

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CRITIQUES IN TARIQ ALI'S *NIGHT OF THE GOLDEN BUTTERFLY*

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Abstract

Through its close study of *Night of the Golden Butterfly* by Tariq Ali, this paper makes an attempt to study how the novel offers an alternate account of Pakistan's political and cultural history through the medium of fiction. History as a tool of reconstruction of experience used by the dominant powers is often seen to be in clash with individual reconstruction of the experience through imagination in the form of literary narratives. This query about the general nature of representation gets attached to some very debatable questions prevailing among the contemporary Pakistanis and those mainly focus on the issues of identity, culture, race, and religion. Unlike the rest of the novels in the Islam Quintet, the novel is set in the modern times narrating an account of contemporary issues pertaining to western imperialism, rise of religious fanaticism, military-mullah-feudal nexus in Pakistan, and immigrant experiences. The paper tries to show how the novel not only takes a hard look at the western imperialism for its devastating impact on the colonized world, but in a self-reflexive way, also criticizes the Muslim societies for adopting the path of self-destructive religious fundamentalism with reference to Ali's own native country, Pakistan, referred to as "Fatherland" in the novel.

Keywords: *Night of the Golden Butterfly*, Tariq Ali, History, Pakistan, Muslims, Culture, Fundamentalism.

The novel *Night of the Golden Butterfly* by Tariq Ali is the concluding novel in the Islam Quintet. But unlike the rest of the novels in the Islam Quintet, the novel is set in the modern times narrating an account of contemporary issues pertaining to western imperialism, rise of religious fanaticism, military-mullah-feudal nexus in Pakistan, and immigrant experiences. Again the novel not only takes a hard look at the western imperialism for its devastating impact on the colonized world, but in a self-reflexive way, also criticizes the Muslim societies for adopting the path of self-destructive religious fundamentalism with reference to Ali's own native country, Pakistan, referred to as "Fatherland" in the novel. However, the novel, like other narratives in the Islam Quintet, blatantly challenges the western stereotypes about the contemporary Muslim societies including Pakistan by offering us a diverse and heterogeneous view like the one-time multicultural and free thinking milieu dominating Lahore and other places. Characters like Dara, Plato and Zaynab themselves are totally antithetical to what the

mainstream western accounts portray about Muslims especially in the aftermath of the 9/11. The novel also describes the genocide of Muslim community in Yunnan province in the nineteenth century China and refers briefly to the modern Chinese history especially the events surrounding the Cultural Revolution. In the words of eminent British-Pakistani critic and writer, Aamer Hussein:

The story is pure Ali, dishing up bold commentary on art and love staged as dialogue, obscure historical events, excoriating cultural criticism with savage satire and the pathos of flawed but compelling characters... ..while the strong opinions and authorial voice that characterize Ali's work still thunder across [it], this novel is marked by a deep sense of nostalgia, like that of a man looking back on the halcyon days of his youth.

(qtd. in *The Independent* 2010)

The main protagonist and narrator of the novel named Dara shares interesting parallels with Tariq Ali's life; like Ali, Dara is a famous London-based writer, a cosmopolitan and left-wing critic from an affluent family in the post-Partition Pakistan. In his first introduction in the novel, Dara (probably named after Dara Shikoh, the seventeenth century secular Mughal poet and prince, but imprisoned by his more radical brother, the sixth Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb) is described a middle-aged author and intellectual living in London who has been now contacted by an old progressive friend named Mohammed Aflatun, known as Plato, from his student days in Punjab, Pakistan. Plato is described as a free-spirited, crazily intelligent, bawdy, and anti-clerical painter. As Tariq Ali describes him in the novel: "Plato's came with an eccentricity that—unlike his wit—appeared to be carefully cultivated. According to some of his own pupils, he had taken to cycling round the school and was often seen precariously balanced as he stood on the seat of a moving bike, arms outstretched, repeatedly shouting, 'Allahu Akbar'. When we asked if this was true, he nodded. Why? 'Never heard of satire?' " (69).

