

RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY AND EXPERIENCE: A STUDY OF *SHADOWS OF THE POMEGRANATE TREE*

Basharat Shameem
Lecturer in English
Deptt. of Higher Education
Govt. of Jammu and Kashmir, India.
basharatbhatku@gmail.com

Abstract

*Through its close study of *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* by Tariq Ali, this paper makes an attempt to examine the difference that results when experience is expressed variously through the discourses of history and 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 Muslims and those mainly focus on the issues of identity, culture, race, and religion. The so-called objectivity of the dominant discourses comes into question once these issues are explored. In the novel, all these issues that are vital to the identity of Muslims have been problematized which calls for a thorough comparison of collective and personal narratives. The various characters and incidents in the novel resonate with these issues and present the case for an alternate history and narrative as Ali endeavors to re-describe and reconstruct the history of Muslims and Islam to contest the Western stereotypes.*

Keywords: *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*, Tariq Ali, History, Fiction, Islam, Muslims, Christians.

Tariq Ali's novel *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*, published in 1992, is set in the late 15th century Spain after the defeat of Muslims and re-establishment of the Christian rule. The novel explores the different periods of history to bring to fore the rational, secular, progressive and tolerant traditions of Islamic civilization in contrast to the crusading tendencies of Medieval Christian Europe. The novel tells the captivating story of Muslim Spain and the re-conquest of the Kingdom of Granada by the army of Ferdinand and Isabella in the late fifteenth century which not only resulted in the banishment of Muslim and Jewish populations from Granada, but also the burning of all of its Muslim libraries in what is historically known as Spanish Inquisition. The novel is characterized by its evocative description of the minute local backdrop and detail of Muslim Spain, or as commonly

referred to in those times in Arabic *Al-Andalus* mainly through the perspective of a rural aristocratic family, the Al-Hudayl who live in the village of BanuHudayl. The BanuHudayl clan immigrated to Granada from Damascus in the tenth century A.D. As the tragic events unfold after the re-conquest, the family faces an uncertain future and it forms the shell of the narrative. The novel is perhaps more relevant now than it was ever as it seems to be an interesting allegory about the uncertainties facing the current day Europe in the wake of refugee crisis and the rise in ultra-right worldviews. This gives the novel the significance of being more than a piece of historical fiction. As Tariq Ali puts it poignantly at the end of his prologue to the novel, “Over the embers of one tragedy lurks the shadow of another” (5).

The novel begins with the infamous burning of the books belonging to the Muslims on the orders of the Archbishop, Ximenes de Cisneros as an attempt to annihilate the rich culture and heritage of the Muslims. The books included on mathematics, philosophy, astronomy, and copies of Holy Quran. And if anything, it showed the bigoted outlook of the Christian dispensation in Spain. However, certain texts pertaining to Arab manuals on medicine and astronomy were not burnt, but preserved and taken to other parts of the Europe which helped in the Renaissance according to the novelist. Regarding this claim of Islamic scholarship influencing the Renaissance, Klaus Stierstorfer, in his study of the novel comments: “Ali’s shrewd move is to claim precedence in modernity and the virtues propounded by liberal humanism for the Islamic world” (154). If anything, the passage makes the argument about the contribution of Islamic scholarship to the development of the modern world. It is something that has been acknowledged by many scholars.

Much of the novel’s plot is about the fictionalization of the aftermath of the Christian reconquest of Granada from the Muslims, in which Ferdinand and Queen Isabella with the help of Church began to persecute the Muslims and Jews to consolidate their rule. This persecution is intended to destroy the rich culture of knowledge, tolerance and multiculturalism that had characterized the Muslim rule in Spain known as Andalusia in the Muslim world during those days. In that period, Jews, Christians and Muslims lived together in harmony and peace, and as Ali writes in the novel “whose attempts to reconcile reason and divine truth became an Andalusian speciality...” (37). In the words of one critic, the *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* “manages to symbolize both the unique contribution of Arab culture and learning to Europe as well as the destruction of that learning at the hands of ‘civilized’ Christendom” (Ahmed 2011). After the persecution starts, the Muslims and Jews are faced with the issue of survival in the Iberian Peninsula as an atmosphere of hate starts against them. Since their survival and way of life is under severe attack, some of them prefer to convert to Christianity in order to save their lives rather than taking the option to fight or migrate.

