



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Haunting Histories and Migrant Identities: Diaspora and Displacement in Tabish Khair's *The Thing About Thugs*

SINORITA MAZUMDER

Assistant Professor,
Department of Languages
Jain (deemed-to-be University), Bangalore
Email: sinorita.mazumder@gmail.com

ABSTRACT :

This study examines the diasporic elements in *The Thing about Thugs* by Tabish Khair, a novel that explores themes of identity crisis, displacement and cultural intersection. Set in colonial India and studying the complexities of migration, the book delves into the lives of the characters who are caught between multiple worlds of navigating their relationships with nationalism, caste and class. With the portrayal of the central character, the British-Indian detective, the novel examines how diasporic subjects reconstruct their identities in response to the aspects of colonialism and modernity. The author uses a narrative style that blends historicism and socialism, reflecting on the tensions of being a part of the Diaspora where belonging and alienation exist simultaneously. *The Thing about Thugs* offers a nuanced portrayal of the diasporic experiences by analyzing the roles of the cultural hybridity, language and historical context. This study would also contribute to underline the ways in which colonial histories and migration have played continuous roles in shaping identity and social relations in contemporary times.

Keywords: Thugs, colonialism, displacement, Identities, Alienation.

Introduction

Tabish Khair's novel *The Thing About Thugs* (2010) revisits the 19th century colonial crime story with a critical lens aiming at postcolonialism and alienation. Set in Victorian London, this novel narrated by Amir Ali, an Indian man brought to London by a British phrenologist interested in studying criminal behaviour. When a series of murders take place, Amir finds himself in the midst of suspicion, drawing attention to the ways of crime, migration and science intersect in the colonial imagination. With prostitution and consumption of opium taking a toll in the city, London is also shaken by a 'head cannibal' who beheads his victims who generally belong to poor immigrant class from the colonies. Khair exposes the elite class in London who chose hypocrisy and superiority and led many migrants including lascars and indentured labourers particularly from India or South East Asia.

Colonialism advanced its strategies to dominate the colonies since the fifteenth century, accomplishing its height by the nineteenth century justifying the 'civilizing mission' (Said, 1978). The colonizers, with the assets and power of the colonized lands, oppressed the colonies and helped in the growth of the wealth of the West. They took into consideration that the different cultures of the colonies were inferior and tried to refine them with the aid of a civilizing challenge of colonialism. Tabish Khair, an Indian literary creator who settled in Denmark, employs a postcolonial discourse in his 2010 novel, *The Things About Thugs*. Through his works, I have also tried to explore issues of displacement and alienation through the cultural clashes and discontents that the characters face while residing in the West as immigrants. Khair, specifically affords sharp and clean characters who are tormented by identity crisis in the Western countries and being the 'other'. A postcolonial reading of Khair's novel will help us to deconstruct the discourses related to migration. The British constructed identities based on racial prejudices on the basis of features, customs, rituals and social or cultural practices of the Indians. Alienation, when explained in the context of the studies of diaspora defines loneliness or isolation and the ordeal of being 'different'. Here I would like to refer to Kenneth Keniston's (1965) views of alienation that sums up the meaning of the term- "Most usages of alienation share the assumption that some relationship or connection that once existed; that is natural, desirable or good, has been lost". (The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society, 1965)

This paper tries to explore colonial stereotypes and subjects like otherness, alienation and discrimination offering a thoughtful critique of empire, race and the migration.

Literature Review

The term 'Diaspora' has gained multitudes of definition and clarification when it comes under the sphere of the study of the Indian Diaspora. The meaning and definition of Diaspora has gradually evolved and conceptualized with the various definitions coming up. At the initial phase, when Diaspora was

defined, it concentrated more on the Diasporic societies, which was restricted only to the European Diasporic communities such as Jewish Diaspora. Nevertheless, the term gradually evolved and went through multiple alterations.

As Homi Bhabha (1994, 45) had said,

“What is at issue is the new performative nature of differential identities; the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, contingently, opening out, remarking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference—be it class, gender or race. Such assignments of social differences—where difference are neither one nor the other but something else besides, in between—find their agency in a form of the “future” where the present is not simply transitory. It is, if I may stretch a point, an interstitial future, that emerges in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present.”

