

# THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY: THE PORTRAYAL OF INDO-PAK CULTURE IN ZULFIKAR GHOSE'S CONFESSIONS OF A NATIVE-ALIEN

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## ABSTRACT

The article seeks to present a critical reading of the cultural portrayal of Zulfikar Ghose's memoir *Confessions of a Native-Alien*. The reading of the text is informed by the theoretical perspective of Edward Said for whom the migrant intellectual's cultural representation not reflective of the actual reality of the indigenous culture and is essentially colored with western prejudices about natives' backwardness. Far from being a sympathetic insider who describes and explains the native culture with empathy and intimacy, Ghose's narrative is a distant and lifeless repetition of some of his memories and events related with his immediate family and community. Instead of showing his connection with his past and collective community in a meaningful way, his cultural representation reduces the complex diversity of his native culture into a stereotypical description of what Said has termed as a "living tableau of queerness" with no life and overflowing energy. The cultural portrayal that emerges out of Ghose's memoir obfuscates more than it reveals the true nature and essence of a particular community in a wholesome way and does not enhance or improve our understanding of Indo-Pakistan culture by engendering cross-cultural understanding.

**Key Words:** Stereotyping, Orientalism, cultural representation, discursive reality, empathy, cross-cultural understanding, Pakistani Literature in English

## INTRODUCTION

In the introduction of Waterman's recent work on Pakistani English literature, Shamsiehas credited Pakistani English writers for "challeng[ing] ... the stereotypes perpetuated in the West" about their people, culture and community (Waterman, 2015, p.xi). Shamsie's observation is not reflective of the actual terms of representation with which Indo-Pakistani culture and society have been presented by mainstream Pakistani writers in English. Far from engaging in a productive and complex task of questioning the stereotypes about their people as backward, extremist and violent and presenting a better image of their culture, the Pakistani English writers, including Ghose, have been instrumental in perpetuating these stereotypes, alleging the traditional Pakistani culture with violence, misogyny and inhumanity.

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Among the pioneering writers of Pakistani English literature, whether it is Suleri (1989) for whom the very existence of women in Pakistan is synonymous with absence and non-existence, or Aslam (2004) as a contemporary voice, the cultural presentation of Pakistan is ubiquitously negative and malignant with its stultifying and suffocating traditions or spectacles of violence and abuse against women and others marginalized. Far from questioning and dismantling the stereotypes about their people and society, these literary and discursive accounts have further strengthened and reinforced them with their stamp of validity. Since the knowledge is coming from the horse's mouth, the so-called insider's perspective – it is hardly questionable in terms of its legitimacy.

In the present article, I have discussed the peculiar portrayal of Indo-Pakistani culture in the autobiographical memoir of Zulfikar Ghose (1965) *Confessions of a Native-Alien*. It is important to mention that despite the general cataloging of Ghose among the pioneers of Pakistani English literature, his relationship has remained elusive and ambivalent with the land of his birth<sup>1</sup> – Pakistan as well as India where he spent the early years of his adolescence and youth before migrating to England.<sup>2</sup> Ghose's identity as a Pakistani writer is further problematized in the wake of his loud and repeated expression of dissociation, detachment and distance from all barriers and boundaries, be they geographical, ideological or nationalist (Abbasi, 2011, p.114). Notwithstanding, what qualifies him as a Pakistani English writer is the sole fact of his being born in a Pakistani city Sialkot, whereas his literary and subjective predilections situate him more in line with his western/American identity and worldview.

### **Distant and Detached Portrayal of Culture**

In *Confessions*, one does not find any sense of belonging and indebtedness on the part of Ghose towards his native culture. This is most evident in parts of his memoir where he gives vent to his emotional and psychological distance from many aspects of his family, community and collective culture. At innumerable points, this distant and detached

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<sup>2</sup>Tariq Rahman and Claire Chambers in their separate discussions on Ghose have argued the same in terms of his subjective identity and association with Pakistan and India to the extent that according to Chamber, Ghose has “left out of the Pakistani group due to his “wavy links to Pakistan”(as cited in Waterman, 2015, p.2).

outlook is culminated into a sheer lack of affinity and association for the collective norms and traditions of Pakistani culture, demonstrating that he is not at all “integrated with his people” with home he “maintains an outsider’s relationship”(Fanon, 2004, p.159). Even in recollecting and recalling his past days and childhood memories in Pakistan and India, his voice is devoid of any association and belonging and remains obviously distant and detached. In the chapter *Native Abroad II*, Ghose comments on various aspects of the traditional family system in Indo-Pak culture where a man does not marry a woman but the entire family (p.137), and where love marriages are not allowed by parents since “arranged marriages involve substantial material gain to the young man” (p.35). His own love affair with a Catholic girl Heather did not last as the traditional Indian culture does not “permit lovers of differing religions”(p.35).

