National Allegory and *The Murder of Aziz Khan*

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyze The Murder of Aziz Khan and to establish how effectively it addresses the socio-political concerns of the newly born Pakistan. Moreover, the novel needs to be read as a national allegory in a specific way. However, from its reading, it is clear that national allegories need not be directly about colonialism. Therefore, the novel substantiates Jameson's notion of "national allegory" only in part, and pushes back the notion by escaping the discussion about colonialism.

Keywords: *National allegory, Pakistan, Zulfikar Ghose, Jameson, Aijaz Ahmad, Capitalism.*

Zulfikar Ghose is an expatriate Pakistani writer whose work holds a problematic position in postcolonial studies. His conscious disavowal of very much in vogue colonial and postcolonial politics in literature cost him readership and critical attention that he otherwise deserves. In his book, *The Art of Creating Fiction* (1991), he asserts that "art is not an Equal Opportunity Employer" (p. 155). It seems that Ghose negates postcolonial realities which constitute much of the postcolonial literature. However, from his early writings it appears that he is not apolitical. His early writings deal with socio-political issues rather blatantly. His second novel, *The Murder of Aziz Khan* (1967; hereinafter cited as *Aziz Khan*), is a testimony to this assertion. The novel remains a major work of art in the history of Pakistani literature in English, and highlights, apart from other concerns, the tension between centuries old peasantry and the newly emerging bourgeoisie in Pakistan.

Before coming to the novel, I will discuss Fredric Jameson's notion of national allegory. Before making his case for 'national allegory,' Jameson highlights an important issue of the western mindset toward a foreign cultural production. He argues:

"The way in which all this affects the reading process seems to be as follows: as western readers whose tastes (and much else) have been formed by our own modernisms, a popular or socially realistic third-world novel tends to come before us, not immediately, but as though already-read. We sense, between ourselves and this alien text, the presence of another reader, of the Other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as conventional or naïve, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share. The fear and the resistance I'm evoking has to do, then, with the sense of our own non-coincidence with that Other reader, so different from ourselves; our sense that to

coincide in any adequate way with that Other reader "ideal reader" –that is to say, to read this text adequately—we would have to give up a great deal that is individually precious to us and acknowledge an existence and a situation unfamiliar and therefore frightening—one that we do not know and prefer not to know". (2000, p. 317)

In this passage, Jameson highlights ambivalence on the part of the western reader of the so-called third world cultural production. In other words, he underlines the familiarity and the difference that a third world novel evokes in the western reader. In short, Jameson is fully aware of the Western mindset shaped over time due to "modernisms" about the cultural products of a foreign land. Therefore, he argues that western readers need to unlearn and give up preconceived notions about a "third-world" text to appreciate it.

Apart from the responsibility of a western reader toward a "third-world text" proposed by Jameson, he is not oblivious to the dilemma of the "third-world" cultures that is the dependence on the "first world" or the West:

"One important distinction would seem to impose itself at the outset, namely that none of these cultures can be conceived as anthropologically independent or autonomous, rather, they are all in various distinct ways locked in a life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism—a cultural struggle that is itself a reflexion of the economic situation of such areas in their penetration by various stages of capitalism, or as it is sometimes euphemistically termed, of modernization". (2000, pp. 318-19)

This is an important observation by Jameson, the modernization and the cultural imperialism is so intertwined in the former colonies that it becomes really difficult to achieve an independent cultural outlook. Interestingly, this phenomenon can be substantiated from the novel *Aziz Khan*; a situation occurs at the Kalapur Club, the Shah brothers' pretensions reveal it all: "band was trying to imitate Xavier Cugat," later paying "tribute to Lawrence Welk," eventually changing to "a medley inspired by the General Overseas Services of the BBC," finally giving homage to Voice of America (pp. 45-49). Here all efforts seem to adopt western cultural practices—the pretentiousness of being modern.

Jameson after establishing the ideas of western mindset about the "third-world" text; the cultural dependence of the post colonial societies on the West; the meddling of private and public lives in the postcolonial novels, so on and so forth leads himself to say that:

"All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even

when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. Let me try to state this distinction in a grossly oversimplified way: one of the determinants of capitalist culture, that is, the culture of the western realist and modernist novel, is a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power: in other words, Freud versus Marx". (2000, p. 319)

Jameson's assumptions such as cultural dependence, modes of production and modernization about the "third-world" are not necessarily untrue. Furthermore, it is not untrue that there are no exclusive domains of "the public and the private" in a "thirdworld" text. However, it seems that on the basis of these assumptions he formulates a wrong conclusion that "all third-world texts…are to be read *national allegories*. In other words, his interesting observations, such as cultural dependence or modernization, can be substantiated by the "third-world" texts Such as *Aziz Khan* but you cannot read it as a national allegorical text.

