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Envisaging the contour of cultural polyphony in Adib Khan's *The Storyteller* and *Homecoming*

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Abstract
The present era may well be conceived in terms of cultural enunciation and articulation of distinct cultural ethos. But the cultural supremacist tendency with myopic parochialism is to be sacrificed for the cultural syncretism that oftentimes celebrates the spirit of multiculturalism. Literature produced by the writers of once colonized countries, particularly in the postcolonial temporality, brings forth the interfaces of culture artifacts of the colonizer and the colonized that substantially celebrates the recuperation of the marginal "local" culture and sustains the dialogue with the "centre". The present article explicates how the novels discussed here provide a vision of alternative modernity against the Eurocentric cultural hegemony through acknowledging the authenticity associated with the indigenous cultural values. But in doing so, it never develop any parochial essentialism, rather adheres to the cultural polyphony made of different cultures.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, indigenous values, sufism, Buddhist tradition, cultural polyphony

Introduction

Like Janu's face of Greek mythology, postmodern society celebrates the two opposite dimensions simultaneously: the more it becomes globalized, the more it upholds "localism". So happens, because true to the tune of multiculturalism, the expatriate people recuperate their primordial 'archaic" culture amid the globalized cosmopolitan mindscape of the "centre". Renowned pundit of multiculturalism, Charles Taylor in his seminal book Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition' contends the same in the following words: "Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, which is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity" (31). But the thing is not as easy as it appears to be; for, the assimilationist tendency of the metropolitan cultural stakeholders envisions that the "future generation of Asians would abandon what the assimilationists deemed to be their 'archaic culture' in favour of 'western life style'" (Brah 23). Nevertheless, the hegemonic universalism eventually gives in to the increasing "localism" and such act of realigning the margin with the centre is viewed by Edward said "as potentially revised visions of the past tending towards a post-colonial future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeplyable experiences" (271). Thus, with the acclivity of counter globalization, indigenous cultural ethos gets articulated in the canvas of cultural contour which , in the words of Robin Cohen "operate locally and globally while drawing their inspiration (normally unconsciously) from a felt need to confront and oppose the anonymous , rational, bewildering, progressive and universal elements of globalization. This requires a return to the local and familial" (147). Such contentious yet contingent proximity of different cultural artifacts unleashes resultant multiculturalism that celebrates alternative scheme of things and ensures what Bhabha terms as a "restaging the past". In this reading, I shall be applying the theoretical rubric discussed above in explicating Adib Khan's two novels— The Storyteller and Homecoming in subsequent chapters.

Born in East Pakistan, migrated to Australia and again visiting to Bangladesh, Adib Khan becomes a trail blazer in the canon of migrant literature in Australia. His "voyage out" to Australia transpired after the mayhem accompanying Bangladesh liberation movement in 1971. Presently he is serving as a professor of English and History at Ballarat University and at the same time producing fiction regularly replete with his autobiographical elements. His novels, generally subscribes to the diasporic typicality that includes a plethora of issues ranging from immigrant problems, multiculturalism, identity crisis, terrorism, Bangladesh Liberation war, Vietnam War and so on. But the novels under discussion in this article— The Storyteller (2000) and Homecoming (2003) [11, 12] share an exceptional thematic outlook. Whereas The Storyteller treats sub-continental legacy as its subject matter, Homecoming revolves round exclusively Australian theme, particularly its involvement in Vietnam War. The former is set in Delhi's slum area having a dwarf protagonist Vamana, modelled after Vamana incarnation of Hindu mythology; the latter is exclusively set in Australian society wherein the resultant dialogue between Eurocentric "centre" and Asian "margin" takes place. The diaspora writers often if not always delve deep into the traditional non-European cultural oeuvre to negotiate such cultural plurality and Adib Khan in his novels— The Storyteller (2000) and Homecoming (2003) [11, 12] explicates the said phenomenon through his narrative aesthetics— dexterously and culpably.

