes, "the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instructions" (Bhabha, Homi K. 1994: 70). Hence they portray colonial stereotypes in various derogatory ways.

Reversal of Roles!

At the end the roles are reversed in the story. AmirAli - the central character, who is suspected because of his past thuggee life emerges as cultured and civilized man. Contrary to the popular supposition and to everybody's astonishment the real thugs happen to be the three Englishmen-from the so called civilized society on earth. The English, who are so proud of their race and culture unleashed atrocities over the innocents by beheading them. Through these reversals of roles in the text, the author interrogates, rebuts and undermines stereotypical representations of India. Through Ali the colonized Khair forms a sequence of mirror images which seems to reflect these fantasies back endlessly.

Captain Meadows attempt to civilize the thug stands as evidence to colonizer's attempt to civilize the, "entire culture and nations the promise so dear to any Christian heart, of salvation of the human soul, of mercy and redemption." (Tabish Khair 2010:108)

Binary Divide

Here the author brings in another binary divide between the colonizer and colonized as civilized and barbaric respectively. They believe they are shipping the civilization to Empire where as in turn the Empire ships back only problems. As Hutchins notes,

“ it had been common from the time of James Mills to identify developed

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civilization exclusively with the European variety, and to designate Indian culture – its antiquity notwithstanding – as characteristic of an early stage of human development . Indians were lumped together with other non-European peoples, all of whom were pronounced primitive because of their lack of European culture.” (Hutchins, Francis 1967:73)

Colonization versus Civilization

Their main purpose seems to convert these uncivilized and barbaric easterners and to teach them colonizer’s civilized culture. But actually the gap between colonization and civilization is very wide, because the colonizing mission and human values could not coexist. So, a country which justifies colonization is already a sick and morally diseased civilization.

Khair interrogates the dominant colonial paradigm and he levels the charge of barbarism against the colonizer and the definers. When Captain Meadows wonders how the empire has allowed the ancient vocation of thugees to flourish so long, Amir Ali politely counters by questioning, “And are you not fond of the battles and wars by which you win a town here and market there? How much less bloody is the occupation of thug?” (Tabish Khair 2010:53).

Western Account of Indian Hindu Religion

The western account of Indian Hindu religion is that it is *merely* superstitious. Hindustan is constructed on the scaffold of superstitious faith; whereas it is believed that the westerners are guided by science, reason and education.

In this novel also, we come across many English characters who talk about God of reason and all the Indian characters seem to be superstitious and gullible. Captain Meadows arrogantly says, he seeks, “the guidance of Reason which is a God unknown to your race.” Other gods are nothing when compared to the wisdom of their god of reason who is able to make material truths out of insubstantial words. Other religious gods are portrayed as tyrannical and blood thirsty demons.

But the society in which Amir Ali finds himself also does not seem to be a

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superior culture. It is a scientific society in the guise of secret cult whose men guided by their god of reason collect human skulls to prove and disprove that human nature is predicted from the skulls. Captain Meadows has brought AmirAli to prove his theory that man's background plays a major role and one cannot judge a person by reading his skull. Said observes that "The Orient became an object suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical thesis about mankind and the universe". (Said, Edward W 1978:7)

This proves how Orient has helped the West to gain knowledge about world and to assert their superiority in various fields. But these Londoners who are guided by reason are unable to solve the mystery behind the heathenish beheadings; only an innate Indian wisdom is able to unearth the mystery.

The Colonial Discourse

The colonial discourse often represents Indian landscape as wild, untamed, bluntly referred to as jungle, filled with robbers, tiger and many other wild beasts. Nature is described as a dangerous and destructive force. Khair tries to dispel this imaginary description through his hero Amir who says, "My part of India is not lush green wilderness, as you like to picture India. No, jaanam, it has been cultivated far too long to be the jungle that you imagine (Tabish Khair 2010:58).

The author beautifully describes the daybreak in Indian Villages which is in sharp contrast to this foggy Victorian London which shrouds much of the story. Amir nostalgically recollects, "How peaceful it is, the break of dawn, in the villages of India... here the fog and the buildings obscure the sun and the sky" (Tabish Khair 2010:58). The hero feels the odors that emanate from houses in London are very strong, pungent and putrid when compared to the smell that comes out from the houses in his village which are very open to the clean air and purified by agarbattis. Even the Thames is small and its stench is juxtaposed with the mighty Ganges back home.