Aijaz Ahmad, a major postcolonial theorist, is a strong critic of the idea of *national allegory* and offers his critique based in the literary and cultural history of the post colonial societies:

"In declaring nationalism to be the main political imperative of our era, the theoretical positions of 'Third World Literature' and Colonial Discourse Analysis' would tend to subvert, with overt intent or not, the rich history of our oppositional and radical cultural productions, which have more often than not come out of communist political practice and, more broadly, from inside a political culture deeply marked by Marxism. What we need to do is to build vastly better knowledges on the basis of that heritage; to revert, instead, from the Marxist critique of class, colony and empire to the emptiness of a Third-Worldist nationalism is politically and theoretically a regression". (1992, p. 44)

Ahmad wants us to understand the indigenous cultural resistance against any sort of imperialism, local and foreign bourgeoisie. This is evident that he warns us against the paradigm of nationalism as the basis for the critique of a "thirdworld text." We also realize that somehow the deeply Marxist resistance embedded in these text could not develop a narrative; and (in the West)the cultural movements characterized by Marxism were ignored.He further argues:

"…this issue of the literary representation of colony and empire in Euro-American literary discourses was posed in the US academy, from the beginning, not from Marxist positions but in response to nationalist pressures, so that the

subsequent theorizing of the subject, even when undertaken by Marxists, proceeded from the already-existing nationalist premises and predispositions". (1992, p. 62)

Here Ahmad highlights the dilemma of the Euro-US academy saying that it did not allow the genuine Marxist position as a critical base for the interpretation of the "third-world" texts. It is, in fact, the pressure of the nationalist movements like the Black movement in the United States in the 1960s which provided a substantial ground to theorize the more complicated "third-world" situation and its literary production. Moreover, I would tend to believe that to discard Marxism in favor of metropolis postmodern and postcolonial critique of the "third-world" culture and literature is an easy way to get away with the more complex issues pertaining to the postcolonial societies.

Ahmad further claims that there are many literary texts that do not fit in the idea of national allegory. Thus, he concludes that all "third-world" texts should not be read as national allegories, he maintains:

"Third World Literature, that not to take him literally is to violate the very terms of his discourse. Yet one knows of so many texts from one's own part of the world which do not fit the description of 'national allegory' that one wonders why Jameson insists so much on the category, 'all'. Without this category, of course, he cannot produce a theory of Third World Literature. But is it also the case that he means the opposite of what he actually says: not that 'all third-world texts are to be read…as national allegories' but that only those texts which give us national allegories can be admitted as authentic texts of Third World Literature, while the rest are by definition excluded? So one is not quite sure whether one is dealing with a fallacy ('all third-world texts are' this or that) or with the Law of the Father (you must write this if you are to be admitted into my theory)". (1992, p. 107)

Here Ahmad disapproves the idea of national allegory, and points out that without this idea the theory of "Third World Literature" would not have been produced. This means that Ahmad attacks on the dilemma of theoretical practices dominated by the West and its politics of admission and exclusion of the "third-world texts" in the western literary canon—in other words, the patronization of the "third-world" literature.

Discussing the postcolonial novels, Ahmad argues that they are mostly concerned with "the barbarity of feudal landowners, the rapes and murders in the houses of religious 'mystics', the stranglehold of moneylenders upon the lives of peasants and the lower petty bourgeoisie, the social and sexual frustrations of schoolgirls, and so on" (p. 118). Here, it does not mean that the

novels of the postcolonial world completely escape the issue of colonialism, its echoes are there. However, colonialism does not remain the primary concern of these texts. Ahmad further asserts his position in an almost irrefutable brilliant passage:

"In fact, I do not know of any fictional narrative in Urdu, in roughly the last two hundred years, which is of any significance and any length (I am making an exception for a few short stories here) in which the issue of colonialism or the difficulty of a civilizational encounter between the English and the Indian has the same primacy as, for example, in Forster's A Passage to India or Paul Scott's The Raj Quartet. The typical Urdu writer has had a peculiar vision, in which he or she has never been able to construct fixed boundaries between the criminalities of the colonialist and the brutalities of all those indigenous people who have had power in our own society. We have had our own hysterias here and there—far too many, in fact—but there has never been a sustained, powerful myth of a primal innocence, when it comes to the colonial encounter". (1992, p. 118)

