

Theme of East- West encounter in Tabish Khair's novel *The Thing About Thugs* on the basis of Racism , Identity, Barbarism, Caste and Ethnicity

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ABSTRACT

London the place of hopes, light and dreams has been portrayed by many writers since the colonial period. In Tabish Khair's novel, *The Thing About Thugs* the depiction of London city is something different. In this novel there is a comparison of haunting mysteries which become a form of horror, fear and marginalization of the city and lavish life, rich culture and smartness of the city. The author has tried to portray the past of India with different techniques. He is not agree with the superiority of British Empire over India or other eastern countries. The novel is a powerful attempt of the author to look upon the matters like prominent issues of colonial and postcolonial period such as uncivilized, uncultured, dangerous, diabolical and inferior by self on one hand and the notion of race, identity, Barbarism, east-west encounter, stereotypes on the other hand. The novel isa story of a reformed thug Amir Ali who has been taken away to London through a British Captain, T. Meadows to investigate the cult of thugee. The novel shows how the authorities suspect that there must be Indians or eastern behind these activities but the actual position was not as per their thinking. The novel highlights how these issues have been in the minds of the west for ever about east through which they always consider themselves superior to eastern subcontinents. The existence of race which looked down as inferior give them always a sense of superiority to the east.

Keywords: *Inter-racial relationships, East-West encounter, Barbarism,*

Racism, Ethnicity, Identity, Colonial and postcolonial period

I.INTRODUCTION

This work puts emphasis on the theme of east-west encounter in Tabish Khair's novel *The Thing About Thugs* on the basis of racism, ethnicity, caste, Class, barbarism and identity. Tabish Khair was born in 1966 in Ranchi and grew up In Gaya, a small Indian town of historical interest in Bihar, in a Muslim class family. He finished his Ph. D in 2000 and moved to Aarhus, where he is currently Associate Professor in the department of English in the University of Aarhus. Tabish Khair is one of the writers of his age who merges his experience to the cosmopolitan ideas. Migration to Denmark was an important step to his life. This migration marks a new identity of the author. He has written on number of emerging and interesting issues of contemporary age. Themes like alienation, class division, realism, self-enigma of identity, quest for cultural roots, alienation from

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native and assimilation to the adopted nation, colonial and racial otherness etc certainly found in his works. In his works we also find the elements of anti-colonial discourse and he also tries to assimilate the cultural conflict prevailing between his root nation and adopted nation.

The issues like racism and ethnicity have always been a great matter of conversation in Indian English literature since a long time. Being of Indian origin Tabish Khair is a migrant writer who raises these issues in his novel *The Thing About Thugs*. The setting of the novel is in the Victorian age, nineteenth century London.

Victorian Age was a culmination period for colonialism. Many European states maintained their colonies on other continents. The colonizing power enslaved and oppressed most of the native people of the colonial region. The colonial power always argued that third world countries were inferior and needed western help and assistance in order to gain moral integrity and economic wealth. At the same time the eastern people were forced to give up their cultural heritage and assimilate to the colonizer's culture.

The novel is set in the nineteenth century London of opium dens, tunnel people, and seamen, abandoned by skippers. This novel is narrated by Amir Ali, a young man from an Indian village. He has been brought to London to be shown off as a reformed thug, after he told a British officer a long tale about thugs, India's murderous bandit gangs. Unfortunately, he makes a convenient suspect when a series of grotesque beheadings occur in the city. Khair's novel is ingenious and mischievous, not only in its powerful subtext about racial profiling but also in its ironic echoes of Charles Dickens and Agatha Christie.

Amir Ali is the narrator of the story and he is also the central and the leading character. In the year 1839 Amir Ali has been taken to London by Captain William T. Meadows in order to investigate the cult of Thuggee in the region. He has been represented as a reformed Thug. But when the story opens he becomes one of them. Amir Ali has an English girl friend Jenny, he addresses her 'Jaanam'. Amir's Persian letters to Jenny become the developing and interesting source for the narrative. The people of London suspect that the criminals behind the brutal murders and thugees were the Orientals. Just because the image of India from the western mind is always made by repellent interpretations and by misrepresentations of Indian civilization. The Orientals have always been colonized and neglected by the Europeans. Therefore they suffer with the feelings of hatred and aggression in their minds. The thinking of the British eye in the Indian life and culture is always different. The westerners always feel themselves superior to the Orientals but Khair refutes this thinking because at the end they come to know that the actual criminals were whites not the Orientals.