In describing his childhood memories, he comments, quite distastefully, on the complex web of relations in the extended family system of Pakistan where he was born and raised as a child. His description unambiguously reflects his disapproval and distance from the essence of his culture where one man usually the “eldest male” is enormously burdened – far greater than in any other culture of the world – to “ensure the existence of the other members of the family” (p.2). For this, he is expected to “stretch his hundred-odd rupees a month to feed and clothe some twenty members of the clan” (p.2) – something that Ghose does not approve in case of his own father. He refers to his personal experience of being part of a family that was “living on one man’s brain and seven men’s hard work” and criticizes the extended family system where there is “no scope for individualistic gestures” (pp.49-50). Thus in referring to his extended family in Pakistan, he does not mention the feelings of love, sympathy and sacrifice with which the family members were connected and united with one another. Instead, he criticizes his uncles and aunts who were all dependent on his father for their livelihood and felt relieved when his father decided to migrate to England as nobody from his extended family in Sialkot could now “intrude on [their] prosperity” (p.72).

On a related note, Ghose’s description about his large family can be contrasted with the subjective outlook of the African writer Nguugi (1986) who valorizes his childhood as being one of twenty-eight children in the extended family, raised with a mixture of Gikuyu traditional

customs and Christian values. This extended family with its web of relations and associations connects Nugugiso strongly with the values and norms of his family and tribe and furnishes him with a perspective where past is characterized with “dignity, glory and sobriety” (Fanon, 2004, p.148). However, contrary to this perspective, Ghose disapproves and criticizes Eastern culture for its strict parental control and the rigid views of the elders and narrates her grandmother’s resentment that she shows against her son’s decision of joining army by fasting and sitting for long hours in the sun, showing her “hurt physically with an aura of self-humiliation for those around her to be hurt and humiliated in accepting her rigid views” (p.17).

### **Stereotypical Portrayal of Indian Culture**

Ghose’s sense of alienation and distance from the traditional aspects of his native culture engenders a discourse by creating certain stereotypes about Indian people with their weather, wickedness and weakness of mind. At times this becomes so explicit that while reading his memoir it seems as if one were reading some Orientalist tale with its so-called cult of nativity – marked with natives’ ignorance, filth and debauchery. In his preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, the French existentialist philosopher Sartre has analyzed so succinctly how the colonial rule has constructed the colonized subject by

breaking him in halfway. The result: neither man nor beast, but the “native”. Beaten, underfed, sick, and frightened, but only up to certain point, yellow, black, or white he always has the same character traits – *lazy, sly, and thieving* who lives on nothing and understands only the language of violence. (2004, p.1, italics mine)

In line with Sartre’s argument, Ghose constructs a native subject who is defined and determined with certain stereotypes and myths about his subjective and cultural identity. During his visit to India and Pakistan as a sports journalist he comments on the so-called Indian ways which are stamped with his explicit disapproval and distance. He describes an Indian man who “sleeps in the heat, his stomach covered in, his face turned to the dust, an arm stretched out, the hand in the dust” as being a Indian “he has nowhere else to go [but] to the earth and one day he will never rise from it” (p.139). Another typical stereotype that he often associates with Indian culture is the superstitiousness of its people,

showing them as weak-minded and psychologically frail. He compares his parents' religious belief which they exhibited during an earthquake with a primitive and pre-modern man who is "fretted at the sight of a comet, wept during a hurricane, and prayed with dry lips during the months of drought" by considering these as "afflictions...brought upon himself by his own wrong deeds" (p.10). In a similar manner, he narrates his childhood memory when his father was cursed by his grandmother while he was lying in his bed and hearing the cross accusations which he "would not want to hear again from a mother and son" (p.50). The effect of his curse was considerably palpable on Ghose's mother who due to her "illiteracy and simplicity was terribly pessimistic" (p.156), believing that "a curse from an elder member" is "a potent thing" that inevitably brings with it "the gloom of imminent disaster" (p.50). As a corollary, his description of his grandmother as a controlling cursing woman willfully belies the kind, accommodating and usually-praying grandmothers in the traditional family system of Pakistan, underscoring his greater proclivity of mirroring a negative image of his culture by excluding the positive side.

