



*Review Article*

## **The Oriental Phobia: A Postcolonial Reading of *The Thing About Thugs***

Mustafa Büyükgebiz<sup>1</sup>  
Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University  
mustafa.buyukgebiz@alanya.edu.tr

### **APA Citation:**

Büyükgebiz, M. (2019). The Oriental Phobia: A Postcolonial Reading of *The Thing About Thugs*. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, 7(12), 106-112.

---

### **Abstract**

European Enlightenment created such categories as ‘civilized vs. uncivilized’ or ‘west vs. non-west’. With European colonial expansion, these ideas were identified, expanded and reworked. Colonial enterprises of European nations generated stereotypes of outsiders and some characteristics were attributed to these groups of ‘others’ such as laziness, aggression, violence, greed, sexual promiscuity, bestiality, primitivism, innocence and irrationality\*. Thus, postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha refer to the colonized as the colonial other. Tabish Khair mainly focuses on some of widely debated subjects of Postcolonial Literary Theory such as otherness, identity and discontent in colonized cultures. In this sense, his novels provide a perfect basis to analyse and understand the psychology of the colonized immigrants and their discontent. To put it in a nutshell, with the help of postcolonial studies, this paper will study the concepts of discontent, anarchy, otherness, and ethnic and religious terror by focusing on the “colonized” characters appeared in Tabish Khair’s 2010 novel; *The Thing About Thugs*. By the same token, theoretical and narrative reflections of postcolonialism will be explored in the novel.

**Keywords:** *Postcolonialism, otherness, discontent, discrimination*

---

Through the history of mankind, there have always been oppressors and oppressed. According to Marxist understanding of class and race, the struggle is inevitable and the story of mankind has been shaped by these clashes of societies and social classes. Marx and Engels referred to this situation in *The Communist Manifesto* by pointing out that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx & Engels, 2018). In this respect, it is also sensible to hold the issue of postcolonial discontents from a Marxist point of view. However, Marxism is sometimes seen as insufficient to understand race and gender oppressions since it mostly focuses on class distinctions and analyses them by means of production and reproduction. Thus, Race, Gender and Class (RGC) studies widen this perspective and make it

---

<sup>1</sup> Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University, School of Foreign Languages, Kestel Campus, 07450, Antalya, Turkey.

available to analyse racial and gender oppressions from a Marxist point of view, and it is believed that “it would contribute to raise awareness about the reality and the importance of class and the extent to which neither racial nor gender oppression can be understood in isolation from the realities of class exploitation” (Gimenez, 2001)

In this respect, the aim of this article is to analyse Tabish Khair’s *The Thing about Thugs* and *Night of Happiness* in terms of class conflict, colonial and postcolonial representations of class identity and identity crisis by referring to specific quotations from the novels and theoretical discussions about the issue. *The Thing about Thugs* will be read from the perspectives of racial and class identities and racial otherness. The work will also refer to some theoretical issues like how class and racial identities are constructed by tracing supports and evidences in the aforementioned novel.

*The Thing about Thugs*, which was first published in 2010, is a novel set in the late-Victorian London. The narration of the novel constitutes a series of notes and writings by the characters. The plot story begins in a Bihari village in the colonized lands of ‘Hindoostan’. Captain T. Meadows searches for local men with skull deficiencies to develop his phrenological researches back home in England and comes across with Amir Ali, an exposed member of a Thugee cult. Amir Ali changes his identity and pretends to be a Thug to escape from family enemies.

Thugee is an ancient traditional way of robbing wealthy travellers in the vast lands of India by winning their trust and offering shelter. It has its own customs that are passed on to sons from fathers. It appears to the colonial forces as an opportunity to legalize their claims about the inferior and savage nature of the colonized and they use it to prove their superiority by using so-called scientific methods of phrenology, or the study of human skull and its effects on human behavioural attitudes in other words.

