

POSTMODERN ANXIETY IN THE WRITINGS OF TABISH KHAIR

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ABSTRACT

The present manuscript is an attempt to analyze the range of themes and issues portrayed by a diaspora writer, Tabish Khair in postmodern Indian English literature. The eminent figures of Indian English literature like Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, V.S. Naipaul and Kamala Markandaya, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, and Tabish Khair undertook the harsh realities of society and life. Nationalism, racism, identity, partition, caste, class, poverty, cultural roots, peasantry, doubly oppressed lives of women, rural-urban division, east-west encounter, feudal practices, Dalits, communalism, and tribal culture are some of the major issues exposed in their writings. These writers are also deified as path-breakers and pathmakers of the new era of Indian writing in English. Tabish Khair is one of the most enthusiastic and energetic diasporic writers of the postmodern era. He has portrayed the contemporary Indian life in a truthful and simple manner.

KEYWORDS: *Diasporic Sensibility, Quest for Identity, Alienation, Assimilation, Racism, Cultural Roots*

INTRODUCTION

Modernism was an earlier aesthetic movement which was a vogue in the earlier time of the twentieth century. Term postmodernism implies a relation to modernism. Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory* describes the concept of modernism:

Modernism was that earthquake in the arts which brought down much of the structure of pre-twentieth century practice in music, painting, literature, and architecture. In all the arts touched by modernism what had been the most fundamental elements of practice were challenged and rejected thus, melody and harmony were put aside in music, perspective and direct pictorial representation were abandoned in painting, in favor of abstraction, in architecture traditional forms and materials (pitched roofs, domes, and columns, wood, stone and bricks) were rejected in favor of plain geometrical forms often executed in new materials like plate glass and concrete. ^[1]

The term postmodernism was first commonly used in 1949 to talk about modern literature. Many people did not like modern architecture because it had too many box-like shapes and people did not think it was pretty. Some of them started the postmodern architecture movement.^[2] The postmodernism generally refers to the period of second half of the 20th century. It was a time when postmodern ideas became very common.

Postmodernism is a complex phenomenon of the contemporary literary world. It is also described as a socio-cultural and literary theory. It is a shifting of thoughts, culture, and beliefs that have manifested in a variety of

disciplines including art, social sciences, music, architecture, literature, fashion, communication and technology. Post-modern literature describes the socio-cultural implication of postmodernism. The shifting of the perceptions of modernity probably began in the late 1950s and still continuing. It is also associated with power shifting and dehumanization after the period of the Second World War and the onslaught of consumer capitalism.

Postmodernism emphasizes the role of language, power and cultural relations, and motivations and is against the sharp distinctions such as male versus female, straight versus gay, white versus black, and imperial versus colonial.^[3]

Perhaps, taking a clue from the perception and generalized definition of the term, postmodern Indian English writers have taken excessive advantage and freedom to put off the expression of thoughts. These writers of the age deals with the keys of social concerns like poverty, class conflict, gender issues, debt-ridden farmers, and underprivileged sections of society. The postmodernist discourses have made the issues of the quest for identity and nationality as all the more complex. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (1990)* explains the features of postmodernism in literature as:

Post modernity is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals.... Postmodernism may be seen as a continuation of modernism's alienated mood and disorienting techniques and at the same time as an abandonment of its determined quest for artistic coherence in a fragmented world: in very crude terms, where a modernist artist or writer would try to wrest a meaning from the world through myth, symbol, or formal complexity, the postmodernist greets the absurd or meaningless confusion of contemporary existence with a certain numbed or flippant indifference, favouring self-consciously 'depthless' works of fabulation, pastiche, bricolage, or aleatory disconnections described above.^[4]

The most obvious question about the postmodern Indian English writing is they are borrowing the tradition and history as their themes. These are the generations, whether in India or in the diaspora, either exiled or migrated. These diasporas are confidently raising their voice which is no more imitation of the British model or apology about writing in English literature. This urge of representation of the postmodern Indian English writing demands an analysis of those complex social, moral and psychological forces that drive them to flout their separate identity i.e. 'otherness'. Therefore these writers have their different set of reasons to rewrite history and myth.

Cross-border migrations are very common during the colonial and postcolonial period either exiled or migrated. Even they are more frequent during the reforms period. Indian diasporic writers including Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, V.S. Naipaul, Nirad C. Choudhury, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amitav Ghosh, Bharati Mukherjee, M.G. Vassanji, Farrukh Dhondy, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Amit Chaudhury, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, and Tabish Khair are those who have tempted the readers and academia across the globe by producing the literature describing typical diasporic sensibility among the émigré and expatriates. Their works capture the essential diasporic complexities with simplicity.

The portrayal of nostalgia for the native culture is beautifully contrasted with Indian diaspora's temptation towards the glamourized Western World. Meanwhile, the double consciousness of the Indian diaspora abroad, like other

diasporas, is "not merely double, but a reality that involves the crossing of an indeterminate number of borderlines, one that remains multiple in its hyphenations."^[5]

Tabish Khair is an eminent Indian diasporic writer, presently residing in Denmark. He is immensely influenced by the political, social and cultural milieu of post-independent India. Khair's fiction is a clear depiction of postmodernity, precisely because it questions realist modes of knowledge and representation. In his writings, he has fulfilled all the needs and desires of a postmodern reader. Every work of the writer is valuable and impactful in terms of the depiction of postmodern themes and issues. Characteristics like nostalgia, enigma of home, exile, identity, cultural fragmentation, dislocation, colonial and neo-colonial power structures, cultural degeneration, hostility, the materialistic offshoots of modern civilization, sinking human relationships, blending of facts, mystery and fantasy, alienation, assimilation to the adopted country, cultural roots, racial differences, east-west encounter, childhood memories, hybridity, unacceptability, mingled language and homelessness emphatically defines traumas of a migrant writer.