Having read his repeated references to the alleged sloth and greed of Indian culture, one has the impression as if there were no greedier and lazier people elsewhere but India – the bloody country where he has to drink black coffee to keep himself awake (p. 137); and where "time moves differently" as the "omnipresent sun encourages sloth" (p.127); and where one "can belch, fart, spit" wherever one chooses to do so without any internal or external restraint (p. 60). Besides their weather, hygiene and sloth, another stereotype that he creates about Indians is what he terms as the "fatalistic acceptance of sufferings, even of inconvenience" which is an essential feature of their collective consciousness(p.140). Thus he considers the Indians' strange temperament of resignation against all injustice and misery, no matter how massive and unbearable, as if someone had learnt to "lie back and enjoy" the rape since he could not stop it (p.140). The abject poverty of India forces him to contemplate on the difference in class and status and fills him with "bitterness" – but then this bitterness is nothing worth in India than a "laugh, a loathsome laugh of a fat, cigar-smoking businessman who has just been told a dirty joke" (p.139).

At many points in the narrative, Ghose seems to be contemptuous about Indians' love for money and materials, which like their prototypical sloth, is a product of their culture as he says "the most important thing in India is money and you should see how they make it" (p.139), and remarks rather sarcastically "... and many Indians do nothing else when they are not making money" (p.60). Another reference to the materiality of Indian culture is made when he refers to his grandparents' two obsessions either "Allah or money" (p.135), and declares rather sweepingly that the "major reason why people pray is that they want more money" (p.131).

Whether it is the Hindu festival *Devali* which Ghose repels because of its "material selfishness" (p.131) or the Indian newspapers embodying the "native taste for an exaggerated, inaccurate vocabulary" (p.133), all aspects of his native culture impart him a sense of emotional distance and detachment, multiplying his feelings of alienation even in his apparent nativity.<sup>2</sup> It is quite ironical to see that the stereotypes that Ghose creates about Indian people prove to be quite real in his own case when he was given the role of the soothsayer in the performance of *Julius Caesar* during his school in England because "the master thought that that was the best part for an oriental" (p.68). Paradoxically, when he describes Indians' love for money, it is always in a negative light, but the same love for pound note when it is described in the context of his father (p. 73) becomes admiring as denying the importance of money in t/his case would be a blasphemy" (p. 80).

### **Religious and Sacred Aspects of Native Culture**

In an attempt to absolutely ignore the spiritual and sacred side of Indians' religiosity, Ghose comments on many people of his family by exhibiting his explicit difference from the ways they practice their faith in their mundane life. Thus his cousin who knew and remembered the whole chapter of the *Quran* becomes a foil against his inability to read or memorize anything in Arabic from the sacred text (p.7). More precisely, while describing various aspects of the spiritual life of Indo-Pak culture, Ghose fails to show any respect and regard for the vital significance of religion in the construction of individual and collective subjectivity of his people that he claims to represent in his writings. He gives a horrific description of the ritual of circumcision by referring to his personal experience in his childhood when his family forced him to undergo this

against his will. There is a peculiar air in which he narrates the incident with all its details, when he was “trapped like a cockerel” trying to avoid the “moment of slaughter” by “screaming and raising hell and doing [his] best to dodge out” against his uncles who were forcing him to “become a *Mussulman*” (p.14). In a mixed sense of horror and sensation he describes further details of the ritual which was done by the local barber with the same “razor ... he has shaved [his] head a year or so before” (p.15). In many ways, his tone and voice not only situate him distant from his cousin and entire folk around who were “damned magnanimous” about the ritual but also embody his resentment “against the first violence performed for cultural or religious reason” on a male child in Pakistani culture (Waterman, 2015, p.135).