With the evolution of the meaning of the word, ‘diaspora’, the terms, ‘diaspora’ and ‘diaspora community’ are addressed as “...as metaphoric designations for several categories of people—expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities *tout court*—in much the same way that “ghetto” has come to designate all kinds of crowded, constricted and disprivileged urban environments, and ‘holocaust’ has come to be applied to all kinds of mass murder”. (Safran, 1991, 83). This term is used in various fields, such as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, literary studies and ethnic studies. The modern diaspora now only refers to anyone living outside the geographical borders of their country of origin. The diasporic ‘dispersion’ has been transformed into ‘gathering’ by Homi Bhabha:

“Gathering of exiles and emigres and refugees; gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gathering in the ghettos or cafes of city centres... Also, the gathering of people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant...” (Bhabha, 1994, 198-199)

The diaspora has been defined by various scholars according to many categories. Steven Vertovec (2000) described diaspora as a social form and she refers the diaspora as a process in shaping social relationships among the diasporic communities. He describes the diaspora as a mode of cultural reproduction. Robin Cohen (1997) has also categorized the diaspora according to the dispersal of the people from their homelands as labour diaspora.

With the definition of the key terms and terminologies of the diaspora, I would now try to talk about the myriad dimensions of fiction and how it has played a key role in representing the various notions of diaspora. The concepts that have been introduced by Homi Bhabha with reference to cultural hybridity and Otherness, has been conceptualized with the revisiting of the concepts of colonialism. He stated that we should have a different perspective while looking at the concept of colonialism. He says that colonialism should be looked at as a period of complex and varied cultural contact and interaction. According to him, the colonialism is marked by an economy of identity where the colonizer and the colonized depend heavily on each other.

Talking about different narratives, this piece can be analysed as a form of post-colonial fiction and historiographic fiction. These two forms often intersect as they explore the complex relationships between history, narrative and power. These literary forms often challenge traditional historical narratives by contrasting alternate forms of narrative and questioning the authority of official accounts. Postcolonial fiction generally focusses on the critique of the English literary canon and colonial historiographies whereas historiographic metafiction examines the process of writing history by itself. These writings are often engaged in understanding issues of cultural identity, which ultimately includes the experiences of the colonized and its aftermaths. Khair has also tried to employ both the forms as different forms of narrative to explore the myriad writing patterns in contrast to the other conventional forms of writing. “The Thing About Thugs” presents multiple perspectives on the thuggee phenomenon challenging the dominant colonial narratives. Khair contrasts British colonial accounts with Indian narratives with their experiences undermining stereotypical portrayal of thugs in colonial literature. It explores the power dynamics between the colonizers and the colonized through the relationship between Amir Ali and the other British characters.

Most of the times, it has been observed that the colonial narrative is different from the postcolonial fiction. Khair here, has tried to showcase the voice of the marginalised, that, in the other colonial narratives have been subdued. He has presented the narrative as a broken one with different voices emerging one after the other justifying their violent actions.

Theoretical Framework

Humans have been migrating since ages and this process of migration has been considered a social phenomenon. It brings about socio-cultural, political as well as economic changes in the society, particularly in the lives of the migrants. These particular sets of people have been migrating across borders of the countries have been termed as the ‘Diaspora’. Over the years social scientists have been conducting research on the Diaspora and in contemporary times this has been considered a prominent area of study for the sociologists. In this context, I would like to quote Upreti, who suggests that migration to him is, “a shifting of individual or group of individuals from one cultural system to another...” (Upreti, 1981,2).

The theories of displacement, hybridity and movement form integral part of theorizing identity as a product of colonialism. It is essential here to shed light on the issues of ‘Displacement’ and in what context it is a synonymous term for ‘Diaspora’. The displacement of Palestinians forms a good example that reflects the pain and suffering which they encounter once they are forced to leave their homeland or they abandon their homelands. Angelika Bammer (1994) defines Displacement as —the separation of people from their native culture, through physical dislocation (as refugees, immigrants, migrants, exiles, or expatriates) or the colonizing imposition of a foreign culture” (xi). Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. (1995) Lee argue that —Displacement shares with Diaspora the notions of physical dislocation, banishment, and exile, but emphatically draws attention to the cultural dimension; that is, how one’s ancestral culture or the culture of the birthplace as been dislocated, transformed, rejected, or replaced by a new one (11). Thus, both Displacement and Diaspora can be used to tackle issues of exile, immigration, Nostalgia and hybridity. Therefore, people in exile are immersed in the sense of loss and dislocation. Since culture is a part of human consciousness, the cultural displacement caused by exile is more prominent.