The above assertion is fundamentally significant to understand the fact that the colonial and postcolonial literary trends (especially in the context of the in the continent of India) are very different than what generally are assumed in terms of binaries such as nationalism/imperialism, colonizer/colonized, and local/foreign. The literature of the time deals more with the social issues and immediate concerns than anything else. Even after the Independence of the sub-continent and the emergence of India and Pakistan—the hysteria of nationalism versus imperialism is hard to find in the fictions of 1950s and 1960s:

"The major fictions of the 1950s and 1960s … came out of that refusal to forgive what we ourselves had done and were still doing, in one way or another, to our own polity. No quarter was given to the colonialist; but there was none for ourselves either. One could speak, in a general sort of way, of 'the nation' in this context, but not of 'nationalism'. In Pakistan, of course, there was another, overriding doubt: were we a nation at all? Most of the left wing, I am sure, said 'No'". (Ahmad, 1992, p. 119)

The partition of the sub-continent India was one of the bloodiest events in human history—ten million people migrated across the border, and approximately one million were killed: the event became a subject matter of the literature produced at/around that time and later still. The disgust against the sad events of the partition badly affected the men of letters. In the following sentence by Zulfikar Ghose from his autobiography *Confessions of a Native –Alien* (1965), one notices the pathos, and un-forgivingness of what the Indians (Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs) did to each other, he recollects: [in Bombay] "Walking down the street in the morning, one would find the hacked limbs of a man lying

on the pavement. Lorries collecting dead bodies would pass by the streets as though they were collecting garbage cans" (p. 31). Those impressions of "India's most tragic years" in which communal violence was at its peak and "left behind the taint of sin on all of us." That is why Ghose says, "I have hated religion" (1965, p. 32). Therefore, yes, no attention was paid to the subject of colonialism; and most of the writers, both in India and Pakistan, have tried to address the subject of partition as well as ever present sociopolitical frustrations: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Bapsi Sidwah's, *Ice Candy Man*, and Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* are testimony to this.

With this background, I move towards Ghose's (1935-) *Aziz Khan*, situating the novel in the over-all context of the above debate. In the following discussion, I will try to show that the novel is concerned with the local exploitation and completely evades colonialism. To be precise, I argue that, to use Aijaz Ahmad's phrase, what we have done "to our own polity."

Claire Tomalin, one of the reviewers of the novel says that it is written "in the best manner of an English nineteenth-century novel" (1967, p. 27). Here she is referring to the realistic mode of the nineteenth century novel. Tariq Rahman, a Pakistani literary critic turned linguist, writes in *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* (1991) that the novel is "the only important work of fiction representing the social reality of the emergence of primitive capitalism in Pakistan in the nineteen sixties" (p. 102). With the imposition of martial law by the self proclaimed Field Marshal Muhammad Ayub Khan in 1958, bourgeoisie started rising in Pakistan. Rahman posits:

"Muhammad Ayub Khan, the general turned dictator, had created a transient phase of political stability in which military and other elites became affluent and consumerism could flourish. Taking advantage of this change in the psyche of the middle class, a number of industrialists started producing goods for local consumption. The textile industry was among the first to come up. The rural areas of Lyallpur (now Faisalabad) and the area between Lahore and Multan passed into the hands of industrialists. About these industrial changes—it can hardly be called a revolution—there is no work of imagination either in Urdu or English which can compare in quality with Aziz Khan". (1991, p. 184)

This passage provides an overview of the socio-political developments in Pakistan, and establishes *Aziz Khan* as a representative work of literature of the time.

Aziz Khan, the major character in the novel, owns some seventy acres of the land in Kalapur. The Shah brothers, Akram, Ayub, and Afaq are building their cotton industry and have set to destroy Aziz Khan to capture his land. If we look

at the troika of the Shah brothers, it is interesting how effectively they operate. The eldest, Akram, tricks people by giving them money to establish the industry, whereas, Ayub, the second one, keeps a check on the worker's union and gets successful by destroying the union, and Afaq, the youngest of all exploits women. So, these characters speak of how the industrial elite brings havoc through trickery and exploits workers and women. Interestingly the troika of the Shah brothers is representative of the famous troika of the Pkistani system—Mullah Military alliance, Civil Bureaucracy, and Politicians. Robert Ross's evaluation is thought provoking:

