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## Portrayal of Racism and Ethnicity in Tabish Khair's "The Thing About Thugs"

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### Abstract

London the city of dreams, hopes and light has been fictionalised by a number of authors since the colonial period. But the portrayal of the city in Tabish Khair's novel *The Thing About Thugs* is something unique. It defines the beauty, rich culture and lavish life of the city on one hand and on the other hand it reveals the haunting mysteries which become a major form of fear, horror and marginalisation of the city. The author has tried to represent Indian past without stinky spots and with the help of multiple techniques he denies with the superiority of British Empire over India or other eastern countries. The novel he also refutes the typical mind-set of Europeans about eastern subcontinents along with eastern thinking and dreams about western lavish, high profile and busy country life. The novel is a wonderful attempt of the writer to attack upon the issues like stereotypes, barbarism, class, caste, racist attitude, inter-racial relationships, and religion etc. The novel is a story of a reformed thug Amir Ali who has taken away to London by a British Captain, T. Meadows to investigate the cult of thuggee and series of brutal beheadings happening in the dark, stinky streets of London. The novel highlights how the authorities suspect that there must be Indians or eastern behind these activities but the reality was not as per their thinking. It represents how these issues have always been in the minds of the west about east by which they always feel themselves superior to eastern subcontinents. The presence of a race which is looked down as inferior give them always a sense of superiority to the east.

**Keywords:** Racism, Ethnicity, Diasporic dynamism, Barbarism, East-West encounter, Inter-racial relationships.

### Article

In Indian English literary scenario the issues like racism and ethnicity have always been a great matter of discussion since a long time. Tabish Khair is a migrant writer of Indian origin who raises these issues emphatically in his novel *The Thing About Thugs*. The setting of the novel is in nineteenth century London, the Victorian age. Nineteenth century was the culmination period for colonialism, When European states established colonies on other continents. Most of the native people of colonial territory were oppressed and enslaved by the colonising power. At the same time the indigenous people were forced to give up their cultural heritage and to assimilate to the coloniser's culture. The colonial power always argued that 'third world countries' were inferior and needed western help and assistance in order to gain moral integrity and economic wealth.

Amir Ali is the central and leading character and he is also the narrator of the story. He has represented as a reformed thug. But when the entire story opens he becomes almost one of them. Amir Ali has taken to London by Captain William T. Meadows in the year around 1839. He was taken away to London to investigate the cult of Thuggee in the region. Amir has an English girlfriend Jenny; he addresses her 'jaanam'. Amir's Persian letters to Jenny becomes the developing and interesting source for the narrative. The people of London suspect that the criminals behind the brutal murders and thugees were the orientals. Just because of the image of India from the western mind is always made by repellent interpretations and by misrepresentations of Indian civilization. The Orient has been always colonised and neglected by the Europeans therefore they suffers with the feeling of hatred and aggression in their minds. The thinking of British eye on the Indian life and culture is always

different. And the westerns always feel themselves superior to the orientals but Khair refutes this thinking because at the end of the novel they come to know that the actual criminals were Whites not the Orientals.

The primary symbol/ signifier of racism is the 'colour' although later it changes into certain terms prevailing in the Indian society like linguistic, religious, ethnic, sexual and class differences. Ania Loomba in her book *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism* defines the attitude of racism. To quote:

"Race' those particularly highlight the supposed primitivism and violence. The connection between contemporary British racism and the city is an important reminder that race is a relational concept which does not have fixed referents" (1998, 106).

The racist attitude of British towards east is emphatically presented in the novel and this theory exists in the *Orientalism*. Therefore we could say orientalism exposes the racist attitude of west towards east. The racist attitude gives them a feeling of superiority complex.

According to Marxism the racism is an important element of class division. Actually the history is the witness of racist attitude of stereotypes as a complex process. These racist stereotypes of colonial discourses can still be found in science, historical writing, mass media and literature. The one more type of caste distinction represented by the author in the novel in a very lucid manner; "Haldi Ram and his community, being low caste, resided in a hamlet just outside the main village" (67). This type of typical mind-set for low castes was very common in the colonial India.

The British attitude towards India was very much influenced with domestic servants, and the experiences of slavery etc. Racism, caste and class are the important contents of colonialism. While describing caste system Ania Loomba claims,

"Caste was of course a concept that becomes familiar in England from colonial experiences in India, and it marked a social, economic and religious hierarchy overlaid with connotations of purity and pollution, similar to those that shape the idea of race" (1998, 107).

The racist attitude also defined by Jawahar Lal Nehru in *Discovery of India*, as east versus west and Asia versus Europe. While accepting the fact Rudyard Kipling commented on racist attitude in the ending lines of his *The Ballad of East and West*;

"Oh, East is east, and West is west, and never the twain shall meet,  
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great judgement seat".  
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,  
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!"  
(1889).