Nostalgia is often discussed in relation to the issues of self-loss and displacement. Nostalgia has been defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “A feeling of sadness mixed with pleasure and affection when you think of happy times in the past”. Nostalgia is often regarded as a concept that is a consequence of being displaced. The issue of Nostalgia tackles the loss of homeland and the memories which immigrants leave behind. Moreover, Nostalgia refers to incidents that become part of the past and can never be restored.

This is the juncture, where the concept of the “Third Space” comes into view. This third space is a liminal or in-between space where cultural exchange and hybridity occur, often challenging fixed notions of identity and culture. The concept had been introduced by Homi Bhabha (1994) where he proposes the idea of an in-between space of the cultural encounter of the colonizer and the colonized which he calls as the third space of cultural enunciation. This third space undermines “the binary thought and essentialist identities produced by colonial knowledge”. (1994, 276). Through this theory and concept, he scrutinizes a formation of cultural hybrid identity of colonized people in their cultural encounter in colonial domination and inequality. This theory has been working as a prominent space for the understanding in the field of diasporic studies, that challenges the understanding of the notions of hybrid identities.

The concept of Orientalism by Edward Said has also been playing its role to form the theoretical framework for this novel that has been considered for study. The groundbreaking concept of Orientalism (1978) that was conceptualized by Edward Said created a stir causing a huge impact on the humanities, social sciences, history to women’s studies and the like. Said (1978) argues that Orientalism is a built-in system or method by which the West not only socially constructed the ‘Orient’ but also controlled and managed it through the interweaving of power relations working through the representations of art, literature, visual media, film and travel writing. Being an elementary part of postcolonial narratives, this theory identifies how and why the Orient was created to be a binary opposition to the Occident by decoding the structures of power and knowledge hidden in texts and other discourses. Analyzing the novel in context with the theories of Orientalism, I would like to delve deeper into the study of diaspora as well. Diasporic individuals often living between two cultures are frequently confronted with Orientalist stereotypes in their adopted homelands, forcing them to navigate between two worlds. Said championed the role of the intellectual as an exile or migrant, someone who can critically engage with established truths and challenge dominant narratives, a perspective crucial for understanding how diasporic voices contribute to critiquing Orientalist frameworks.

The novel by Tabish Khair underlines some of the major themes of third space, orientalism, nostalgia and displacement to construct a rich narrative that investigates colonial history and migration. The novel inhabits the concept of third space where cultural meanings are negotiated and identities are ambiguous. The concept of Orientalism is also central to the novel’s portrayal of how British colonial discourse exoticizes and demonizes the ‘other’ Indian self. The themes of displacement, nostalgia and hybridity also take their own places in revealing the emotional undertow of imperialism, where memory becomes both a refuge and a distortion. These theoretical perspectives, together do not portray the novel *Thugs* as merely a historical novel, but also a critical exploration of power, representation and belonging.

Textual Analysis

To begin with, the title *The Thing About Thugs* foregrounds one of the key themes of the novel; the conflict between facts based on science and lived reality of the colonized. The ‘thing’ in the novel refers to the skull of the non-European humans (Khair 2012, 45-47). The narrative which details the murders of some targeted humans shows how the skulls emerge from a clear imperial bias for the colonized, which believed that the brain functioned as an organ for murder in Asiatic or Negroid craniums which inevitably led them to commit murder (Khair 2012,91). The novel begins with a detailed description of Amir Ali by William Meadows as:

The man who stood in front of me in that hospital room was a fine specimen of the Asiatic type: compactly built, of average height, with dark brown hair and limpid mascara-touched eyes... he obviously belonged to one of the higher castes, for his complexion was fair, he might have even passed for an Italian back home. But this man was no child of the Enlightenment. No deities he worshipped were different. His religion was terrible; his goddess was terrible... in front of me there stood finally, gentle reader, that most dreaded of men in India, that relentless practitioner of terror and murder and deceit, a thug. (Khair 2012, ii)