In the novel, Muslims in the novel in contrast to their Christian attackers have been depicted in secular terms who are more concerned with their well-being of their families,

lands, businesses, and cultural heritage. Their apprehensions are mostly non-religious. They are not shown as rigidly religious in their daily lives and overall outlook on the worldly matters. This is aptly revealed in the novel by one character named Zubayda who tells her Husband Umar: “Nobody knows better than you that I am not a religious person...even though I keep up pretence. I fast during Ramadan to preserve [my] figure” (20). As the novel shows, most of the Muslim characters display very progressive attitudes towards the matters of morality and sex. For them, religion is largely a part of their cultural and linguistic life which is referred to as the Andalusian culture by Ali. And as the novel suggests, this culture put great emphasis on learning, logic and philosophy. After the reconquest, their only priority remains how to save their lives and property in the Peninsula. It seems their filiations and loyalty is with the land they currently inhabit rather than with their religion. On the other hand, it is their opponents, the Christian attackers who seem more motivated by the religious bigotry and fundamentalism. Their acts of burning of literature, forced conversion of and physical attacks against Muslims and Jews, and seizing of the properties and the forced eviction of Jews and Muslims serves to validate their extreme bigoted and intolerant outlook. As a result, the traditionally dominant Eurocentric view of Western civilization and history as the most progressive, rich and tolerant gets strongly contested and demystified in the *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*.

The monolithic image of Muslims constructed by the orientalists in the western imagination as backward, ignorant and intolerant comes into a serious question through this intervention. In their prominent work, *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin write that “the rereading and rewriting of the European historical and fictional record are vital and inescapable tasks. These subversive maneuvers, rather than the construction or reconstruction of the essentially national or regional, are what is characteristic of post-colonial discourse in general” (96). In the novel, Tariq Ali can be seen offering an alternate account of the history which deconstructs the edifice of the dominant Eurocentric discourses through a rewriting and reconstruction of the history. In his essay, “Tariq Ali and Recent Negotiations of Fundamentalism,” Klaus Stierstorfer categorizes Ali’s historical narratives as a “metafictional rewriting of Eurocentric history” (153). The technique of rewriting is deemed vital by the postcolonial writers and theorists to expropriate the hegemonic Eurocentric discourses on history and reality. In the words of Barbara Harlow, writers in postcolonial contexts “consider it necessary to wrest that expropriated historicity back, reappropriate it for themselves in order to reconstruct a new world-historical order” (33). The relationship between the West and the East historically has been reduced to a mere binary with an overbearing Western dominance. The hegemonic nature of the projects of imperialism and colonialism is based on the notion of superiority of Euro-centric identity and culture. In other words, this kind of a relationship between East and West is based on the dichotomy between “Self” and “otherness.” In this relationship, the dominant western

colonizer constitutes the Self while the marginalized orient constitutes the Other. In the words of Cahoon, the foundation for this is that what we perceive as “cultural units”, that is, “human beings, words, meanings, ideas, philosophical systems, social organizations” can only remain in their apparent state through an “active process of exclusion, opposition and hierarchization” (16). This construction of “exclusion and hierarchization” is usually accomplished through innumerable cultural processes, mostly through historical expressions. It is here that Tariq Ali’s novel seeks to counter these hegemonic processes and expressions. Eminent postcolonial theorist Hellen Tiffin in an essay titled “Colonialist Pretexts and Rites of Reply” argues that the reversal of otherness and colonial stereotypes is an essential strategy towards postcolonial recovery (Tiffin 1997). Dismantling of stereotypes is what Ali endeavours to do in *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* as he recounts the tale of an intellectually progressive Islamic civilization that is under the onslaught of a bigoted and cruel colonizer. In this novel, he narrates history not from the perspectives of the dominant power structures; rather it is narrated from the common people’s perspective. The characters in the *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* are not emperors, kings, queens, or rulers; they are common people who live their complacent lives.