"…the three Shah brothers and their families represent the new Pakistan: the men arrogant, greedy, dishonest, conniving violent, blasphemous; the women silly, grasping, frustrated, bored. They violate the sanctity of the land by first literally destroying its ancient contours, then symbolically severing the subtle relationship between it and themselves". (p. 200)

The novel throws light on the shallow way of Pakistani life as well. The corruption of the government officials and mindless superficiality of the women is evident: Faridah, the wife of Akram, for example, is a testimony of this, her taste and character is the representation of the typical Pakistani middle-class women—the love for ostentatious clothes and jewelry:

"Vas there any pink?" Faridah asked.
"Pink?" Mr Feroze Khan asked. "Begum Sahiba I have each and every culler for your sootability, pink, saalmun red, turkwise, emmaruld green, purple, midnight blue, dark grey, baje, pee green, the cumpleet range, begum sahiba, the cumpleet range.''
Fiaz and Nasseim came hurrying back with rolls of material. (p. 104)

The whole scene does not reflect the respect of a woman in Pakistani culture but servile flattery of a bourgeois person. While this goes on, an i.e. Faridah shop, the narrator interrupts and gives an unexpected description of Bakhshi whom we later find a harmless idiot. The narrator says:

"A little way down the street, outside a grocery, a small, dwarf-like man was being thrown about and kicked by a crowd which seemed highly entertained by the exercise. Punjabi obscenities accompanied each blow. Faridah did not care to look; nor hear. She decided she liked the colour and returned to the shop, paying no attention to the sufferings of the dwarf called Bakshi". (p. 104)

This passage is effectively fore-grounded against Faridah's shopping and reveals the insensitivity of the bourgeoisie woman on the one hand and the sadism and callousness of the society on the other—total degeneration, chaos and barbarity.

Similarly at another place the cunningness of Hussain, the moneylender, who destroys Aziz Khan, reveals sleaziness of a small businessman. In order not to pay two thousand rupees he dramatizes to be ill:

"Father was wondering," Rafique began, but Hussain hastily interrupted him, "Hai, Amma-ji, why did I have that cuppa cha, oooooh!"
He pressed a hand to his stomach and groaned. "Oooooh! Three bucks I paid the dachterr, and he said, plain he said, drink milk, and hyere I go, so carried off seeing my brother, I go and drink tea. Vhat I doing to myself, Amma-ji, throwing good money like that and not taking advice? Oooooh!" (p. 76)

These scenes are interesting and amusing but effectively reveal the shallowness of the emerging moneyed class in Pakistan.

The Shah Brothers, being the representative of the moneyed class, do everything to satisfy their false ego; they do nothing for the good of the community. They are the product of an old kind of capitalism which is characterized by extreme exploitation of the poor. Unfortunately, the Shahs are the people who would shape the values of the emerging Pakistani society. The writer says: "Akram in the eyes of these people, who admired his ruthless methods, was not only a Pakistani enjoying his freedom; he was *the* Pakistani in whose type the successful citizens of the country would need to be moulded" (p. 23). It seems that the writer is satirizing ordinary people who look up to an exploitative agency, Akram. However, this is an honest judgment about the country where all promises are defeated, and one finds no way of success except exploitation and corruption. Ironically it reveals complete disillusionment of the people with the existing system.

Unlike the modern capitalistic structures which tend to be profit oriented only, the Shah Brothers' psyche is tinged with the feudal mindset—the lust for the possession and the overt subjugation of others. Ayub expresses to Akram that it is not that they want Aziz Khan's land but they want to humiliate him: "At first we had economic reasons for wanting his land. And then, gradually, we realized that we were fighting against the pride of one man. And our own pride, our own honor were in question" (p. 283). So, contrary to the modern day Capitalism, which is subtle in its exploitation, the Shah brothers' Capitalism is typical to Pakistan—a mixture of feudal mindset and capitalistic want of wealth.

The novel takes on the destructive idea of the capitalistic individualism versus cooperation among human beings. However, it is not that the author favors the extended family system in Pakistan. The novel effectively portrays the estrangement of the Shah brothers due to their egotistical lust for power and wealth. This kind of capitalistic individualism leads to the split in the Shah

family into three nuclear families. Aziz Khan's family was split up by the Shahs', it was destroyed by them leaving him alone. Aziz Khan has agrarian family system shaped by "the vegetative hopefulness of belief in a fixed order, almost a fatalism which approved only of the sort of routine repetition of which the Sun's daily rising and setting were the archetype" (p. 53). Whereas, the Shah brothers were first uprooted from India and moved to Pakistan and became an exploitative class, whose family values are in making. But, surely, the new capitalistic structure in a newly born country estranged the exploiters and deracinated the exploited. Both victims and the victimizers suffer, the former physically, the latter psychologically. So the damage is across the board.