This distinction of race has been seen in the characters of the novel. The description of British characters in the novel is presented as coloniser stronger, and civilised in comparison to Indian characters. According to Homi Bhabha there are four kinds of stages in the process of colonisation; mimicry, hybridity, ambivalence and liminality. Khair focused upon the ambivalent nature of coloniser and colonised in the novel. The colonisers are considered as brutal, strong, wild, wily, dangerous and harmful. But on the same time they looked as helpful, supportive and domestic.

The British characters in the novel are created and narrated in the same manner like Captains, Lords, majors etc. These British are presented as criminals, murderous, skull collectors, and opium eaters. They are all belongs to high class society. And on the other hand the colonised are always taken as suppressed, voiceless, weak, and uncivilised. But the character of Amir Ali And lady character QuiHy have presented as intelligent, cultured and strong. And both were able to investigate the real thugs.

According to the west the orient or the India is a country of poverty, illiteracy, and uncivilised peoples and of course they are murderous, barbaric and thugs. They do not care that the east is agree or not but they always repeated the same attitude. This typical attitude is also represented in the writings of west. And these writings made India as a disgraceful country. Sometimes this attitude represents in this novel too. From the perspective of India, Mary Douglas has claimed that India is “a mirror image” of Europe and thus a totally opposite world to the West” (1972, 12).

The novel strongly highlights the trauma of racism. The Character of Amir Ali is represented as an accused of the murderous and robberies and he take refuge among his fellow “untouchables”. This also includes an enjoyable trip through Mole People territory, live in sewer tunnels.

Because of the series of murderous, in London, becomes an increasingly dangerous and horrible place with many lurking threats. There were one common thing in these murders that all those who have been killed so far are non-Whites/ blacks/orients and poor people residing on the dark streets of London. Commenting on the monstrous nature of its people, Khair writes thus:

“And London, this city of cities, how could it be trusted? It hid so many stories and layers, its paths above the ground were devious and twisted, its tunnels and sewers and dungeons numberless and unmapped” (159).

The novel represents the study of other that how other has been treated and viewed as a problem and become a major form of horror, fear, marginalisation and violence and how they remain other from the western mind. When Amir goes to London he certainly faces these sets of problems. He suffered with inferiority complex as the British always force orients to feel this. Khair has examined this through the study of polemical dichotomy of East and west. Commented about this type of treatment of other O.P. Dwivedi in his “The Devil and the Racial Other in Tabish Khair’s *The Thing About Thugs*” writes, “Covertly suggesting his preference for highlighting issues of otherness and ghost stories as cogent alternative in order to break the negative stereotyping of the other” (2013, 1).

The novel not only defines the typical thinking of west for the east but along with that it also gives certain examples which highlight the racial otherness. To quote “There is the difference in the shape and size of the brain and the organic quality of the body” (88). Khair has also made a comparison between the physical structure of Chinaman and Negro. He claims,

“Negro or the child of some other race is to blur the essential differences between the races, and the lessons of history, which records Greek and Roman antiquity as the cradle of every civilization, as well as the lessons of biology” (87).

The novel also represents an ethnic biased characterisation like the people belong to the east always considered as lazy, violent, uneducated and uncivilized. And the people of west are quite intelligent, educated, mannered, and cultured in comparison to the east. Edward Said in ‘*Orientalism*’ describes about this biased behaviour of west towards east. The west is always considered as powerful, coloniser and they have a typical attitude towards east. The east is always taken like; lazy Indians, dazed Irish, and Liquidator Arab. And especially Indians have always remained a centre of attraction for western countries. Therefore Edward Said claims how the image of India and Indians are repeatedly misunderstand by the west. On the other hand west is always consider as the land of beauty, light, colours, lavish life, and dreams. But the novel denies this thinking as the actual criminals behind those brutal beheadings and thugees were the British.

Hence it may be said that the novel highly raises the trauma of racism and ethnicity which were underpinned in the colonial period. The author tried to represent Indian past without stinky spots and with the help of multiple

techniques he denies with the superiority of British Empire over India or other eastern countries. And he also refutes their typical mind-set about eastern subcontinents along with eastern thinking and dreams about western lavish, high profile and busy country life. Therefore we could say that the novel is a wonderful attempt and attack on the stereotypes, barbarism, caste, racist attitude, discourse, inter-racial relationships, and religion etc. The major concern of the novel is the effect of racism and ethnicity underpinned in the western minds towards eastern subcontinents along with that it majorly highlights the notion of self which is related to the identity of a migrant. Actually this thinking is in their blood from many years, which cannot be changed. On commenting about the racist attitude of westerners O. P. Dwivedi further says;

“So what one can deduce from the above statements is the simple truth that the Whites had clearly created a monster out of their fear of the ‘Other’ races and cultures. More than anything else, the negative ‘Other’ that has been positioned and strengthened in the Whites discourses over a long period of time appears as a person who cannot be changed” (2013, 8).

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