Through its re-telling of the reconquest of Spain and the persecution thereafter in terms of physical and cultural repression, the novel also provides an insight into the beginning of the western colonialism and its impact on the Muslim world. In this novel, history is narrated in close relation to the story-telling as this re-telling of the history is indeed not done through the so-called “objective” angle of formal history, but instead through subtle artistic imagination. The writer of a work of literature generally does not aim at depicting the historical facts in the same way that a professional historian does. Instead, the artist looks beyond the available facts and digs deep into the spirit underlying those facts. This, however, in no way alters either the value of the facts or the reality concerning them. Ralph Waldo Emerson succinctly sums this up by stating that “Fiction reveals the truth that reality obscures” (qtd in Wilson 10). Before Emerson, even in the classical times, scholars like Aristotle held similar views on the relationship between fact and fiction. Much of the postmodernist thinkers are of the opinion that historical narratives are rarely neutral and, thus, cannot lay claims to total objectivity. They suggest that each one is guided, if not motivated, by the theoretical or ideological position that an author/writer holds. To these thinkers, knowledge is bound and framed by institutions that are pervaded by power relations which they aim to perpetuate. Jacques Derrida, in “Difference; in Margins of Philosophy” argues that all discourse includes a “trace (of that) which can never be presented,” and by implication any attempt to determine whole meaning from a particular narrative can never be fulfilled (23). In simpler words, according to Derrida, there will always be gaps in presenting the reality which makes objectivity impossible. Hayden White, in his essay, “Interpretation in History” also challenges the objectivity of historical narratives: “The historian has to interpret

his materials in order to construct the moving pattern of images in which the form of the historical process is to be mirrored” (281). This implies that the professional historian aims to formulate an interpretation of history rather than writing an objective history. Elucidating his argument further, White further theorizes that interpretation influences the projection of history in at least three dissimilar manners: “aesthetically (in the choice of a narrative strategy), epistemologically (in the choice of an explanatory paradigm), and ethically (in the choice of a strategy by which the ideological implications of a given representation can be drawn for the comprehension of current social patterns)”(307). Through all these theoretical assertions about the project of history writing, one can conclude that there can be no such thing as a “pure” or “objective” history which can wholly portray truth and reality. On the contrary, there can only be varied perspectives or versions at interpreting history. In such a scenario, the so-called strict distinction between “literary fiction” and “proper history” becomes too blurred and sometimes even to the extent of overlapping. It is so because both kinds of narratives come up with different accounts or perspectives on history and reality. In their own ways, both create different perspectives on truth and reality in illuminating our perceptions. Tariq Ali’s account of Muslim society in Spain and its conquest by Christians may not be agreed upon by a formal historian, but the novels, in their own ways try to interpret the history and culture of that time from a humane perspective which is free from all the contrived power structures. In this context, Klaus Stiersdorfer observes, “What characterizes both Tariq Ali’s approach...is his belief in the power of literature as a social and political force” (157). And by offering a discontinuity from the dominant discourse of western colonial project, the novels by Tariq Ali can be said to reflect the popular view that how literature can contest the contorted truths of power structures in the contemporary world

And this contestation is done by narrating history from the perspective of both the characters in the novel and also the readers. This takes the narration away from one dominant narrative as it wants to bring to light such perspectives which have been rendered to the invisible pages. The main plot of the novel tries to comprehensively explore the history of the era it is set in. According to the theoretical postulates of postmodernism, a literary text is essentially a cultural construct. It implies that the construction of a text is possible only through narrative. Narrative on the other hand is related to representation which makes it an indirect representation of reality. According to this view, history has been conventionally regarded as a grand narrative which has a supposedly grand origin and teleology. The generally accepted history written from the perspective of the dominant power structures, the Eurocentric perspective in this case, is the so-called empirical history. On the contrary, the marginalized groups who are often pushed to the peripheries of the centre contest this by coming up with histories of their own which are more genealogical in nature. If the former is referred to as History, the latter can be put in as histories which offer a multitude of perspectives on any historical reality. In this context, eminent postmodern theorist Hayden

