

## Postcolonial Re-telling of History: A Study of Tariq Ali's *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*

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### Abstract

The present paper attempts to study Tariq Ali's *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* as a Postcolonial text. The western historiography and scholarship have always misinterpreted Islam as a religion of terror and wars, and misrepresented Muslims as 'people without culture and history'. Fiction, for the postcolonial writers, is a tool of reconstructing history and Tariq Ali, a Pakistani-British novelist and historian, in this novel, traces down different phases of Islamic past in order to show times when culture and learning were attributes of Islamic civilisation and were adored by the most learned Christians of the time. This novel is a typical Postcolonial text as the author of the novel attempts to write back to the West so as to challenge its hegemonic discourse about Islam and Muslim culture. By employing postcolonial perspective, the novelist depicts Islamic civilisation as secular, tolerant and pluralistic while as Christianity is characterised by crusading tendencies, religious fanaticism and xenophobia. The paper will also attempt to analyse how the novel under study denounces West's superior morality and contests its misrepresentation of Islam and its followers.

**Key Words:** Islam, Christians, Muslims, East, West, Postcolonial, Historiography.

### Introduction

Tariq Ali is a Pakistani-British novelist, historian, filmmaker, a Marxist socio-political commentator and an activist. He has written a collection of postcolonial historical novels known as *Islam Quintet*. He, in this series, attempts to tell history from the postcolonial perspective so as to correct the western misconceptions and misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims. The first novel of the collection *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* was written in 1992 and when Edward Said read it, he suggested Ali not to stop here and 'tell the whole bloody story now'. Tariq Ali went on to dig out the glorious past of Muslims from the liberation of Jerusalem in 1187 to the fall of Granada in 1492 and from the rise of Ottoman Empire to its decline, he retrieved everything that was made silent by the imperial powers of the Christian Europe.

When Ali was working on his first novel, he travelled to Spain and during his research he found the relationship among the three Abrahamic religions — Christianity, Islam and Judaism, the most beautiful thing in the Iberian Peninsula and all of them lived in peace until Catholic fundamentalism destroyed it by othering and obliterating Islamic civilisation and

Judaism from the Peninsula in the fifteenth century. In an interview with A. Sahi, Tariq Ali talks about his intentions in writing *Islam Quintet*: “to make Muslims aware of their cultural history, to make it part of the academic talk, and to show the other side of Islam in Spain, Sicily and Turkey...” (Sahi). The focus of this research paper is to study *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* in the light of postcolonialism in order to highlight how Tariq Ali emancipates history from the shackles of colonialism by re-telling history from the perspective of Muslims.

### Analysis

*Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* is the opening novel of *Islam Quintet* written by Tariq Ali. The novel was published in 1992 and is set in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century Moorish Spain, and it deals with the fall of Granada and its aftermath. The novel begins with Ximenes de Cisneros, the archbishop of Granada, giving some vague orders to five Christian knights who were ‘veterans of the Reconquest’ and in a week’s time, a notorious bonfire of the books belonging to the Islamic culture and learning takes place at Bab al-Ramla in al-Andalus (Arabic name of Spain). The bonfire included the books on science, mathematics, religion, philosophy, astronomy, medicine and some handmade copies of the holy Quran. In short, a civilisation of seven centuries was burnt to ashes, as the novelist puts it, “Everything written in Arabic was confiscated” (x). The novel demonstrates that after the reconquest of Granada, Queen Isabella with the aid of Catholic Church starts persecuting Muslims and Jews of the peninsula in order to consolidate her monarchy. The splendid culture of learning, tolerance, multiculturalism and secularism that existed in the Muslim Spain was completely destroyed by the Queen. “The novel manages to symbolise both the unique contribution of Arab culture and learning to Europe as well as the destruction of that learning at the hands of ‘civilised’ Christendom” (Ahmed).

The novel tells the story of al-Hudayl family, a rural upper-class Muslim family that lived in a small hamlet of Banu Hudayl built by their ancestor Hamza bin Hudayl in the tenth century. As the novel progresses, the Christian Inquisitors start revealing their malicious intentions against the inhabitants of the village and the family is apprehensive about their uncertain future in the peninsula. Their apprehensions are justified as the Church and the Queen have violated the surrender terms which guaranteed Muslims and the Jews of Granada their cultural and religious freedom as well as safety of their properties and businesses. Some of the inhabitants of the village prefer to embrace Christianity to protect their properties and family and not to fight or migrate. Their concerns are materialistic rather than religious.

*Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* is more than a historical novel. Like other postcolonial texts, it is an endeavor to challenge West’s use of ‘Orientalism’ against the East. Orientalism in Edward Said’s words is “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 03). In other words, it is the process of “othering” the people of the East so as to justify West’s colonisation of the East. Said argues that the knowledge constructed about the Orient is imagined rather than factual and this constructed knowledge describes Eastern societies as uncivilised, irrational, backward and ‘societies without culture and history.’ He further states that it is the literary and cultural artifacts as well as historical records produced during the colonial period that consolidate such knowledge. Therefore, the

primary task of a postcolonial writer is to re-examine all the socio-cultural texts generated throughout the colonial era, to contest West's prejudiced and partial discourse about the East and misrepresentation of it (the East). Tariq Ali in this novel, not only confronts West's hegemonic discourse about Muslims but also deconstructs it by reversing the binaries in favour of Muslims.

