

EXPLORING FICTIONALITY OF REALITY THROUGH TABISH KHAIR'S 'MUSLIM MODERNITIES'**Ms. Shruti Jain¹****Mr. Anuj Kushwaha²**

ABSTRACT: *If the novels catch the fictionality of reality then nonfictions also at times help us in understanding the reality of fictionality. In this regard we would like to explore on how Tabish Khair viewed Islam in modern era and we would like to explore on how his work Muslim Modernities helps us in understanding the fictionality of reality.*

KEY WORDS: *Tabish Khair, Islam, Denmark, Fictionality*

In Muslim Modernities, Khair does not theoretically analyze Muslim identities but the points he posit in it are often ethical:

‘There were other kinds of threats too such as Hindu-Muslim riots which were more threatening to secular Muslims like me and my family members than to religious Muslims living in ghetto-like colonies. There were constant attempts to bracket our identity. Are you Muslim or Indian, we were asked—as if one could be only the one or the other.’³

Here lies the desire which is the essence of Muslim Modernities, which is to be able to choose any version of Muslim identity to live with without questioning. Khair also gives the idea that technically this is not possible in the pure sense of being modern because being a minority (the minority of coloured people in Denmark, the minority of immigrants, the minority of Indians, of Muslims.⁴) it is assumed that minority would play an assumed role of being ‘other’ which indeed is framed reality. They are expected to live the fictional reality the Westerners expect out of them. The problem is that this obsession with image of Muslim and its confrontation in the post

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³ Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities Tabish Khair's Essays on Moderation and Mayhem 2001-2007*, compiled and ed. Renu Kaul Verma. New Delhi: Vitasta, 2008. p 4

⁴ Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities*. p 4

colonial literature is ‘concerned with the bridge of West-and-the –Rest.’⁵ This means in Spivakian way that postcoloniality is after all ‘a heritage of imperialism in the *rest* of the Globe’⁶. Here again it is apparent that minors like Tabish Khair are stereotyped in this technologically advanced era. The problem Khair faces is that that he, firstly, is a Muslim born in India and his understanding of Islam does not simply mean for him a religion of Muslim but a space where his religious viewpoint are confronted or rather shaped by major religion of Hindus and therefore an Indian secular element is included in his sense of religion; and then secondly, his Muslim identity is always under scrutiny in the *West* which shocks his secular idea of Islam. In ‘Muslim Modernities’ Khair makes an endeavour to find the solutions, though not in literal sense, of these problems and makes an endeavour to look for appropriate image of Islam. In one of the essays, ‘9/11: Conscience and Coffee’⁷, Khair tries to bring out the universal pain through his personal experiences. It seems as if Islam and Muslim are baptized⁸ to be atrocious and hence to be handled with un-indemnified attention. Anything wrong done by a group of Muslims is equivalent to wrong intended by whole Muslim community to the entire world: ‘There are moments that cleave Time into two. Everything that happens afterwards seems to happen in a different world. World war II and the Holocaust was one such moment for Europe. The Vietnam War was another for America and Vietnam. The suicide-hijack-crashing of four passenger planes and the destruction of the World Trade Center on the morning of 11 September 2001 was such a moment for the entire world.’⁹

It becomes so easy for the West and through West for the Rest-of-the-World to view the fictional depiction of Islam and Muslim as real. Media, needless to say, plays important role in it, that is, it creates multiple representations of Islamic identity and ultimately makes the audiences believe of the stereotypical image. For Khair, conscience is important as it is relational to be ethical. The question that comes into reader’s mind is whether Humanity is meant only for the West? (‘For example, the first Danish person who brought me news of the tragedy—a person I respect in many ways—said that he was against violence of any kind and added that he would understand if Americans decided to hit back’¹⁰) Khair somehow objects to this mode of thinking and probes into the matter explaining that these kinds of justified violence (in the sense that both means and ends of violence can be emphatically justified) are often personal and do not carry any universal

⁵ Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities*. p 4

⁶ This view is, however, argued by Aijaz Ahmad where he has examined the definition of postcoloniality given by Spivak : ‘Those of us from formerly colonized countries are able to communicate with each other and with the metropolis, to exchange and to establish sociality and transnationality, because we have had access to the culture of imperialism.’, Ahmad, Aijaz. *A Politics of Literary Postcoloniality in Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013. p 277

⁷ Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities*. p 7

⁸ Primal baptism: The anti-descriptivist answer, in contrast, is that a word is connected to a object or to a set of objects, through an act of ‘primal baptism’, and this link maintains itself even if the cluster of descriptive features which initially determined the meaning of the word changes completely.

Zizek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 2002. P 90

⁹ Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities* p 7

¹⁰ Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities* p 8

humanism motive. This makes Khair to write: 'Isn't that why there were shocking pictures of embittered Palestinian youths celebrating the tragedy in the occupied areas—youths who have become so used to the idea of missiles being launched at their own buildings by Israeli security forces and the notion of reciprocal violence that they could not feel the inhumanity of their inane celebration?'¹¹

Khair emphasizes on the fact that politicization of pain as universal feeling is often destructive and therefore, he says that 'We need to go beyond it. We owe it to the victim of the tragedy to go beyond it.'¹²

But then why and how this fictional image is considered as reality? According to Khair, media plays an important role in it. For example the expert panels who are representatives of the intellectual and culture determine the reality of fictional image. Edward Said in 'Representations of the Intellectual' depicts the importance of intellectual: 'The central fact for me is, I think, that the intellectual is a n individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug.'¹³