The entire narrative oeuvre of The Storyteller captures the odyssey of its deformed protagonist, a dwarf skilled in storytelling—Vamana. From the very outset, the novel turns to non-Europan values; the metaphoric allusion to the God Vishnu's Vaman incarnation in characterization of its central character is juxtaposed with the Islamic heaven projected in the prologue of the novel. A midget of cadaverous appearance Vamana treads unusual path of underworld mostly shrouded by anti-social elements of

Delhi— pick picketers, hijra, thieves, beggars, dwarf, eunuch, slum dweller, prostitute, etcetera . His exceptional ability to tell tales exerts a spell bound effect on his audience. And in doing so, he repeatedly questions the authority of the neo-colonial stakeholders, the successive "native informant" or "brown sahib" whom Fanon describes as "lumpen proletariat" in postcolonial society. His apparent bodily deformities correspond with that of the social maladies of the once colonized countries. Therefore he ruminates over the pre-colonial glories of Delhi that has been rendered exhausted after colonial invasion. And he broods "the glory of Chandni Chawk exists now only in the mind. All that remains are tottering warehouses, dilapidated shops and the permanent stink of piss. The centre of the bazaar is permanently clogged with people and stray animals" (11). Thus, the deformed protagonist of the novel The Storyteller bears an alternative modernity that substantially accompanies a resonance resistance, typical to Postcolonial social milieu.

In Postcolonial period the very act of storytelling has always been considered as a way to dismantle the assumed authenticity of Western narrative and Vamana's physical deformities conveys the maxim of celebration of periphery instead of "centre". Furthermore, the recuperation of mythic tradition provides a sense of values of indigenous legacy. As Ashcroft and et al. argues in their seminal book Empire Writes Back— "traditional pre-colonial indigenous forms are especially important both in the syncretic practice which develops and as an expression of a renewed sense of identity and self – value in independence period" (180). The name Vamana itself connotes mythological incarnation of God Vishnu the creator and interestingly Vamana turns to be a creator of his character embedded in the stories: "Vamana— the dwarf incarnation of the god, Vishnu. I have divine status. It is a highly appropriate name for a creator" (11). His possessions of the essence of three entities –man, God and beast is quintessential to that of God Vishnu who c**o**nsumed a substantial part of earth, water and air in three strides. Though he is born off human being, his capability to create a supra reality in his storytelling elevates him to the status of God—"My name is Vamana…Incarnation of god Visnu. Consort of Indra" (282). His Godlike entity becomes conspicuous in his claims that he not only creates, rather like typical mythical figure he destroys as well—"my words give birth to terror. Universes collapse. Even as I create, lives end" (48). Thus the character of Vamana signifies a potential enunciation of alternative matrix in postcolonial trajectories which celebrates the merging as liberating potentials. Vamana's marginal social status and abnormal physical stature itself speak for the alternative matrix of humanity. As Yudice opines –"by demonstrating that the 'merginal' constitutes the condition of possibility of all social, scientific, and cultural entities, a new 'ethics of marginality' has emerged that is necessarily decentered and plural, and that constitute the basic of a new, neo-Nietzschean "freedom" from moral injunction" (214).

In postcolonial endeavour; the indigenous morality, values, knowledge system which once was relegated in colonial regime, recuperated to falsify the assumed predominance of the western hegemony. And Sufism can be considered as one of the pre-colonial ethos celebrated in the postcolonial multiculturalism. Though "Sufism" initially had a purely Islamic origin, but over the period it has absorbs different extra Islamic influences throughout the ages and become a melting pot of different faiths. The Sufi cult doesn't adhere to the strict outward rituals of any particular religion; rather it welds together the inner spirit and humanitarian aspect of every religion. In The Storyteller Vamana's desire to be a Dervish testifies his acumen in Sufi tradition which can be exerted as an ecumenical panacea against the suffocating Colonial/neo-colonial domination? Even his visiting to Hakim or Fakir Pagla Jan in a Khanqah to recover Chaman substantiates his penchant to an alternative way of conceiving the world from Eastern perspective that eventually dismantles the banal Eurocentric hegemony. Thus politics of difference, and the politics of recognition revalue the disrespected identities and the marginalized groups—that summarily reject any Eurocentric banal stigmatization of the "other', greatly underpinned by the "distorted imagination" of the colonizing West.