Unlike Christians, Muslims of the fifteenth century Spain had a very rational outlook towards religion. Tariq Ali in his book *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* writes "The attempt to reconcile reason and divine truth became an Andalusian specialty..." (37). The novel portrays Muslims as tolerant, secular and rational beings while as Christians are shown exhibiting religious bigotry and xenophobia. Not a single Muslim character in the novel is spiritually attached to their religion. Religion for them is just a cultural and linguistic identity. Besides Ama (who is a ritualistic), all other Muslim characters in the novel display liberal attitude towards Islam. Even Umar bin Abdullah, the head of Banu Hudayl family, thinks of converting to Christianity at some point in order to safeguard his family, property and their future from the horrendous Christian Inquisitors. His wife Zubayda and his daughter Hind are very unorthodox in the matters of religion. Zubayda fasts during Ramadhan not to purify her soul but to preserve her figure. This is evident when she talks to her husband, "Nobody knows better than you that I'm not a religious person even though I keep up pretence. I fast during Ramadhan to preserve [my] figure" (20). Zuhayr bin Umar who wants to drive the pagans (Christians) out of Granada, had at the beginning, very friendly outlook towards them. It is only when the Queen and her confessor Ximenes de Cisneros tried to erase and vandalise their rich culture and history that they resisted. Their fight was not against Christianity but against the Christian colonisers and their colonisation of the peninsula: "We are not people without history... We are Moorish knights defending what once belonged to us." (Ali 242).

Although the events described in the novel happened in the late fifteenth century and the novel was written much after the colonisation ended, *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* would still be considered as postcolonial literature. The authors of *Empire Writes Back* (2002), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths et al. define postcolonial literature as literature that "cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day" (2). The novel describes how after the reconquest of Moorish Spain, the opulent culture of learning is annihilated by the European colonial power and how Muslims and Jews are being persecuted by the Christian soldiers and are forced to leave what actually belonged to them. Before the reconquest, the followers of all the three religions lived in mutual peace in Muslim Spain and it benefited all of them until the Church and the Crown decided to destroy it for their political gains. In this way, the novel not only questions the Eurocentric discourse about Muslims but also deconstructs it by telling the alternate account of history exposing Christian bigotry and fanaticism.

Helen Tiffin in her article, 'Colonial Pretexts and Rites of Reply' maintains that the reversal of otherness and colonist stereotypes is a fundamental strategy towards "postcolonial recovery" (14) and this is what Tariq Ali accomplishes in *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*. He plays with the general European notions of the 'self' and the 'other', and replaces Muslims as 'the self' and Christians as 'the other' in his novel. This reversal of roles is better demonstrated by Yazid's Chess Set carved by Juan the Carpenter who is a Jew. The Chess set

in the novel symbolises the two cultures of Islam and Christianity where Muslims were given white colour and “their Queen [is] a noble beauty and her spouse a red-bearded monarch with blue eyes” (2). On the other hand, the Christians were not only black in colour but monsters, and their army “creatures of Inquisition in search for prey” (3).

Throughout the novel, the novelist provides Arabic and Muslim names of the places, historical personages, buildings and other important events instead of their English versions to show that these places and historical figures have their own historical importance rather than being of any marginal significance to Western historiography. For instance, the renowned Muslim thinkers and philosophers known to the world as Avicenna and Averroes are mentioned with their actual names Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd. Similarly, the places such as Cordoba, Granada and Seville are denoted as Qurtaba, Gharnata and Ishbiliya in the novel. A glossary is added at the end of the book that translates Arabic names into English to help the reader in keeping track of the context. Dasenbrock states, “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” (17). Tariq Ali’s use of Arabic names in place of their English ones is itself the rejection of colonial and Eurocentric terminology, signifying his “rereading and rewriting of the European records” (Tiffin et al. 96).

For many of us, analysing history through fiction seems a pointless task however, postcolonial writers invest their interest in fiction to question and destabilise colonial account of history. As Bishnupriya Ghosh writes, “the novel has borne the burden of history rather heavily in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries — often telling ‘in another place, another time’ those pasts that cannot be told or that are willfully buried” (19). The novel under study attempts to dig out the past and illustrates the crusading tendencies of the Christian Europe of the fifteenth century in a realistic way. In the novel, Ximenes de Cisneros is the face of Christian extremism and totalitarianism who was the main culprit behind burning of 195 libraries of Muslim culture. The narrator labels him as ‘Queen’s confessor’ and her proxy ruler, bestowing him with both the authorities of the Church and the Crown. His malicious ideology of intolerance finds place in the prologue of the novel itself. He believed “that the heathen [Muslims and Jews] could only be eliminated as a force if their culture was completely erased” (xii), and for Ximenes, the burning of books was a step forward in accomplishing this task. Not all the books and manuscripts were burnt, many of them (books related to medicine and astronomy and other sciences) were spared from burning and then sent to different parts of Europe and thus carved the path for ‘European Renaissance’. Klaus Stiersdorfer comments, “Ali’s shrewd move is to claim precedence in modernity and the virtues propounded by liberal humanism for the Islamic world” (154). The novelist’s claim that the Islamic culture heralded European Renaissance is a postcolonial way to discard West’s superiority over the East.