Plato wants his biography written by Dara and it is precisely this enterprise which reunites them and their old circle of progressive friends belonging to the radical intellectual milieu of the 1960s Pakistan. It was in the 1960s Lahore where four college students namely, Dara, Zahid, Plato and Hanif (Confucius as they called him) begin their political and intellectual comradeship based on shared Marxist yearnings. Plato reminds Dara about a "debt" he owes him and the only way to repay that was by turning the story of Plato's eccentric life into a piece of fiction. Dara agrees on this request as put forward by his good old friend, but with the affirmation that he will narrate a multi-vocal story and give it the form of a proper piece of fiction. All the four friends and their life stories, and events associated with them are brought together after more than 40 years when Dara undertakes his project of writing. And in the course, his account, apart from his former friends and comrades, also focuses on two women: Zaynab, Plato's mistress, and Jindie, his own first love and the titular Golden Butterfly of the novel. The plot neatly combines betrayal, friendship and reconciliation. One of these reunions is with his former love, Jindié, a Chinese origin Pakistani woman and her husband, Zahid, Dara's former best friend and a staunch Marxist, who betrayed his friends and their progressive ideology to turn into a supporter of the imperialist regime of USA and its conservative policies when he became a famous doctor there. And along with this, a deep sense of nostalgia pervades the novel as the author remembers the good old cosmopolitan nature of the Pakistani society now overwhelmed

by religious fundamentalism and bigotry. This deep sense of nostalgia is reflected in the novel in the following words:

Was it old friends I was mourning or an old city, an old world that had since changed so much and for the worse, a world in which expectations for a better future were always high and in which the ultra-Wahabi beard, gangster politics and cancerous corruption had yet to appear and drown all hope. The Jamaat-i-Islami [a hardcore Islamist organization] boys were present in miniscule numbers then, and would sometimes argue with us, replying parrot-like to all our criticisms with a single phrase, ‘Islam is a complete code of life,’ and that was how we used to address them. ‘Tell me something, Islam-is-a-complete-code-of-life, could it be true that we are descended from apes? Have you ever considered the possibility or studied the evidence?’ (ibid.)

According to Chris Ross:

The novel is a lament for lost intellectual freedoms in Lahore before the mullahs – a chaotic city of craftsmen, walled gardens and juice bars abuzz with poets and painters arguing over tea and samosas. But at least our narrator belongs to a so-called “valiant minority of dissident publishers, intellectuals and workers who regularly and courageously challenge the established order and its mediocracy – men and women who live in a huge bubble, who are unable to account for themselves, and do not regard this in any way as a problem, who rarely question the socio-historical realities that have produced them”. . . (qtd. in *The Guardian* 2011)

Through Dara’s account and through the perspectives of other characters in the novel, Tariq Ali, all together foregrounds and deconstructs the orientalist stereotypes about Muslims in general and Pakistan in particular. This is particularly revealed through the perspectives of characters like Zaynab and Yusuf al-Hadid who vehemently challenge the western stereotypes about Muslim women and rampant Islamophobia.

A very interesting feature about the novel is how its narration flutters back and forth between the years and locales of the narrator’s life. This is a connotative reflection of the immigrant or diasporic identities brought into existence by the modern life in which characters appear as hybrids of East and West. At one instance, they leisurely walk through present-day Paris discussing French literature and immigration, and in the next instance, they are carried back to cosmopolitan milieu of 1960s Lahore, witnessing a feisty session of public poetry recitation. In this context, Aamer Hussein writes:

Ali delights in evoking the timbre of Lahore life: its all-male gatherings of intellectuals, its dives and coffee houses, its mixture of erotic tension and sexual repression; its coded class structure and the desperate desire to rise at any cost...Ali’s prose is often rugged, but he portrays Pakistan in a gentler era, with sexual relationships more romantic, politics more idealistic, consumerism less brash. His nostalgia, however, isn’t blinkered: in Ayub Khan’s regime he sees the roots of what Pakistan is to become...This jewel box of a novel, written in the voice of a ribald but tender Punjabi cosmopolitan, ultimately bears the signature of a 20th-century internationalist. In an epiphanic conclusion at an exhibition in Lahore, Plato’s paintings present a cavalcade of historical events, right up to the

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Obama regime. Through Dara, Plato and Zaynab, Ali examines home, absence, and how, at times, exile and expatriation become interchangeable. Zaynab will return to taste freedom in Paris and London, but she'll always be drawn back to the Fatherland. And so, it seems, will our restless narrator. (ibid.)