Therefore, the independence of the country, for the Shah brothers, meant accumulating wealth at any cost. When the exploitation of the local bourgeoisie reached at its peak hopelessness and pessimism prevailed across the masses.

"After the euphoria of independence, which is defined ironically in Aziz Khan as the freedom to pursue wealth at any cost (22), a second stage starts to evolve: the common people rebel, disillusioned by broken promises that mock independence and angry over the brutality and greed afflicting the businessmen and the rulers they rule… The laborers in the Shah brothers' factory listen to just that person, Riaz, who "had spent his time in reading such diverse political economists as John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx" (186). Following the usual course of events, this incipient movement is soon crushed, its leaders destroyed". (Ross, 1989, p. 201)

This is a good interpretation of the post-independence Pakistan, the promises of a better life were broken, and people became disillusioned. The factory workers, as the novel suggests, turned their ears to the workers' leader Riaz who spoke of Marxism as their only hope.

However, unfortunately, as it actually happened in Pakistan that young comrades/socialist leaders were killed during the Martial law regime of 1960s and later in 1980s. Shortly after the Independence in 1947 the socialists were bullied and effectively checked, especially, after their unsuccessful attempt to take over the government in 1952. The attempt was led by the famous Lenin peace prize winning poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz and General Akbar Khan.

The Murder of Aziz Khan is indeed a brilliant work of art about Pakistan. It successfully portrays and gives a realistic depiction of the Pakistani society in the sixties. Interestingly, Ghose, in his letter to Thomas Berger on 26 October 1968, one year after the publication of the novel, writes:

"I heard from my Pakistani sources that the theme of Aziz Khan has recently been enacted there. The owner of a cement factory is the Aziz in this case and the

man who played Ayub Shah is none other than the son-in-law of the president of the country: the shah character, seeing that Aziz was doing well with cement and that the factory was in his neighborhood, demanded a 51% share of the business for no other reason than that Shah had power and that he suffered the factory smoke which blew towards his house. Aziz of course refused. A man was murdered, and Aziz has been charged with the murder though apparently he's quite innocent; but no lawyer in Pakistan will defend him for fear of the power of the president's family". (1989, p. 159)

Nothing can be truer about the Pakistani ruling elite than what is expressed in this letter. This shows how truthfully the writer has captured, in his novel *Aziz Khan*, the sociopolitical situation of Pakistan.

To be precise Pakistan has not changed much, the corruption and exploitation has increased more than ever. The workers and laborers are badly crushed; the trade unions were banned during successive martial laws. That is why this novel has an appeal for the contemporary Pakistani society too. The novel tells how the pride and dignity of a traditional farmer was invaded and crushed by the newly emerging bourgeoisie. Capitalism, excessive and mad lust for wealth and how power uproots everyone remain the major concerns of the novel. This is an important idea; despite Ghose's claim of anti-referentiality, he studies this theme in his successive writings. The novel recognizes the significance of historical reality very effectively.

All and all, the novel's highest concern remains the exploitation, without doubt. In the novel, says, Chelva Kanaganayakam, "we see the changing economy, the emergence of the new classes, the ideological struggles between the industrialists and the workers, the corruption of the bureaucracy, the collapse of the traditional values, and the failure of religion" (1993, p. 41). Above all the novel captures probably the greatest truth in human history: In the words of Javed, Aziz Khan's son, "that the world had a way of deceiving itself" (p. 215), that evil has a way of asserting itself. In this case evil remains Capitalism. Certainly, Ghose's work is preoccupied with this theme, even though his renowned disinterestedness with the subject matter, Ghose is not apolitical in this novel.

From the discussion of the novel, it is evident that *Aziz Khan* substantiates some of the ideas of Jameson's notion of national allegory such as modes of production, cultural dependence, and modernization about the "third world." But the novel completely evades the aspects of the national allegory about colonialism. The novel is not a critique of colonialism; rather it is a national

allegory that criticizes the exploitation of the local people by the local elite: To be precise, a narrative of the failure of the post-independence promise.

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