In *Thing About Thugs* Amir Ali faces alienation mainly because of his ‘Oriental’ background and his exilic status that he himself chooses temporarily to escape punishment in a legal case and travels to London with an English Captain, William Meadows. The captain was searching for a man from India with a distinct skull shape to help him advance his phrenological research in England. Amir, in order to save his life in a murder case he was accused of, confesses to be a former thug. Thus, Meadows gets the man he was looking for and takes him along. But even Meadows patronage cannot save him from being subjected to racial bias and alienation. Amir and several other immigrants, mostly lascars and indentured servants from India, undergo terrifying ordeals leading to a traumatic sense of isolation and alienation. One can note Amir Ali’s helplessness and a sense of loss and regret in these words: “Perhaps that is why I feel a certain dread at times. Having come so long a way; heading into nothing, running away from everything. I had only hoped to survive, not to flourish.” (Khair 2012, 166). According to Kenneth Keniston (1960), the concept of alienation typically hinges on the idea of a lost connection. In his framework he defines the concept of alienation implying it to be a prior state of unity, harmony or belonging that has been disrupted. Keniston’s interpretation aligns with broader existential and sociological uses of the term, emphasizing emotional, psychological, and social estrangement in modern life. Alienated and abandoned Karim in *The Thing About Thugs* tells the tale of his woes in his broken, mispronounced English with the fluidity of ‘Hindustani’ to the kind English ladies and gentleman who interrogate him. He says,

“I was born in Calcutta and was a Mussulman- but I Christian now. I have been in dis countree ten year. I come first as servant to a military officer, Englishman. I lived with him in Scotland six, seven mont. He left Scotland saying he come back. But he not and in a mont I hear he dead, and then I come to London. I wish very often return my countree where everything sheap (cheap) living sheap, rice sheap.....” (Khair 159-160)

The other characters like Gunga, Karim and Amir Ali find themselves to be dislocated and alienated in London. Exiled characters are generally alienated politically or socially and find it very difficult to condition their minds and practices as per the customs of their new geographical locations. Alienation from one’s culture, society, and self—brought about by colonization and the enforced imposition of the colonizers’ ideologies, practices, and religious beliefs—has been a central theme in colonial and postcolonial literature. This sense of dislocation and cultural fragmentation continues to resonate in contemporary narratives that critique the legacy of empire. In *Imperial History and Postcolonial Theory*, Dane Kennedy (1996) observes that “decolonization robbed imperial history of most of its practical incentives. Yet it continued to cling to the methodology and ‘mentalité’ of the official

mind,” highlighting the persistent ideological frameworks of colonial authority even after formal empire ended. Tabish Khair’s *Thugs* similarly interrogates this enduring colonial mindset. Through a sharp critique of racialized narratives and orientalist tropes, Khair scrutinizes the West’s colonialist attitudes and its tendency to stereotype and misrepresent the Eastern world, thus challenging the dominant historical discourse from within.

Postcolonial literature primarily seeks to explore and respond to the challenges faced by formerly colonized societies in the aftermath of decolonization. It often revolves around key themes such as racism, colonial oppression, cultural hybridity, and the concept of otherness. At the heart of these narratives lies the persistent theme of alienation, which is deeply tied to the process of dehumanization. When individuals become disconnected from their cultural roots and communities, this external estrangement inevitably extends inward, resulting in a profound disconnection from their own identity and sense of self.

