

Vanity Bagh – A Vanity bag opened into a ‘Tiny Pakistan’ in India

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Abstract: Anees Salim’s *Vanity Bagh* is an enticing tale about a little mohalla in India, where the Muslim characters in the novel recount their past, while their life goes out of hands in the prison. The prison gives them time to ruminate about their past and their flaws, creating the narrative plot of the novel. The novel is set in the backdrop of a series of terrorist attacks, blasts and widespread Islamophobia.

Key words : Blasts, 9/11, Tiny Pakistan, gang, nation

Vanity Bagh, published in 2013 is the second novel by Anees Salim, the Malayali novelist writing in English. His other novels include *The Vicks Mango Tree*, *Tales from a Vending Machine*, *The Blind Lady’s Descendants*. The novel *Vanity Bagh* won the 2013 Hindu Literary Prize. The novel is about a mohalla in India named *Vanity Bagh*. “Inside every Indian city, there is a tiny Pakistan”. The mohalla is nicknamed “Little Pakistan”, attesting to the common cultural traditions which bind India and Pakistan. It could be the story of any Indian mohalla, any of the countless, “Little Pakistans” scattered over India. This adds to the universality of the novel. The men and women of *Vanity Bagh* are named after the rich and successful in Pakistan – Imran, Wazim, Benazir, Zia, Zulfikkar, Nawaz Sherrif...so run their names. The protagonist and the narrator of the novel is Imran Jabbari, the son of the local Imam, accused of terrorist activity and sentenced to fourteen years’ imprisonment. When we first see him, he has completed the first eighteen months of his fourteen year imprisonment. Imran is a great narrator with his delusions and self-amusing nature and the novel unveils through Imran’s solitary, retrospective musings and soliloquys in jail.

Inspired by the legend of Abu Hatim, the aging don of *Vanity Bagh*, Imran and his friends form a gang called “51/2 men”. They are hired to dispense a batch of stolen scooters. Imran and his friends, realize to their surprise that they were implicated in a terrorist act when

the city rocked with scooter bombs. The novel is the story of an aspiring gang getting into serious trouble doing petty small gang stuff. It is a dark comic tale, giving a bitter picture of the prison life filled with melancholy and abuse. An innovative narrative technique used by Salim is the use of quotes interspersed throughout the novel, which enables him to bring in more characters, thus widening the canvas of the novel. Imran's conversation with the researcher is striking. "Such a coincidence that all tragic days have an eleven to it? The 11/11 was not a coincidence. It was so that history would be easy to remember in numbers as simple as the multiplication table of one". The novel satirizes the rampant Islamophobia. When the researcher comes to know of Imran's father being a priest, he wonders whether he was the type of person who would appreciate terrorist activity. Imran is frequently subjected to the question "what do they teach you at the madrassa?" and he gives a hilarious reply that "madrassas teach you what they are supposed to. The Holy Quran and nothing more." The probe against celebrations in Vanity Bagh when Pakistan won over England shows how deep Islamophobia and jingoism are rooted.

The narrative is structured in such a way that Imran miraculously reads his flashback at Vanity Bagh from the plain pages of a notebook in prison. This is where Anees Salim employs magic realist features in the novel. The narration follows a stream of consciousness pattern, scattered and disordered. The oppressive prison life is portrayed in detail in the novel. Inter-block contacts are forbidden and inmates are not allowed to collect possessions even from relatives while the wardens freely indulge in extortion and fleecing, even as cameras watch the prisoners round the clock. The novel presents both sides of a divide: youth turning to terrorism on the one hand and the Imam of the local mosque hoisting the national flag. The narrative turns into political satire at many places where the system is made fun of and even a politically sensitive event like the assassination of Benazir Bhutto trivialized. Imran relates his life with films; when the life of the 51/2 men go down on luck, he relates it to the sinking of the Titanic. The novel gives the reader visions of horror when those men who were "scared of even those tiny ten per rupee crackers" are used as agents for the serial blasts.

A vision that constantly recurs to Imran is a calendar without the eleventh month, where October fuses into December. This is his unconscious desire to wipe off the black month from his life. Imran's world is a microcosm of the semi-urban India- the religious skirmishes, the joys, the sorrows, the politics, the underworld, Indo-Pak cricket matches and many more. The question of partition, religion, economic disparity, gender, pornography, homosexuality, politics, Indian history, motherhood, justice, fate and the notion of crime are all problematized by the novel.

The title of the novel itself is a word play. The novel opens the vanity bag to reveal the vanities of a Bagh, to reveal many lives unheard and unthinkable of and explores the life and foibles of everyday characters. The novel has its share of dark humour. However, the optimistic

tone that emerges from the satire enables Salim to make critical social commentary. The word play in the title is continued in the narration. The tone of the novel makes it a light read though it tells a bleak story. The deceptively light narration creates intricate sketches of everyday Indian lives. The novel, though lags initially, picks up speed and soon becomes un-put-down-able. Halfway through the novel, the reader begins to empathize with Imran Jabbari, in spite of the fact that he is a criminal, convicted of terrorist activity. To quote AneesSalim, “the book is not about hope, it is about hopelessness. More than anything else, it is about distress and religious intolerance that can divide humanity and win elections”.