The primary signifier of East-West encounter was racism. The symbol of racism is the 'colour' although later it changes into certain terms prevailing in the Indian society like linguistic, religious, ethnic, sexual and class differences. According to Marxism racism is an important element of class division. Actually the history is the witness of racist attitudes of stereotypes as a complex process. These racist stereotypes of colonial discourse can still be found in science, historical writing, mass media and literature. Ania Loomba in her book *Colonialism And Postcolonialism* defines the attitude of racism. To quote: "Race, those particularly highlight the supposed primitivism and violence. The connection between contemporary British racism and the city is an important reminder that race is a rational concept which does not have fixed referents". The racist attitude of the British towards the East is emphatically presented in the novel and this theory exists in the orientalism. Therefore we can say orientalism exposes the racist attitude of the West towards the East. The

racist attitude gives them a feeling of superiority complex.

The British attitude towards India was very much influenced with domestic servants and the experiences of slavery etc. Racism and caste are the important content of colonialism. While describing caste system Ania Loomba claims, “Caste was course of a concept that becomes familiar in England from colonial experiences in India, and it marked a social, economic and religious hierarchy overlaid with connotations of purity and pollution, similar to those that shape the idea of race”.

The racist attitude also defined by Jawahar Lal Nehru in Discovery of India, as east versus west and Asia versus Europe. While accepting the fact Rudyard Kipling commented on racist attitude in the ending lines of his *The Ballad of East and West*:

“Oh, East is east, West is west, and the twain shall meet
Till Earth and sky stand presently at God’s great judgement seat”.
But there is neither East nor West, Border nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the
earth”!

This distinction of race has been seen in the characters of the novel. The portrayal of British characters in the novel is presented as colonizer stronger and civilized in comparison to Indian characters. According to Homi Bhabha, there are four kinds of stages in the process of colonization; mimicry, hybridity, ambivalence and liminality. Khair focused upon the ambivalent nature of colonizer and colonized in the novel. The colonizers are considered as brutal, strong, wild, wily, dangerous and harmful. But on the same time they looked as helpful, supportive and domestic.

The British characters in the novel are created in the same manner like captains, lords, majors etc. These British are presented as criminals, murderous, skull collectors and opium eaters. They all belong to high class society. On the other hand the colonized are always taken as suppressed, voiceless, weak and uncivilized. But the character of Amir Ali and lady character Quihy have presented as intelligent, cultured and strong. They both were able to investigate the real thugs. According to the west, India is a country of poverty, illiteracy and uncivilized peoples and of course they are murderous, barbaric and thugs. They do not care that east is agree or not but they always repeated the same attitude. This typical attitude is also represented in the writings of west. These writings made India as disgraceful country. From the perspective of India, Mary Douglas has claimed that India is “a mirror image of Europe and thus a totally opposite world to the west”.

The novel strongly highlights the trauma of east –west encounter. The character Amir Ali is represented as an accused of the murderous and robberies and he take refuge among his fellow ‘Untouchables’. Because of the series of murderous, in London become an increasingly dangerous and horrible place with many lurking threats. There was one common thing in these murders that all those who have been killed so far are orients and poor people residing on the dark streets of London. Commenting on the monstrous nature of its people, Khair writes thus: “And London, this city of cities how could it be trusted? It hide so many stories and layers, its paths above the ground were devious and twisted, its tunnels and sewers and dungeons numberless and unmapped” When Amir goes to London he suffered with inferiority complex as the British always forces to orients to feel this. He certainly faces sets of problems such as

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horror, fear marginalization and violence etc .Khair has examined this through the study of polemical dichotomy of East and West. The novel not only defined the typical thinking of west for the east but along with that it also gives certain examples which highlight the racial otherness. To quote “There is the difference in the shape and size of the brain and the organic quality of the body ”.Khair has also made a comparison between the physical structure of Chinaman and Negro. He claims, “Negro or child of some other race is to blur the essential differences between the races and the lessons of history, which records Greek and Roman antiquity as the cradle of every civilization, as well as the lesson of biology. The novel also represents an ethnic biased characterization like the people belong to the east always considered as lazy, violent, uneducated and un civilized .On the other hand the people of the west are intelligent, educated, mannered and cultured in comparison to east. Edward said in ‘ orientalism’ describes about this biased behavior of west to east. The west is always considered as powerful, colonizer and the have atypical attitude towards east. The east is always taken as lazy Indian, dazed Irish, and liquidator Arab. But the novel reveals that the actual criminal were British. Hence it may be said that the novel highly raises the east-west encounter on the basis of racism, ethnicity, caste, class, barbarism and identity.

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