White observes in his work, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* that narrative history plays an important role in determining a culture's "systems of meaning production" (45). He is of the view that historical narratives provide new realms of meaning to human existence. This argument is further corroborated by Dominick LaCapra in his work *History and Criticism*. In it, he argues that "the history of discourse...will give content and meaning to what must be for us a blankly utopian future" (104). In his novels, Ali adopts many narrative approaches for the reconstructions of the past as a medium of radical contestation. They reconstruct new meanings of the past in relationship with the contemporary issues. This reconstruction of the past/history in his novels is transmuted by Ali into a cultural and political tool in which fact and fiction offers an alternative vision of the history. *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* asks questions about how history portrays experience and also how and why historical justifications are provided to the ideas upheld in the present (western imperialism) while on the other hand certain experiences for all that they do to individual lives (lives of Muslim characters in this case) go utterly under-represented and lost in silence. The novel foregrounds these silences and gaps in history which is in a way the paradigm within which this study is taking place. History, as depicted in this novel, if not subjective is certainly selective in the sense that history chooses what events to include in its body and which others to exclude. There are political reasons for those silences, of course. Here the idea of the history as a discourse becomes prominent.

The narration of the alternate account of history in the novel is done by using different images, names, signs and stories than the ones used in the mainstream accounts. This critical appraisal of the novel aims to identify these images, stories and spaces within the novel which in their narration of events produce differing discourses. Through the novel these discourses arrive alternatively. For instance, the names of places, famous people, buildings and other important words are depicted in the novel using their Arabic denotations. This is done specifically by the novelist to illustrate how these places and individuals possess their own unique history and identity instead of getting subsumed into the grand idiom of Western history. For instance, the eminent Medieval Muslim philosophers commonly referred to as Averroes and Avicenna in the west are mentioned in the novel through their real names--Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina, respectively. Similarly, the places like Granada, Seville and Cordoba are mentioned as Gharnata, Ishbiliya and Qurtuba, respectively. The presence of Arabic nomenclature among other things in the novel is presented as a marker of distinct identity of the Muslims in Spain which is under attack by the conquering forces. It is to convey to the reader their centrality to the main narrative as presented by Tariq Ali. He does not want the Eurocentric interpretations overtake his narrative. According to Reed Dasenbrock's study of *Islam Quintet*, the reader is given "just enough Western equivalents" to keep track of the context. The fact that there are two versions of places, things and certain people, "reminds us that though we think we know the story, we have only heard one voice telling it"

(Dasenbrock 17). But at the same time, the novel *Shadows of Pomegranate Trees* is not about one singular account or story. There are scores of stories hidden in the novel and scores of storytellers narrated through the multitude of characters. These storytellers not only tell different stories but also the same stories differently.

Since History is linked with the sense of the self and one's identity, the colonizer deems it essential to distort and completely deprive the colonized of their history. And the burning of the books in Granada as depicted in the novel could be seen in this context. It is a practice which the colonizers repeat often. Tariq Ali drives home the same point and by doing so, he also deconstructs the myth of the superiority of the western civilisation. In fact, throughout the novel, he just reverses the binary upon which the western discourse of the orient is based upon. For instance, Ali explicitly states the advancement and richness of the medieval Islamic scholarship and knowledge in the novel which was far ahead of its western counterpart during those times. He writes in the novel: "The sumptuously bound and decorated volumes were a testament to the arts of the Peninsular Arabs, surpassing the standards of the monasteries of Christendom. The compositions they contained had been the envy of scholars throughout Europe" (3). This means that in the novel, not only did the Muslims in Spain have pride in their learned history and culture, but even European scholars would testify to it. This is yet again illustrative of the ways through which Ali's narrative clearly reverses the binary in favour of the colonized Muslims. Towards the end of the novel, there is an epilogue in which the novel describes an event which takes place two decades after the reconquest of Andalusia. The event, in the gory contents that it exhibits, contrasts starkly with much of the Muslim Spanish history that is portrayed in the novel and thus offers another instance where Tariq Ali dismantles the traditional western colonial binary. The epilogue describes the rise of a young captain in the Christian army named Cortes who orders the massacre of al-Hudayl in assuming fame as one of the celebrated military leaders of the colonial era. The last four lines sum up the message of the epilogue: "Tenochtitlan is the name of the city and Moctezuma is the king." "Much wealth went into its construction", said the captain. "They are a very rich nation, Captain Cortes," came the reply. The captain smiled" (240). This conversation is suggestive of the greed that is inherent to colonialism. By presenting the infamous Cortes as the perpetrator behind the massacre of Banu Hudayl, *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* alludes to the global colonial project and highlights the dark past of Western civilization wherein the European powers in their quest for wealth invaded other lands and destroyed the native cultures and civilisations in those lands as in America, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Asia, et al.