Though the novel does not subscribe to the typical diasporic oeuvre, it projects a self-migration of its protagonist in the home land itself and his psychological terrain becomes a space of liberation which he appropriates by the act of storytelling. Vamana's stories perform dual role: role of storyteller as well as creator of his fictional sojourn; and this aspect of a storyteller is aptly put forward by Elaine Singleton in the following words— "The writer/ storyteller tells the story of the emerging nation. He is, therefore, as much creator as a teller of tales. The dual roles are borrowed from the ancient oral storytelling tradition (4)". A storyteller does not merely repeat the ancient stories, rather they mould it into new ones; recreate through transcreation to cop up with the present exigencies. This in turn obliterates any hegemonic imposition and provides a nationalistic outlook, as Fanon puts—"The emergence of the imagination and of the creative urge in the songs and epic stories of a colonized country is worth following. The storyteller replies to the expectant people by successive approximations, and makes his way, apparently alone but in fact helped on by his public, towards the seeking out of new pattern, that is to say national pattern" (194). Accordingly, Vaman's story creates a tangible experience of different archaic events like Battle of Kurukshetra", Myth of Yamuna and 'cave of Ali Baba' that substantially make him in the words of Christopher Vogler's terms an 'elixir'. Such delineation of archaic myth through storytelling often brings forth the very Indian traditional cultural plurality celebrated throughout the ages. Accordingly, Yamuna advises Vamana to disown any concept of cultural purity and absolutism. She says—"there are truths and lies in every one of them. Mankind cannot live in absolute purity" (255). The Storyteller, therefore, has anthologized itself as a typical postcolonial text with post-modern flamboyancy and post structural tendency to be away from 'purity'. From myth to magic realism; from storytelling to body politics; from deconstruction of identity to the acknowledgement of subversion, this novel celebrates the very spirit of multiculturalism.

The novel Homecoming yokes together the Eurocentric Australian culture and the Asian ones through its pivotal characters like Martin and Maria. While the former represents the Eurocentric views, the later stands for Asiatic outlook of Vietnam. And in their contingent proximity after the Vietnam cataclysm, an effective exchange of and acknowledging to Other's cultures paves the ways for mutual respect for each other. Martin Godwin is a Vietnam War veteran who served in Vietnam War as an Australian soldier of American alley. During his staying in Australia,

though he develops a nexus with a Vietnamese woman called My-Kim, his prejudiced views of everything non–European becomes conspicuous every now and then throughout the narrative oeuvre of the novel. Nevertheless, it appears to be more incongruent when he comes back to Australia and stays closer to Maria. Maria is descendent of "boat people" whose parents came from Vietnam to Australia immediately after the Vietnam War. Martin, a representative figure of settler people does not easily coalesce with the immigrant like Maria. Indeed, historically, they bear the legacy of long held conflict. As T.B Hoang (2013) opines – "in the Australian context, it would seem that there is a big gap between the immigrants group and mainstream Australian society, which exemplifies a clear cut cultural differences". Furthermore, the presence of Asian origin makes the thing other way complicating; as Ien Ang rightly notes –"the issue of Asian in Australia continues to be one that is historically complex, ideologically loaded and politically and culturally sensitive" (115). For Martin, everything European is to be revered as it bears "symbol of our cultural heritage" (Homecoming 17). Such Eurocentric supremacist tendency sustains resentment in him towards anything that corresponds to Muhammadanism and Buddhism. And in post-Vietnam War era, the unprecedented coming of Asian migrant to Australia produces a counter conservatism. As Adib Khan in his essay "Trends in Australian Fiction" substantiates this reality in the following words—"In Australian, the term multiculturalism has undergone recognizable shifts in both denotative and connotative meaning since the end of the Vietnam War and the increased influx of Asian Migrants"(1). Eventually, Maria who happens to be his only son Frank's fiancé bridges the gulf between them and makes him interested about Asian culture; now he realizes —"Vietnam is liken an archeological dig. The deeper you dig, the more you unearth" (Homecoming 121).