In the nineteenth century -when the novel’s plot is also set - the dominant scientific theory of studying biology was Lamarckian that is “based on the assumption that organisms actively adapt to their environments by acquiring characteristics (both physical and behavioural) that over a period of time become inherited” (Paul, 1981). This out-of-fashion scientific tendency of the nineteenth century should be taken into account seriously since it is vital to understand racial attitudes of the time and how they legitimize racism. These Lamarckian assumptions on acquiring physical and behavioural characteristics propose that people and communities living in both cultural and natural ‘poor’ environments are destined to pass this ‘poverty’ on their next generations. Thus, over centuries, these communities face biological degenerations that reflect their cultural and natural poverty. This nineteenth century assumption leads us to the idea that “a consistent Lamarckian interpretation implied that all deprived populations, including the proletariat, would be genetically lamed” (Paul, 1981).

In the novel, Lamarckism shows itself in the form of a pseudoscientific branch; phrenology. It became quite popular as ‘a new scientific branch’ through the first half of the nineteenth century and “since 1823, the number of phrenological societies had grown from one to twenty-four” (Parssinen, 1974: 1). There was a strong enthusiasm among upper-class and young scholars of the time. The reason of such enthusiasm may be hidden in the description of phrenology.

The basis of phrenology is the belief that psychological characteristics of an individual are determined by the size and proportion of controlling organs in the brain. A person with a highly-developed 'veneration' organ, for example, will probably be extremely religious. Furthermore, the size of these organs can be discovered by noting the shape of the skull and, especially, any protuberances, since

the cranium corresponds closely to the shape of the brain beneath. Consequently, an individual's character can be discovered from a careful examination of his head. (Parssinen, 1974)

This new type of science was a perfect opportunity to prove the inferiority of the colonized. The need for scientific proof on barbarism of the colonized and the aim of legalizing colonial oppression lead the colonizer to examine the skull samples of mostly colonized criminals. Today, there are various different skull samples in the Medical School of the University of Edinburgh and 'among the skulls are seven from India, which were originally presented to the Edinburgh Phrenological Society in 1833' (Wagner, 2010). Wagner expresses that these skulls are labelled as 'Thug', which means that they were accused of being criminals in colonial times, executed by the colonial authority and their skulls were brought to be analysed for their deficiencies (Wagner, 2010).

Khair refers to this fact in the beginning of the novel. Lord Batterstone, who is from 'the Society' and the villain of the novel, buys skulls with deficiency from a middle-class man, John May. He is particularly interested in extraordinary-shaped skulls and willing to pay high amounts for them. 'But I need the, ahem, the top of the Thing before the next meeting of my Society, ready to be exhibited. Do you understand? Ready to be exhibited and demonstrated, and as exceptional as you have made me believe' (Khair, 2012)

From the quotation above, the reader understands that they refer to the skulls as 'the Thing' in the novel which also represents the ignored identity of the owner of the skulls. Throughout the novel, there are various examples reflecting the colonizers' attitudes towards the colonized. Lower class people – especially from different nations and mostly from the colonies- are seen as objects rather than individuals.

Amir Ali, the protagonist of the novel, is brought to London from his homeland by Captain Meadows as a phrenological research subject since the shape of his skull is not proper, which means that he is a proof of racial inferiority. Also, Captain Meadows is willing to write about the Thugee cult in India and Amir Ali introduces himself to Captain Meadows as an ex-Thug. He seems to be comfortable with the idea that he is destined to be a criminal and accept that he is inferior while talking to Captain Meadows.

Amir Ali knows he will be a research subject in Lord Batterstone's The London Society of Phrenology, and he is exhibited various times there as a 'living skull'. Except these exhibitions, he tells his background to Captain Meadows as a Thug.

It is not only phrenology in the novel that reflects race discrimination and colonial understanding, but also race and class distinctions are clearly pointed out by Khair. Various dialogues and monologues in the novel assert that racist attitudes of the time are accepted both by the colonizer and the colonized. In a conversation between Major Greyper and Captain Meadows, Major states that it is a hopeless activity to civilize the colonized people. Captain Meadows trusts Amir Ali as an ex-Thug and he feels that Amir Ali regrets his past cruelties and tries to be a civilized man. He criticizes Captain Meadows about his trust to Amir Ali and says that it is too dangerous to keep him in his house. At the end of the conversation, by referring to Amir Ali, he says 'Leopards and spots, you know, leopards and spots...' (Khair, 2012).