Through the character and actions of Cortes or the most of the Christian conquerors in the novel, Tariq Ali portrays how symbolically the path of plural existence between the Eastern and Western cultures was horribly shut down. It is indeed one of the more intriguing

features of the novel. When Cortes obliterates Banu Hudayl from the maps and destroys the standard, he redefines the imagined boundaries between the East and the West. He not only removes the symbolical key, the standard, but alongwith it, he also breaks the real key--the possibility of religious tolerance and coexistence between the East and the West.

A thorough reading of the novel and as has been explored in this chapter till now, one is able to infer that the binary opposition between Christian fanaticism and Islamic tolerance is one of its prime themes. As described already, this is achieved in the novel through various symbols, objects and also through characterization. Klaus Stierstorfer also elaborates on this in his essay "Tariq Ali and Recent Negotiations of Fundamentalism." Stierstorfer compares and contrasts Tariq Ali's characters with those of Salman Rushdie. He remarks, "many of Ali's characters become emblematic for ideas and visions" as opposed to Rushdie who accentuates "hybridity and transcultural migration", and that "Ali is much clearer when it comes to the social and cultural propositions underlying the novels" (156). This observation does carry some weight as it is evident from the way most of the characters in *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* from the two different factions encapsulate starkly opposing ideas and thereby achieve a binary relation which in itself opposes the idea of cultural hybridity. The reversing of the binary opposition between "self" and the "other" by writers through images of history, cultural expressions and values is common subversive technique employed by the writers writing in the postcolonial contexts. And Tariq Ali seems no exception to it.

The main theme in the novel thus centers around the binary opposition between the two main cultures--the colonizing Christians who are religious fanatics and the religiously tolerant colonized Muslims. This is Tariq Ali's way of challenging and reversing the notions of the Eurocentric discourse. In this regard, Dasenbrock observes, "We view religious tolerance as a feature of our Western culture, not of Islamic culture, so the (accurate) assertion that our tradition of tolerance was better exemplified in the middle ages by Islam than by Christianity displaces our received fault lines a little" (15). As a result, the orientalist idea of the West as the self, the tolerant, rational and superior culture, and the East (or the Orient) as its binary opposite, the religiously fanatical and violent counterpart, is here being deconstructed. It is done through the mode of fiction as history is seen as a tool of reconstruction of experience of both collective and personal narratives. The various characters and incidents in the novel resonate with these issues and present the case for an alternate history and narrative as Ali endeavours to re-describe and reconstruct the history of Muslims and Islam to contest the Western stereotypes.

Works Cited

- Ali, Tariq. *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1992. Pdf.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- Cahoone, Lawrence E. "Introduction." *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*. ed. Lawrence E. Cahoone. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996. Pdf.
- Dasenbrock, Reed Way. "Tariq Ali's Islam Quintet." *British Asian Fiction: Framing the Contemporary*. eds. Neil Murphy and Wai-chew Sim. New York: Cambria Press, 2008. Pdf.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Difference." *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. A. Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. Print.
- Gamal, Ahmed. "Rewriting Strategies in Tariq Ali's Postcolonial Metafiction." *Postcolonial Text*, Vol 6, No. 4 (2011): 1-19. *GOOGLE*. Web. 20 January, 2018.
- Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. London: Methuen & Co., 1987. Print.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History and Criticism*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1987. Pdf.
- Stierstorfer, Klaus. "Tariq Ali and Recent Negotiations of Fundamentalism." *Fundamentalism and Literature*. eds. Catherine Pessa-Miquel and Klaus Stierstorfer. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 143-60. Pdf.
- Tiffin, Helen. "Colonialist Pretexts and Rites of Reply." *The Yearbook of English Studies*. Vol. 27. *The Politics of Postcolonial Criticism* (1997): 219-30. Pdf.
- "Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. Vol. 24. No. 01. (1998): 160-181. *GOOGLE*. Web. 20 January, 2019.
- White, Hayden. "Interpretation in History." *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*. Vol.4. No.2 (1973): 281-314. *GOOGLE*. Web. 20 January, 2018.
- Wilson, Anil. "India 1857." *Literature of Resistance: India 1857*. Eds. G.K. Das and Sushma Arya. New Delhi: Primus Books, 2009. Print.