Khair is a versatile figure of postcolonial and postmodern studies. Remembering his childhood memories he has become a master of storytelling. He frankly experiments with new techniques, an amalgam of new ideas with old memories, questions long-held beliefs, and opposes bigotry in his fiction. Khair is an eminent postmodernist and a pioneer in the field of Indian English Diasporic Literature. He beautifully portrays the complex and confusing postcolonial, postmodern world in his fiction. All his novels and poetic works represent his interpretation of history, childhood memories of his native land, social and political issues and their impact on life and society as well. Being a postmodern writer and poet Khair becomes the rebellion from conventionality writings in literature. Khair projects the contemporary reality of society, a reality destitute of borders.

Khair's efforts are so heart touching as the way he reconstructs the relationships between his native home and adopted nation. The poet finds relief and it also gives him immense pleasure in narrating the concepts about his homeland. He has tried to fill every object, every single event and occasion of his childhood memories and the difficulties coming in front of a postmodern writer.

Apart from the migrant sensibility, he is trying to identify himself. He preferred the pattern of chop up narrative technique. He has played with the multiple themes and issues grounded in the Indian social culture. He has given the pleasure of reading to every reader for a conventional poetry without being more conventional. Generally, the language he has used is smooth, soft along with simple, crisp sentences dabbled with emotions. His poetic collections reflected the image of the poet, as a sharp and subtle observer of things. The best part of his writing is his childhood memories of his native land and difficulties coming in front of the adoption of a new nation become a continuous inspiration or source of writing.

Being a diasporic writer his major works focus on some important and specific issues/ themes of postmodern literature. His first novel *An Angel in Pyjamas* was published in 1995. The book is memorable in terms of its description of pretentiousness and the authenticity with the caption of rural life.

His *Babu Fictions: Alienation in contemporary Indian English novels (2001)* deals with the reading of Contemporary Indian English novels with the use of the concept of 'discourse'. It mainly focuses our attention on 'alienation' and 'class division'. *Babu Fictions* becomes one of the important texts on Indian English fiction.

His novel *The Bus Stopped* (2004) depicts the reliving memory comes to replace living experiences. Khair has essentially used two strong metaphors in the novel, 'The Home' and 'The Journeys'. Here Home becomes a signifier of identity and memories of a migrant writer. The novel highlights the regional spirit of Bihar (a historically significant city of India), the native land of the writer.

His third novel *The Thing About Thugs* (2002) focuses on the stereotypes and the racist attitude of the British towards the orientals. It also includes the themes like east-west encounter, caste, class, barbaric attitude of British, interracial relationships and hybridity.

His collection of poems *Where Parallel Line Meet* (2000) essentially describes the memories of the poet's childhood. There is a sweet and subtle narration of many things of his related to his native region. It mainly deals with the themes like the quest for identity and cultural roots.

The Gothic, Post colonialism, and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere (2009) is an excellent book. It defines the effort of the writers of the colonial and postcolonial period to write- back. Gina Wisker writes about the book,

“This is a fascinating, diverse and rich book which combines across the Gothic and the postcolonial in its concern with varieties colonial and imperial Gothic “Other”, at different times, introducing a focus on the “war on terror” as a topical “hook”. Khair places the foreign ‘Other’ as a central function in the Gothic in texts set both in Britain and the ex-colonies, particularly in the Caribbean, where British influence is revealed as frequently demonic. ^[6]

His poetic collection *Man of Glass: Poems* (2010), reflects Khair's knowledge of Indian literary figures like Mirza Galib, who has written in the form of gazal and which has primarily translated by Khair in the English language.

Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel (2011), highlights the fifteen hundred years of travel writing with special reference to Asia and Africa. *Khair's How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* is the story of love, betrayal, and pain.

Khair's two important works *The New Xenophobia* (2016) and *Jihadi Jane* (2016) are even more interesting. *The New Xenophobia* studies fear in a historical, philosophical and socio-economic context.

Jihadi Jane (2016) raised the question that Khair answered in this fictional take is to try and explain to a reader why a person living in a prosperous third world country chooses to join the war in Syria.

His most recent work *Night of Happiness: In House of Inversions* (2018) is a literary thriller that is also an inquiry into the Gujarat pogrom and the verities of the Muslim faith. It is a superb novel about painful ironies of a world without tolerance.

CONCLUSIONS

These issues become some prominent reasons behind his leaving India and deflations of colonial mindset. This thinking still exists in the post-independence Indian scenario can also be observed in his works. Postmodernism, not having any proper definition and issues yet is a blooming and ongoing area. Postmodernism has its own features and it is very difficult to combine all these elements together. Thus, this paper remains an attempt to apply the post-modern theory in the writings of Tabish Khair. He merges the ancient ideas and thoughts with the zeal of postmodern era which makes him a new trendsetter in the postmodern literary world.

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