Another interesting element in Ali’s *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* is its portrayal of Muslim women characters. Ali’s women characters are strong and outspoken, rational and philosophical rather than what Oriental discourse views them as irrational and erotic. Stiersdorfer comments “Ali’s novels are full of independent-minded, strong women in direct opposition to today’s Islamic chauvinism” (154). This is affirmed by the characters of Zubayda and Hind in the novel. Zubayda, Umar’s wife, is an unorthodox and energetic woman who, thanks to her unconventional upbringing, bears a strong influence on her family

particularly her husband Umar. A staunch campaigner of women's rights, she is generous enough to let her daughter Hind celebrate her life with her newly found love Ibn Daud. She is determined that her daughter should live her life to the fullest rather than abide herself to "any strictly defined role in the household" (192). Hind on the other hand, proves to be the younger version of her mother. She, like her mother, is a freethinker, bold and brutally exuberant who does not shy away in arguing about certain unusual aspects of society even with the most learned men in the novel. While talking to Ibn Daud about existing social order, she pronounces her most powerful words in the novel: "The only true nobility I can accept is that conferred by talent. The worst thing in the world is that of ignorance. The preachers you seem to respect so much say that ignorance is woman's passport to paradise. I would rather the Creator banished me to hell." (184). The statements like these and characters like her denounces Oriental stereotyping of Muslim women as irrational, docile and erotic, and thus challenges West's misrepresentation of them.

The novel contains certain features of postmodern historiographic fiction in it. The postmodern historical fiction is mainly self-reflexive and in it "the past as referent [...] is incorporated and modified, given new and different life and meaning" (Hutcheon 182). It views monolithic history as fictive construction and privileges alternate histories (mini-narratives) over the so called 'objective History' (grand-narrative). Similarly, in *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*, the novelist's focus is to provide an alternate account of history that prefers individual responses about an incident over the conventional mode of historiography. It problematises the monolithic and dominant discourse about the past and provides a diverse, provisional and rather contradictory account of history by raising the marginalised characters to the fore in the narrative. The book is filled with the voices of those people who were typically silenced by the western historiographers while writing history. The outcome is a distinct interpretation of the past that has a significant impact on how things are structured and the conflicts that exist now. In the novel, historical figures and fictional characters cross paths in an attempt to give different perspectives to the western historiographers' otherwise totalising and prejudiced history of Muslim Spain. The novel while attempting to undermine European historical discourses, lauds the cultural supremacy of Muslims as the story ends on a note of Muslim moral victory.

The most recurrent and significant theme of the novel is the 'clash of civilisations' where one civilisation overthrows another. In their centuries old relationship, Islam and Christianity have often been seen in cultural confrontation. The hostility is rooted in Islam's overpowering of the Church as a strong political and military power in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Because Christianity has always treated Islam as a threat to its existence particularly when it annexed some parts of Syria and Spain in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D, it (Christianity) initiated Crusades in around 1095 so as to combat the expansion of Islam over Europe and other parts of the world. Karen Armstrong (2001) maintains that during Crusades 'religion was at its very worst' and gave rise to the eternal clash among three Abrahamic religions. The novel shows how a civilisation based on secularism, multiculturalism, tolerance and learning was destroyed by Christian crusaders for their political gains. The clash between the two civilisations according to the novelist is because of the West's mishandling and misinterpretation of Islam as a socio-political force. Ali refutes West's claim that Islam is the thing of the past and therefore is incapable to survive the present-day realities and argues that it is the Muslim culture that foreshadowed modernity in the world.

## Conclusion

The primary concern of this paper was to analyse *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* as a postcolonial text in which the novelist challenges and refutes colonial historiography by rewriting history from the perspective of colonised people. The novel employs certain postcolonial as well as postmodern writing strategies to construct a narrative that subverts the general western conceptions about the history and culture of the colonised 'other'. The juxtaposition of the two cultures of Muslims and Christians is used to illustrate Christian extremism and intolerance against a culturally rich, liberal and tolerant Muslim civilisation. In the novel, the orientalist construction of the West as civilised, tolerant, secular and morally superior against the East as uncivilised, ignorant and culturally inferior is not only challenged but dismantled as well. The novel also calls for yet another 'Convivencia' (a Spanish term for religious harmony and peaceful co-existence) where the three Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) live in harmony and peaceful coexistence and pave way for global peace.

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