Here and elsewhere, the narrative becomes a replica of an orientalist account with its frequent referencing of natives with their alleged or actual corruption, debauchery and filth. He comments on the religious faith of people living in the traditional Indo-Pak culture as if he no more belongs to them. His presentation of the Indian *Sadhu* is fraught with the characteristic stereotypes of an Orientalist tale and echoes the bizarre extravaganza of an Eastern setting with its myth, mystery and mystique. He describes the Indian *Sadhu* who was “absolutely naked, his body smeared with ashes. His hair, long and knotted” touching his shoulders, his “tongue hanging out of his mouth, had a spear pierced through it and ...was supporting the whole weight of the spear as well as bearing the wound, the pain” (p.59). And then in a perfect mimicry of an Orientalist Ghose calls him a man who with his “brisk pace” was “intent on reaching a goal” but “despite the holy intention, despite the spiritual quest, which no doubt burned in [his] breast was something of *the aimlessness* of India” (p.59, Italics mine). In another instance, he narrates his experience of visiting the sacred river of Ganges when he vents his feelings of dislike for the religious devotion of *Hindu* worshippers taking a “bodily plunge” in the river as the “culmination of [their] lifetime’s ambition” but to Ghose it was the “foulest river in the world” (p.60) and the Indians were bathing in it as:

...profligate despite the poverty, seeking a purification of the soul and *blind* to the filth of the streets, hurrying despite the *inbred inertness* that is the *curse* of the *Indian body* because of the centuries of heat, urgently engaged in an activity which is as

*uncreative* as it is *wasteful*. This was India marching on with heaven as its goal even though the road was mere dust (p.61, italics mine).

Ghose's voice in these lines is so obliviously denigrating and stereotypical so as to echo and resemble the Orientalist stereotypes with their bizarre mixture of natives' spirituality and superstition; festivity and filth and outer piety and inner corruption. In an extreme sense of detachment and distance, Ghose singularizes him from the entire filthy folk of India by looking around

with admiration and pity, with love and hate as one may handle a jewel in a shop knowing that he can never purchase it, so that he can both praise its beauty and *denigrate the people who, he feels, will abuse the preciousness of the object*. (p.61, italics mine)

On a related note, this indifference and contempt that he feels for his native culture and its collective ambience is sharply contrasted with the Francophone intellectual and poet Césaire, who on his return to his native land, makes a passionate appeal to revive and reconnect him with his soil, his people and their collective spirit: “[M]ake me the lover of this unique people/make me commissioner of its blood/make me the agent of its resentment (as cited in Kesteloot, 1995, p.169). Whereas Ghose with his so-called rational self is unable to identify anything with this atmosphere of whimsicality, magic and superstition, Césaire does not hesitate to identify and realign his subjective self with his land by imbibing the “*savage faith* of the sorcerer” (as cited in Kesteloot, 1995, p.169, italics mine). In Wilder's view, Césaire's gesturing signifies his complete immersion into his native culture combined with his conscious distancing from western modes of consciousness with its so-called “communicative rationality” and “conventional temporality” (2004, p.40). However, Ghose's distant and disdainful outlook against the devout Indians and their “wasteful and uncreative” ways is emblematic of his disrespect and indifference from the distinctive cultural essence of a living community that he is associated against his will.

#### **A Living Tableau of Queerness**

It is very pertinent to compare Ghose's presentation of his native culture with another migrant writer V.S. Naipaul who presents a similar picture of Indian people with their sloth, blackmailing and criminality combined with their lust and fatalism (1964). In his remarkable analysis of the

third-world migrant intellectuals (of which Ghose and Naipaul are prominent names). Said (2002) analyzes how their literary and intellectual projects are full of denunciation and disapproval for their indigenous cultural norms and practices. The cumulative effect of such discursive construction of stereotypes is that they turn the Orient into a “living tableau of queerness” (Said, 1978, p.103).<sup>3</sup> Thus Ghose is not hesitant in describing the *Pukhtun* custom of eating lamb stew in a “large port [that] one associates with cannibals” (p.13). Suffice to say that the use of the word Cannibals signifies the essentially Eurocentric outlook of Ghose and is reminiscent of the colonial logic that views natives in an essentially dehumanized color with their “abased state of being”(Ashcroft et al., 2000, p.31). According to Ashcroft, the word Cannibal is an “especially powerful and distinctive feature of the rhetoric of empire”, that far from being a merely “descriptive” term is an “ontological category... synonymous with the savage, the primitive, the ‘other’ of Europe” (2000, pp.30-1).