Lord Batterstone has also the same attitude towards other races. In his Society, he tries to convince people about the inferiority and cruelty of Asian people by giving so-called scientific and also religious evidences. He asserts that God's workmanship is slight in creation of human,

and strongly denies the idea that a Caucasian shares the ancestor with a lower class Negro. He argues that the brain and its organic quality are different in every race. Races cannot be in same quality and some of them are destined to be inferior.

In the novel, race discrimination is seen in all levels of society, not only in upper-class. The lower-class working people of the society also discriminate other colonized races. Nelly Clennam, the cook in Captain Meadows's house, apparently reflects her hate towards Amir Ali because of his race and background as a Thug. She says that 'it would be said by many that to harbour a nigger, lordey, a cannibal in the kitchen was not only a danger but an act of verging on the unchristian...' (Khair, 2012). Although she is a lower-class servant, she sees Amir Ali inferior than herself because of his race.

In the Nineteenth Century, it is only possible for the people who belong to Western upper-class society to have a stable and accepted identity. Wherever they go in 'the Empire', they are always regarded as lords and gentlemen. However, it is not that easy for other community members to preserve their social titles. Amir Ali is one of these noblemen of the Orient. He is mostly called out as 'nawabzada' by the people from his homeland. In a letter of Amir Ali to Jenny, Haldi Ram shows his respect to him as a nobleman of India by saying that 'Forgive us for interrupting your journey, not even providing you with a decent breakfast, for what can we poor people serve to a gentleman like you, son of the noble Syed Zahid Ali sahib, nephew of the learned and gracious Mustapha Ali sahib' (Khair, 2012: 52). Without any evidence or witness, Amir Ali is seen as the savage beheader, or 'the Head Cannibal' with their words. Daniel Oates, a newspaper agent in London, grows suspicious of Amir Ali just by commenting on his physical appearance. He says 'I must confess that with his pointy moustache, flowing tresses and dark, shifty eyes, he looks the very part of a vindictive murderer, a practitioner of barbarous, unspeakable rites' (Khair, 2012: 91). The main reason of this easy condemnation lies in class consciousness of the society. Gimenez states that '[...] it is likely that, whatever individuals' conception of who they *really* are might be, their behaviour is routinely interpreted in different terms by their peers and by those who are located high in the hierarchical structure, in position that give them the power to make decisions affecting other people's lives' (Gimenez, 2001).

Major Greyper has also the same attribution towards foreigners. As it is discussed in the previous pages, phrenology is a tool to build a colonial other and make it accepted by the society by using science. However, there is no need to have such a scientific proof to identify a criminal according to Major Greyper. Khair asserts that

Major Greyper had nothing against phrenology, but he did not need to feel the skull of a man to know whether he was a criminal: you could tell from any scoundrel's background, language, gait, clothes, eyes, from so many things. Criminality always revealed itself: only the blind refused to see it. (Khair, 2012)

These racial preconceptions are repeated in various concepts throughout the novel. People create an Oriental monster in their fantasies and one of the examples of this situation is Amir Ali's walking on the streets of London with his elaborate Indian dress 'with a turban and a flashy cummerbund over his kurta and angarkha' (Khair, 2012). Amir does not feel comfortable with this dress on the streets because 'once, a group of drunken youths who besieged and berated Amir Ali for being an Oriental despot who kept women like cattle in his harem' (Khair, 2012).

However, there are not only blacks and whites in this issue. There is also a 'grey area' where Marxist class consciousness shows itself. Amir Ali's Oriental appearance may be seen as a

thread but its elaborate style, which separates him from other lascars and poor immigrants, sometimes leads to confusion. When Amir Ali dresses firmly, he sometimes – but not so often – gets different reactions from people. This is what the reader experiences when Amir comes across a policeman on the street on his way back from a meeting in the London Society of Phrenology, after being exhibited as a living skull. Khair expresses the confusion of the policeman when he sees Amir Ali with an elaborate Indian dressing, which Gunga exaggerates by saying he has been ‘adopted by the Queen of England’ (Khair, 2012). It is a moment of hesitation for the policeman about how to react.