First (male) panelist: It proves that he (a Somali man who attacked the cartoonist Herr Hansen) had intended to murder Herr Hansen. Why else should he sharpen the weapons? Second (male) panelist: it definitely indicates the degree of premeditation. Third (male) panelist: But does one need to sharpen a knife or an axe in order to kill a man? I mean, it is not as if flesh is that resistant or... Hostess (interrupting): Brrr, that's gory... (and turning to the 'expert on terrorism'): What would you say, colonel? Expert (male) on terrorism: There is a chance that the accused was specifically influenced by the Taliban brand of Islamism. In all known cases of Islamist assault, axes as well as ceremonial beheadings have been employed by Taliban-influenced militants four times more often than by other jihadist groups.'¹⁴

The idea of attack 'widely discussed in the media' indicates the intensity of caricaturing of usual practice of experts. In this sense they interpret the attack or just fill in the gaps and this filling of the gaps is never 'apolitical or value free'¹⁵. The point worth noting in the novel is that the

¹¹ Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities*. p 8

¹² Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities*. p 9

¹³ Said, Edward. *Representations of the Intellectual, THE 1993 REITH LECTURES*. New York: Vintage, 1996. p 11

¹⁴ Khair, Tabish. *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2012. p 167

¹⁵ Said, Edward. *COVERING ISLAM: HOW THE MEDIA AND THE EXPERTS DETERMINE HOW WE SEE THE REST OF THE WORLD*. London: Vintage, 1997. p 164

narrator who himself is a Muslim could not help saying that 'I am not saying was uninfluenced by the atmosphere: the 'Islamist Axe Plot', as it was being called, was at its height then, with adjectives being flexed and postures struck on all sides... I had reasons to be suspicious, cause for caution. If you have a Muslim name, you have to be wary in some contexts.'¹⁶ It is when a person is surrounded by news every time, he/she cannot afford to let it go and make no judgment. It is precisely this attribute of media that is a curse of twenty first century. For example the narrator is a secular Muslim, but it is so difficult for him listening to the news that it seems as if the idea of being a secular Muslim itself is engrossed of being sceptic of Muslim entity throughout. For Khair, whole idea of this sort of interpretation is absurd. For example, the act of Somali man made the narrator to think of Karim bhai's (narrator's flat owner and his flat mate) sudden disappearances as one of the cause of terrorist act: 'But they did not know of his (Karim bhai) sudden disappearances, his years in Cairo, his need for cash, the mystery caller.'¹⁷ In fact, the true understanding of Islamic fundamentalism (in its pure sense) is understood through Karim bhai's sense of religion. In the novel the narrator gives adequate space to the particularities of Karim's religious practices like keeping the room open if a female is there in his room, non-acceptance of homosexuality of Great Claus and Little Claus, never talking openly about his desires, discussing Islam, etc and undoubtedly, all of these practices can be sceptically approached. But Cairo incident brings both the readers and the narrator back to the reality, as if they were living the reality of fiction so far. In Cairo, Karim married a Danish woman quite older than him and because wife's continuing ill-health, she decided to part the ways; to divorce. But Karim did not give up his duty and never deserted her and kept on helping his ex-wife. This was his fundamentalism that to work as human being for humanity without hypocrisy. Evidently, his non-hypocritical attitude was considered sceptical. In this way, Khair not only mocks the interpretive attitude of experts and representatives but also brings under scrutiny the values of secular Muslim narrator.

Why it is that secular Muslim attitude of narrator was more of a cosmopolitan citizen than of having a secular understanding of Islam as such? But Khair tries to look into the concept of secularism in the chapter 'Why I Cannot be a 'Secular Muslim''¹⁸. It is often been contested that colonial English education brought about a secular outlook among the colonized and that it were the colonial expeditions only that made the cultural dialogue at international front. But Khair defies the idea saying that 'On one hand, teaching English literature was used by so-called secularists to counter greater demands for evangelical activities. On the other hand, English literature was itself seen as permeated with not only Christian values but with Christianity... As James Thomason... puts it: "We want books written in a Christian spirit than Christian books."¹⁹ So the literature and literary understanding of secularism was never pure and always had religious (Christian) aura surrounding it. On why cannot a Muslim be a 'Secular Muslim' is

¹⁶ Khair, Tabish. How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position. p 173

¹⁷ Khair, Tabish. How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position. p 175

¹⁸ Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities* p 163

¹⁹ Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities* p 165

more related to historical sedimentation of the term secular which is, more or less, Euro-centric. Then being a cosmopolitan as a post colonial gift itself is considered as a 'by-product of colonization.'²⁰ Does it not indicate that a 'secular Muslim' is an oxymoron, in a sense that secular was never secular in its true meaning and that if Muslim in post-colonial times read dominant literature in universities, isn't he/she reading text with Christian essence? It appears to be 'Christian Muslim' seeming more befitting than 'secular Muslim'. So whenever a Muslim carries a secular outlook he/she is always burdened with this sedimentation of historical problematics. This is why Khair is compelled to write that 'I, like many others, would argue that the world can only become possible for other peoples outside the legacies of colonization once such myths of European centrality are questioned and displaced. This displacement cannot be a simple overturning; it has to be a complex and difficult act of restoration and revision.'²¹

Khair's experiences bring about the contemporary problems of Muslims on how difficult it is for 'other' to keep hold of his/her own ideologies in post colonial times: 'The myth of European centrality are so powerful that they inform the very structures of our understanding of the contemporary world, defining the responses of not only secular and 'modern' citizens/thinkers but also, more perniciously perhaps, the reactionary adherents to Islam and Hindu fundamentalisms.'²²

So far these myths are not de-mystified the problematics of such communities and religion, as Islam or other communities in minorities, getting caught in certain images will keep continuing; the reality of fictionality will get strengthen day by day. Khair's reflections project that if the world has to move on like this then, at least, the people should have choice to choose their own sense of reality.

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²⁰ Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities* p 174

²¹ Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities* p 174

²² Khair, Tabish. *Muslim Modernities*. p 174