Khair’s novel centres on the figure of Amir Ali who was accused of being a thug. His identity is distorted and shaped by the British characters who impose him with orientalist stereotypical features, depicting him as violent, mystical and deceitful. Khair also dismantles orientalist constructions how the British characters, especially characters like Lord Batterstone, project their racialized fantasies onto Amir Ali. As Edward Said outlines in *Orientalism*, the Orient is often represented not as it truly is, but as a constructed mirror of the West’s fears, desires, and political needs. Amir Ali’s identity had been reduced to the mere figure of a thug; a label embedded in British colonial mythology about India’s supposed savagery. There have been a lot of instances when the author has mentioned the savage religious practices observed by the Indians and the savage Indian goddess. Another example was when Lord Batterstone reflects on Amir Ali’s origins, reconsidering him as “one of those dusky fellows whose ancestors probably strangled travellers in the name of some dark God”. This line exemplifies the orientalist discourse at work: the East is imagined as inherently violent, mystical, and irrational. The phrase “dusky fellow” is racially charged, reducing Amir Ali to a skin colour and associating that with inherited criminality and religious barbarism. Khair deliberately invokes this language to critique the West’s “civilizing” narrative. The novel shows how such perceptions are not based on truth but on inherited stereotypes, reinforced by colonial policies and sensationalist ethnographies. The British obsession with the Thuggee cult served as a justification for expanding imperial control in India under the guise of protecting order—what Said calls the “moral authority” of the colonizer.

In diasporic literature, identity emerges as a dynamic and negotiated construct, shaped by histories of displacement, cultural dislocation and the persistent desire to be rooted. In *The Thing about Thugs* (2010), Khair employs the narrative strategies of memory, myth and storytelling to analyse the intersections of colonial history and diasporic subjectivity. By juxtaposing the colonial representation of the thug with the narrator’s act of retelling, Khair exposes the instability of historical truth and political remembering. Memory in diasporic writing often operates as an archival of loss and survival. Together, they articulate a diasporic consciousness that is rooted in multiplicity, resistant to erasure and alive in narrative imagination. It becomes an act of ‘diasporic storytelling’ - transforming history into narrative, exile into articulation and displacement into creative belonging.

Conclusion

Tabish Khair’s *The Thing about Thugs* stands as a powerful reimagining of colonial history and a poignant reflection of what it means to belong to an empire that has survived the aftermaths of colonial reign. By retelling the story of Amir Ali and revisiting the colonial myth of the ‘thug’, Khair exposes how history has often been written through the lens of domination and misrepresentation. In challenging these narratives, the novel becomes a counter-archive- one that returns voice and humanity to those silenced by imperial discourse. This act of rewriting history resonates with Edward Said’s call to ‘reclaim the narrative’ from colonial authority, reminding readers that storytelling is itself a form of resistance.

At the same time, Khair’s use of multiple narrators and interwoven timelines situates the novel firmly within the traditions of diasporic literature. It reflects what Homi Bhabha terms the “in-between” space of hybridity — a zone where identities are constantly negotiated, where memory and imagination work together to create new forms of belonging. The novel’s contemporary narrator, living in London and reconstructing the colonial past, embodies Stuart Hall’s idea of identity as a process of “becoming” rather than “being.” Similarly, the novel’s blend of myth and realism mirrors Paul Gilroy’s vision of the diaspora as a “counterculture of modernity,” one that redefines modern history through the voices of the displaced. Khair’s narrative, therefore, contributes significantly to postcolonial and diasporic discourse by transforming storytelling into a mode of survival and reclamation. It bridges temporal and cultural divides, showing how the colonial past continues to echo through the diasporic present. The novel urges readers to see history not as static truth but as a living, contested field of memory and narrative.

Future research could extend this discussion by placing *The Thing About Thugs* in conversation with other diasporic texts such as Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *By the Sea*, or Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland*. Such comparative studies might reveal how different writers employ memory and myth to navigate questions of identity, exile, and belonging. They could also explore how contemporary diasporic voices continue to challenge historical silences through new forms of storytelling.

Ultimately, Khair’s novel reminds us that stories are not only ways of understanding the world but also of remaking it. In recovering the humanity of those lost in the margins of history, *The Thing About Thugs* reaffirms the power of narrative — to remember, to resist, and to imagine anew.

REFERENCES

1. Bhammer, A. (Ed.). (1994). *Displacements: Cultural identities in question*. Indiana University Press.
2. Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
3. Cohen, R. (1997). *Global diasporas: An introduction*. UCL Press.
4. Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. Harvard University Press.

-
5. Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
 6. Keniston, K. (1965). *The uncommitted: Alienated youth in American society*. Harcourt, Brace & World.
 7. Khair, T. (2010). *The thing about thugs*. HarperCollins.
 8. Safran, W. (1991). Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1(1), 83–99.
 9. Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
 10. Upreti, B. C. (1981). *Migration and social change in India*. Himalaya Publishing House.