The policeman walks past in his blue frockcoat. Solid and dour, he eyes Amir Ali ambivalently, unable to choose between his natural deference for rich clothing and a native suspicion of foreigners. At the last moment, he tips his hat to Amir, and Amir reciprocates with a low, very Oriental, very ornamental bow. (Khair, 2012)

This ‘moment of hesitation’ also directs us to the fact that the culture of discrimination is not only on the level of race. The main source of it is certainly the social class conflict. John May and Lord Batterstone meet in a bar for their secret skull trade in the beginning of the novel. Both May and Batterstone are white Englishmen. However, their class difference is so obvious that Khair narrates this fact by focusing on May’s unsteady accent. While he talks to Batterstone, who is ‘a gentleman from birth and by deportment’, ‘John May, who had spoken rather clear English to the barman, apologizes in an accent burdened by the inferiority of some impossible-to-identify dialect’ (Khair, 2012).

The same John May, who is portrayed as an inferior in his conversation with Batterstone, slowly transforms into a gentleman while he is walking through the poorer sides of the city. Khair criticizes this transformation with his mocking narration. He describes the streets May walks through, and refers to the poor people on the streets as ‘bundled figures’. They are trying to avoid the attention of a patrolling policeman, ‘whose job it is to ensure that those who have houses sleep secure in their possessions – which may only be done by evicting from the city limits those who do not have houses’ (Khair, 2012).

Except John May’s miserable efforts to climb the stairs of the social strata, Khair also gives a clear description of Lord Batterstone’s unquestionable charisma and authority on the same page, letting the reader compare the sharp difference between him and John May. After the meeting of the two, Batterstone leaves there with a ‘smart fly’ ‘pulled by a horse that is conscious of its superiority on these streets’. He does not need to transform according to the place since ‘he remains what he is everywhere’ unlike the lower classes of the novel. His superiority is apparent ‘in the cut of his clothes, the tone of his voice, the fashion of his views, in the very colour of the blood that pulses through his veins and has pulsed through the veins of his ancestors for twelve generations, all bearing with absolute conviction the self knowledge of one family name and many honorary titles’ (Khair, 2012).

Another occasion that the reader feels the steel blade of class conflict in the novel is Lord Batterstone’s speech in the Society. Although the speech is full of racism and unproven, dogmatic ideas even for white Englishman members, nobody in this ‘scientific’ atmosphere dares to object Lord Batterstone. Captain Meadows, known for his opposing ideas, is thinking of objecting for a fraction of a second, but he quickly changes his opinion. It is really risky to object to an upper-class nobleman as a middle class gentleman.

When we look at all these racial and class distinctions from a wider scope, it is also possible to add that immigrants are oppressed because upper-class members of the society have their

reasons of their colonial gains, and lower and middle-class people need to oppress to leave aside their social inferiority by proposing another subaltern. Daniel Oates provides a perfect example to this situation as a character in the novel. He is one of the few people who criticizes and discriminates immigrants in London with great enthusiasm. Khair reveals the reason of it in his work.

The world of Captain Meadows and Major Greyper and other such born gentlemen. The world that has allowed him entry, though only through a side-gate. But he is a defender of that world; he defends it with the fanaticism of the new convert. (Khair, 2012)

All these racial and class discriminations allow us to analyse colonial representations of identity. By focusing on the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, colonial stereotypes and identities can be unfolded. As it is discussed in the previous chapter, colonial discourse reshapes the identity of the other as barbaric, ignorant and strange, and this identity is considered as something which is outside the western culture and world. This understanding of colonial subject both creates otherness and also a threat for western hegemony.

The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is also quite complex in the novel. This complex relationship is perpetually pointed out by Khair mostly in the dialogues between Captain Meadows and Amir Ali. The tone of superiority is deeply felt in the sentences of Captain Meadows. Especially, in the beginning of the novel, he is the true representative of colonial prejudices.

Some colonized subjects show complicit tendencies while some of them resist being colonized. However, colonial discourse must supply a single frame for all colonized subjects to create a stereotype. The dense and varied cultures of the colonized lands do not mean much for the colonizer. All aspects of these cultures have the same quality that they are uncivilized and cruel. There is nothing to learn from these cultures since western knowledge is enough to discover and understand everything. Captain Meadows expresses his feelings about the cruelty of these cultures in his speech to Amir Ali. He says 'Reason is not a tyrannical God like Allah, or a bloodthirsty demon like Bhowanee; Reason does not speak in my ears but gives me ears to listen with' (Khair, 2012).