Egotism and Scorn

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The account of Daniel Oates, the reporter brings out the egotism of the so – called civilized countries who pour scorn on the Indian tradition. He reports, “In the Old Royal Exchange, there were separate walks...but the living gods shipped into London jostle with the rest of us on the same streets and alleys.” (Tabish Khair 2010:208).

Actually in the British colonies entries to public places are demarcated according to European and native categories. But in England there is no such demarcation which the colonizer yearns for. This racialist attitude can also stand for, as Nehru observes in his *Discovery of India*, not so much English versus Indian but European versus Asiatic.

A Variety of Characters

Numerous characters, wonderfully inventive, parade throughout the novel. On one side of the balance we have people – niggers, opium peddlers, lascars, prostitutes, beggars, ex-slaves, - from different corners of the empire doing all sorts of odd and menial jobs, living in gloomy, dingy, stinking, by-lanes of London. They look dangerous yet they are law- abiding and loyal. A woman character who seems to resemble Madame Defarge in Charles Dickens *A Tale of Two cities*, runs a Punjabi dhaba. Her name QuiHy which sounds like Chinese is actually a distortion of ‘Koi Hai ’ means nobody, invisible. But her network connectivity with under privileged is so wide and strong, that with their help she was able to catch the real thugs. She symbolizes east which seems voiceless, but actually superior, very much advanced and marching ahead in the race of civilization.

In the colonizers description, Bhaba states that the position of colonial characters is ambivalent in nature. They are portrayed as wild, dangerous, harmful while at the same time they are harmless, friendly and domesticated. On the other side of the balance , stand in contrast, is the upper class British - the Lords ,Majors, Captains , and the gentlemen who indulge in all sorts of criminal activities like collecting skulls, committing murders and spending time in Opium dens.

Post-colonial Discourse

Post-colonial discourse ridicules the English commentaries and popular

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beliefs regarding the Indian caste system, through these English characters that represent the British class system. Khair's delineation of the underground characters are far more attractive than the upper ones. Ustad, who lives in the sewers of London, calligraphs the walls and ceilings with Urdu poetry. When Fetcher describes these people to Ali he whispers, "They are humans, but no they are not from aloud, not beggars escaped prisoners or homeless Londoners, They never even go above. They were born and reared in the tunnels under London. Not ghosts, nor ghouls, they are human or half human" (Tabish Khair 2010:171).

Co-existence

The harmonious coexistence of people belonging to various religions is revealed through the peaceful atmosphere prevailing in the Indian villages where the presence of colonial rule is not felt much. Amir Ali's description of his induction into the thuggee-fold focuses on Hindu-Muslim unity. Both Hindu and Muslim thugs are united when they invoke Bhowanee, their guardian angel. Amir Ali recalls, "Verses were read out from the Holy Quran and then a Hindu pundit applied vermilion from the plate of offerings to Goddess Bhowanee to my forehead" (Tabish Khair 2010:34). Whereas those sahibs who hails god of reason, can only sow seeds of hatred and partition among the innocent people – an act of uncivilized deed.

Autobiographical Element

At last, the central character gets tired of England, becomes sick of London- the mother of all cities. He does not want to come back home. Here a tinge of the author's autobiographical element can be seen. The author belongs to minority Muslim community. In India he was posed questions to bracket his identity whether he was an Indian or Muslim. When he had to leave India it was not hard for him to part because the real India existed only in his mind and memory.

AmirAli dozes off at the crucial moment in a ship, which sails towards another colony - Africa. Finally he wakes up only to find him lying close to the person, who is the brain behind the beheadings. This gives the story an ambiguous ending.

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Technique of Multiple Narratives

Khair employs the technique of multiple narratives right from first person narration, third person narration, monologue, dialogue, letter writing to reporting to cross-examine western accounts which blame India's poverty as the reason for most of the evils in the society. The traditional technique of building tale and circling back from the present to the past and to the future are all features of Indian oral narrative tradition.

The technique of using non-English lexical items in the text is a more widely used device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness. It signifies the difference between cultures and stresses the importance of discourse in interpreting cultural concepts.

It is possible to raise the question whether Khair takes us to the other extreme of portraying India of the past as a nation without any blemish. Yet, Khair queries the veracity of London dreams of the mighty Indian sub-continent, in a state of stupor and Indian fantasies on the myth of London's cultural superiority. He grills; cross examines, accepts, rejects, refutes, redefines and challenges the established definition and representations of the Indian empire.

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