As the plot of the novel unfolds, more and more characters, coming from diverse backgrounds, are introduced to the readers. These include Plato's old love from his days in London, Alice Stepford, who is now a leading music critic in New York. Then there is Jindie, "the Golden Butterfly (the *sunehrititli*)" of the title, the narrator's first love (18). Along with narrating the tale of contemporary Pakistan, the novel entwines the story of the tumultuous history of Jindie's family. We are told that her great forebear, DùWénxiù, led a Muslim uprising in Yunnan province against the genocidal policies of Han (the largest ethnic group in China) rulers in 1856 A.D. and ruled the region from his capital Dali for a decade, titled Sultan Suleiman as a very tolerant ruler. In 1872 A.D., the Han Emperor of China ordered his troops to destroy the Muslim province of Yunnan and wipe out the Sultanate of Suleiman. The main motive behind this act was not religious or communal, but mostly political and economic including the fears of a minority gaining too much autonomy and international respect. After losing the Opium Wars to Great Britain and other Western powers, the Empire was afraid of the amount of trade being carried out between the Chinese Muslims (Huis as they were called) of Yunnan province and the West, and decided to wipe them out before they could become a challenge to their authority. Consequently, there was a mass genocide of the Muslim population in Yunnan which forced many of them to flee including the family of Jindie and brought them to Lahore. Through this reference to the nineteenth century Chinese history and the brute majoritarianism of its Han population, a subtle parallel is also drawn towards one of the more complex reality of Pakistan--- the domination of the largest ethnic group, Punjabis, over other ethnic minorities. This is reflected in a detailed letter that Jindie writes to Dara in which she slyly remarks, "The talk of Han domination would have been brushed aside by all of you with contempt as it still is by Zahid. Perhaps the reason for this is that the Punjabis have become the Han equivalents of Fatherland, crushing other nationalities at will, but that's your story. Better write it before the Baluch and the Pashtuns and the Sindhis produce their own" (83). Jindie's brother and Dara's former comrade, Hanif or Confucius as he is fondly called by his comrades, joins the Mao Zedong led Cultural Revolution in China to pursue his Marxist dreams, only to be deprived of identity and history in an intense portrayal of the way the Maoists treated their minorities.

The novel can also be read as a critical commentary or an elegiac lamentation on the contemporary state of affairs in Tariq Ali's native country, Pakistan, which once had a considerable tolerant and liberal social milieu in the 60s and early 70s, but has now been wrecked by corruption, feudal exploitation, religious extremism and ethnic strife brought about by the combination of feudal-military-mullah nexus which, according to the novelist, "preside over the kind of tyrannies that break a people's heart and their pride" (18). Plato's last painting dexterously illustrates the four cancers of the Fatherland: the mullahs, the military, the nefarious influence of America, and corruption and that "Fatherland was now on intensive chemotherapy [on which] all sorts of new drugs are being used, but they might end up producing new cancers. It was the inner circle of Hell" (157). As the novel alludes to the dystopian conditions in the contemporary Pakistan:

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I spoke of the country where I could not live, where people were spewed out and forced to seek refuge abroad, where human dignity had become wreckage. [A dissenting person's] life was a living-death example of a human being putrefying in the filth that was our Fatherland...Its rulers. Scum of the earth. Blind, uncaring monsters. Fatherland needs a tsunami to drown them and their ill-gotten gains. (156)

Like most of the people belonging to his social class, the narrator, Dara, and his friend, Plato, had left Fatherland for study and employment in the West. However, Plato is unable to adjust to the experiences of immigrant life and he comes back to Fatherland. But the conditions inside Fatherland are terrible and Plato survives only by paying Karachi gangsters for protection from the mullahs. Karachi, the largest city in Fatherland, is detested by Plato as a “characterless, hybrid monstrosity” (8) given its horrible ethnic strife and crime rate and which was “going to explode” anytime (157). With regards to his native country, Tariq Ali, in the words of Salman Rushdie deems it “necessary, and even exhilarating, to grapple with the special problems created by the incorporation of political material, because politics is by turns farce and tragedy, and sometimes (e.g., Zia’s Pakistan) both at once” (*Outside the Whale* 1984). The existence of atrocious feudal values which legitimize repression of women in the Fatherland is portrayed through the story of Zaynab. She is the daughter of a landlord dynasty and is bizarrely “married to the Koran (Holy Book of Muslims)” by her brothers in order to prevent her share of the inheritance from leaving the family (31). Her story reveals the dark world of feudalism still prevailing in the much of rural Pakistan especially in the interiors of Sindh province where petrifying feudal lords (waderos) rule over the hapless serfs. Narrating her ordeal, she reveals:

‘In my part of the country the big landlords are so desperate to preserve their estates that anything that threatens the size of their holdings has to be fought. As a female I was entitled to my share of the property—under Islamic law that’s a half of what the men inherit. Were it not for sharia I would get nothing at all. Makes one think. In the absence of laws that insist on a totally equal share, it’s better to get something... ‘Even a quarter of a man’s share of our estate amounted to thousands of acres, and in the natural course of events all that land would have gone out of the family. If I married and had children, my share of the estate would be divided among them, diminishing the family holdings. Even if I married a cousin, my brothers would lose my share. There was one remedy; a scheme devised many moons ago: a female whose right of inheritance threatened her family’s estate could be married to the Koran. So a ceremony took place when I was twelve in which the local *pir*, a retarded pockmarked primitive—a male cousin of mine—declared my marriage to the Koran legal and holy. For a month I was locked up with our Holy Book and nothing else. Food would be left outside, and none of the maids was allowed to speak to me. ‘The purpose of this confinement was to acclimatize me to my future. A year later, when I began to menstruate, the book would be removed while I was unclean. They thought that under this treatment I would either adjust to my new reality or take my own life. There were stories of women in my position who had done so. And, to be honest, there were times I thought it might be easier to die than to live like this, and I