Martin's myopic puritanical views are at constant conflict with that of Maria's Buddhist lineage. She is a born Buddhist and bears a legacy of it. She confesses – "I was born in Buddhist tradition. It is not an unfamiliar custom for me. My father is a great believer in meditation" (128). Owing to their close proximity, now Martin begins to disown his ingrained Eurocentric prejudices and consequently embraces Buddhist line of meditation which is Asian in temperament. Both of them play an instrumental role in this novel to sustain a cultural hybridity endowed with tolerance and free from parochialism. Accordingly, Maria contends—"when there are difficulties that can't be easily resolved, you accommodate them" (130). The very Ashramic teaching provides soothing comfort to all and sundry; particularly, to the traumatized psyche of post war reality. And Martin cannot but accept it through Maria. Thus Buddhist meditation enunciates an indigenous ethos that refutes any Eurocentric cultural onslaught. If war torn depression is the byproduct of European society, the tranquility of meditation is the blessings of Asian tradition. Thus the very cultural supremacist tendency that perpetuates exclusivity gets jeopardized and gives in to cultural "heteroglossia". Consequently, Martin left Melbourne for the country side of Daylesford to enjoy the tranquil calmness and experienced "Satyananda Yoga" that would calm down their mental worries—"Tranquility is fundamental for coping with adversity" (Homecoming 2). Actually, Martin's eventual acceptance of Buddhist way of meditation not only upholds the authenticity of Asian culture, rather it exposes the ultimate predicament of modern humanity, as Dormer has rightly pines—"even the hardest sceptic has to head for the warm sea of belief if he or she is to find what makes any kind of life tolerable – innate values (12). Thus, the hegemonic Eurocentric secularism, which is in reality, Christian secularism gives in to the warm sea of Asian belief.

Swami Atma Muktananda, the custodian of the Ashram inculcates in them the very spirit of latitudinarianism that upholds ubiquitous outlook free from any communal constrain. He unambiguously declares "we are not a cult or part of any religion. Promoting peace and harmony, both individually and globally, is our objective" (Homecoming 138). Thus, dwindling away from ethnic essentialism it must acknowledge the potential enunciation of indigenous cultural artifacts as well as disowns the very hegemonic imposition of the "centre"— that will substantially celebrate the multicultural values. The Ashram which brings the Asian and the Europeans together, performs as what Bhabha terms as "liminal space"; or a "contact zone" of cultural amalgamation. Thereby, such experience with truth exhorts us to be free from all type of limitations and barrier; makes us to be a citizen of cosmos—initiates a cosmopolitan outlook with multicultural bend of mind. Benson, the great teacher at Ashram from America retells the Story of "Kisagotami" that eventually reinstate the Asian version of mythology as a recuperative means to retort the European imposition. Thus from the dominant form of cultural assimilationist tendency to the accommodative one is visible—"love the Vietnamese!...they are my favourite people"(168).

To sum up, both of these texts provides a retort through enunciating the indigenous artifact to the havoc brought by colonialism in colonized society that "in effect dismembers Other cultures by attacking their immune system: eradicating identity, erasing history and tradition, reducing everything that makes sense of life for non-secular cultures into meaninglessness; it places the inhuman and degrading on a par with the human and ethical" ("Postmodern Thought" 211). If colonial take over denunciates the "local", the postcolonial literature enunciates a disseminated set of vernacular cultural repertoires: indecidably different yet emancipated from binary oppositions. The recuperation of one's own culture in postcolonial reality is construed as a means of survival; as Ziauddin Sardar contends the same in the following words: "There can be a road to uneasy compromise, rejection of the West or, increasingly, the reforging of traditional cultural premises. However it is expressed, it staunchly opposes any further incursions of the distorted imagination into non-western territory" ("The End of Civilization?" 234). However, self articulation and delineation of traditional culture is to be conceived as a problem solving trope of the people and the fountainhead of the strength of the marginalized that must endorse the moral and political claims of wide range of disadvantaged groups, including ethnic and religious minorities. And from this perspective, both of these texts reify the reverberation of cultures distinct from the main stream one and subscribes to the tenacity of resistance which has been defined by Brah as "a means of confronting the policy and practice of assimilation" (226). And such articulation of the 'archaic' metamorphoses the Asian culture into a resistance strategy that ultimately provides an alternative to the onslaught of

dominant culture of the West and leads to the flowering of pluralism and multiculturalism.

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