Captain Meadows is not the only person who expresses colonial prejudices in the novel. As it is stated above, Daniel Oates has also strong prejudgements about the Orient. He suggests that 'the Orientals are a sensitive and excitable race, and mental exaltation is not only very common, it usually borders on insanity' (Khair, 2012). Western Orientalists develop prejudices about the Orient as Oriental cultures are ignorant, weak, barbaric, and in need of being ruled by the superior culture of the Occident. With the help of the global monologic atmosphere, the Occident defines the Orient from a narrow point of view and bends the truth. There are two things important in evaluating a knowledge related to the Orient; its credibility and service to colonial deeds. For this reason, Amir Ali states that 'truth and credibility are two different things most of the time' (Khair, 2012).

It is mostly stated by Edward Said and other critics of Oriental studies that there is a mystified image of the Orient in colonial and postcolonial discourses. The West is always interested in conceptualizing Eastern cultures with exotic and romantic themes. The main reason of this tendency is to picture the Orient as something related to the past and history. It is satisfying for the westerners to see the Oriental cultures being stuck in the past and have nothing to do with modernity and civilized West. By doing this, the Occident corroborates its superiority over the

Orient since modern and civilized West cannot be compared to the underdeveloped and uncivilized Orient (Said, 1978).

This clash between the appearance and reality may also be observed in colonized identities. It is really hard for these people to build consistent identities since they struggle between what they really are and what they are expected to be by the society. The case of Amir Ali and his story as an ex-Thug stand for a good example to this clash in the novel. Khair uses the letters of Amir to Jenny as a tool to reveal Amir's psychology as an immigrant, and in one of these letters, Amir confesses his real purpose of claiming to be a Thug. He says he sometimes feel guilty because he intentionally fools Captain Meadows with his invented memories. However, he also adds 'I would not say I have lied to him, for I have told him what he wanted to hear' (Khair, 2012). Just like his exaggerated style of dressing aforementioned earlier, his memories are also garnished especially for Captain Meadows. He describes the situation as a mutual profit because he says 'the barter was fair enough: He got his Thug; I got my revenge' (Khair, 2012). Thanks to his invented story, he makes Captain Meadows report his family's murderers as the Thugs to the authorities, and the Company arrest them before they know it.

In *The Thing about Thugs*, Khair gives us a clear social portrait of the time by focusing on colonial deeds of the western society. This colonial atmosphere leads to several sociologic and individual problems. What makes *The Thing about Thugs* significant as an anti-colonial text is that 'Khair employs some metafiction and uses multiple perspectives to offer a broad social critique of the era's class and race divisions' (Singh, 2013). Hence, the colonial effects on society are better understood.

## References

- Gamez-Fernandez, Cristina M, ve O. P. DWIVEDI, (2014) *Tabish Khair: Critical Perspectives*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Gimenez, Martha E, (2001) "Marxism, and Class, Gender, and Race: Rethinking the Trilogy." *Race, Gender & Class*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 23–33.
- Khair, Tabish, (2012), *The Thing about Thugs*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Marx, Karl, ve F. ENGELS, (2018), *The Communist Manifesto*. Clydesdale Press.
- Mondal, Anindita. "Postcolonial Theory: Bhabha and Fanon." *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, vol. 3, no. 11, Nov. 2014, pp. 2965.
- Parssinen, T. M., (1974), "Popular Science and Society: The Phrenology Movement in Early Victorian Britain" *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 8, No: 1, 1-20.
- Paul, Diane, (1981), "In the Interests of Civilization': Marxist Views of Race and Culture in the Nineteenth Century." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 115-138.
- Said, Edward. W., (1978), *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Singh, Varsha, (2013), "The Midnight's Grandchildren: Articulating the Postmodern Spirit in English Fiction of India Analyzing Tabish Khair's *The Thing About Thugs*." *The Criterion An International Journal in English*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1–5.
- Wagner, K. A, (2010), "Confessions of a Skull: Phrenology and Colonial Knowledge in Early Nineteenth-Century India." *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 69, No. 1, 27-51