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spoke of my thoughts with women friends who would start weeping at the idea.
(130)

Her misery is ultimately ended by a paradoxical trait of her country--the high rate of premature death among its “debased elite” (165). Her two dreadful feudalist brothers get killed when their helicopter crashes which liberates her and enables her to live her life freely.

In the background of this portrayal of the Fatherland in the novel, one country has a constant influence over it—the United States of America, referred to in the novel as “Mother of all Fatherlands that is the United States of America” (201). It shares a strange relationship with the Fatherland; they are allies and friends but both distrust each other. However, brutal military dictators and crooked rulers are always “entrusted by Washington to run Fatherland” (33). They are frequent visitors to the innermost chambers of “Satan’s city, Washington, DS, District of Satan” (107). In analysing the novel, eminent Pakistani writer and scholar, Fatima Bhutto observes:

If Pakistan is a land of untold stories, whispered conspiracy theories and closed-door mutinies, then thank heavens for Tariq Ali, whose access to its innermost secret chambers has made him the country’s finest historian and critic...The quest for Plato’s story brings to light the “four cancers of the Fatherland”: America, the military, mullahs and the corruption of politicians. Politics saturates every page, whether Ali is writing about the Muslim rebellion in Yunnan or the current war in Swat, the parties to which he compares to a “hydra-headed beast”. There is the violence of the Fatherland’s rich and powerful - from the Sindhi feudal lords who marry the beautiful and brave Zaynab to the Quran and the authorities’ inept reliance on “Detectives Without Borders” to solve its most notorious murders, through the trigger-happy politicians who knock off a general who has got in their way, to the revenge visited on women who collaborate with foreign enemies...Elsewhere, however, Ali offers a persuasive account of the corruption of contemporary Pakistan, especially the brutal sexual politics, and his wry, ruminative account of lifelong friendship rings with truth.

(qtd. in *New Statesman America* 2010)

In the novel specifically, Tariq Ali is revealing the material conditions of the postcolonial society of Pakistan where the experiences of colonialism, the struggle for an independent nation and the de-humanizing decadent socio-political developments that follow independence exercise an enduring impact. The process of decolonization gave rise to new states and new boundaries but along with it cosmopolitan wanderers like Dara, Plato, Zaynab, and Hanif in the novel. These types of people do not conform to or assimilate in the emerging structures of institutional power in those societies. Thus one major theme of *Night of the Golden Butterfly* is the continued domination and exploitation of the people by the feudally dominated political system of ruling in the time of postcolonial Pakistan. Tariq Ali simply puts forward the historical events and its evaluation in the context of individual feeling of being exploited. Edward Said writes about such type of writings by the writers like Tariq Ali in *Culture and Imperialism* in the following words:

Between classical nineteenth-century imperialism and what it gave rise to in resistant native cultures, there is thus both a stubborn confrontation and a crossing over in discussion, borrowing back and forth, debate. Many of the most interesting post-colonial writers bear their past within them—as scars of

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humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending towards a new future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the empire. One sees these aspects in Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Aime Césaire, Chinua Achebe, Pablo Neruda, Brian Friel, and [Tariq Ali]. And now these writers can truly read the great colonial masterpieces, which not only misrepresented them but assumed they were unable to read and respond directly to what had been written about them, just as European ethnography presumed the natives' incapacity to intervene in scientific discourse about them. (34-35)

Night of the Golden Butterfly is also shown questioning the authoritarian nationalisms (whether Punjabi in Pakistan, Han in China or the White in the west) backed by political consciousness and underlines the idea of emergence of a new world situation being hatched by the dominant capitalist powers led by USA. The novel interrogates the process through which a sense of national identity is constructed. The construction of national identity is said to be the result of a dual dynamics--one homogenizing and the other, differentiating. Making the idea of a nation or community as homogenous, i.e. unified and single, also suggests its difference from other nations or communities. Tariq Ali, in the novel, striking at this very core of the dynamics of nationhood, shows that the idea of a nation is a misleading construction.

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