In using such discursive construction for describing natives’ customs and cultural practices, Ghose continues to view them by wearing western blinkers and unmasks his scanty and insufficient knowledge about his indigenous culture in particular and East in general. Despite his distance and dissociation from all ideologies and labels, his epistemological outlook is laid bare when he (un)wittingly reinforces the stereotypes about native culture by giving them a stamp of validity. In his analysis of the particular portrayal of India and Pakistan in Salman Rushdie’s fictional narratives, Raja (2009) has argued how Rushdie’s works fail to bridge the gap between east and west as they are replete with gross generalizations and even mistaken assumptions about the cultural ambience of East in general and India/Pakistan in particular. Instead of debunking these myths which are generally associated with east, Rushdie’s art and narration become instrumental in perpetuating and

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<sup>3</sup>Said further explains how these stereotypes about natives such as “cudgeled slave”; “the coarse trafficker in women”; “the thieving merchant” create an “oriental subject” above and beyond the reality on ground (1978, p.103). To support his argument, Said criticizes the manner in which Flaubert has given a ludicrous description of an Egyptian Bazar in Cairo by ‘Orientalizing the Orient and Oriental’ into fixed categories of lust, corruption and debauchery (1978, p.49).

indoctrinating the same myths in western consciousness by “lending” them “the legitimacy of the voice of a cultural informant”(Raja, 2009, p.8). Raja further analyses that in the backdrop of the western / metropolitan critics’ lack of direct knowledge about east and its cultural norms, “these fictions [with their aura of myth and magic] *had now become my students’ truth*: Hence wife beating, polygamy, murder, and terrorism became the main tropes for them to define the postcolonial world, and since they read it in their own time, the *text* alone was not sufficient in educating them about the cultures of the periphery, it rather became a site that *cemented* their previously held stereotypes (2009, p.2, italics mine).

Moreover, such representations willfully confuse the specific context of various cultural customs and beliefs of a particular community – hence failing to appreciate the vital link that the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu elaborates between habit and habitus. In Bourdieu’s view, certain habits and customs are meaningful in their totality and are understood if and when they are placed in their specific context. In confusing the specific nuances of various practices and rituals in the collective cultural life of his people, Ghose fails to appreciate the mutual dependency of habit and habitus in constructing a cultural landscape. His refusal to acknowledge the specific cultural context obstructs his ability to engage with the crucial task of subverting these stereotypes. Instead he seems to perpetuate and reinforce them as his cultural portrayal is heavily based on the western stereotypes about eastern culture with its alleged backwardness, savagery and primitivism.

The aftermath of such intellectual and discursive representation of a cultural or social reality is discussed by Said who criticizes the migrant intellectual for his presentation of the native culture with its so-called “follies, its corruptions, its hideous problems” (2002, p.100).<sup>4</sup> That such representation of native culture and its norms by migrant intellectual are neither empty of “western condescension” (Said, 2002, p.102) nor from the “pressure of western ideals” as they are usually received and

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<sup>4</sup>Said has launched this critique against V.S.Naipaul and his representation of East and its cultural norms, for details, see his *Bitter Dispatches from the Third World* (2002).

accepted by academy quite unreflexively.<sup>5</sup> The “native informant”, in the words of Raja “has been appropriated by the metropolitan critic”(2009, p.9) who will refer and use these literary accounts whenever the “inconveniences of the Third world are to be attacked” (Said, 2002, p.103).

The cultural portrayal that emerges out of such discursive accounts is characteristically simplistic and reductionist as it refuses to account for the complex historical, ideological and social determinants which constitute the very bases of human culture. Instead of viewing native culture with empathy and intimacy, such cultural accounts tend to colonize and monopolize the subject by refusing to engage in what Menon has called the “density of argument with a lived community” (in Chatterjee, 2010, p.3, Introduction). Subsequently, the very possibility of cross-cultural understanding and knowledge is reduced as the metropolitan reading public is largely complacent with the way reality is presented by the so-called insider with his first-hand knowledge about his native culture. Notwithstanding the high reception of these works inside academy and their market potential, they neither bridge the gap between cultures nor do they enhance empathy and understanding between people of different communities. Instead they crystalize the subjective outlook of their authors by ‘obliterating’ “any sympathetic feelings” they had or might have for the world they once belonged to, and produce “more dependence, self-disgust” and “apathy” among the wider reading community about the traditional and normative aspects of their culture (Said, 2002, p.103).

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<sup>5</sup>For an excellent discussion on how such works are received and included as the true representative of the third-world counter canon, see Masood Ashraf Raja *Reading Postcolonial Texts in the Era of Empire*(2009)and AijazAhmad A *Response* (1993).

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