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Contemporary Version of Shakuntala in Tabish Khair's Poetry

Abstract: Tabish Khair is a new emerging Indian English poet of contemporary generation. He is also known as reputed journalist writing through various world publications. He has a credit of writing novel with new perspectives. He is winner of *All India Poetry Prize* and won prestigious fellowships. His collection of poetry *Where Parallel Lines Meet* becomes very famous in the literary world. He has great affection to ancient traditions and literature. He dwells upon historical memory and mediaeval history. The colonial hangover was revealed with great force however nostalgic temperament plays outstanding role in his free verse. He born in Muslim family in small town of Bihar, his poetry is great embodiment of secularism. There is anger and violence against colonialism but mediaeval aestheticism runs through the blood vein of his poetry. His poetry touches the heart of reader and shocks nervous system to face the historical memory.

The present research paper highlights the predicament of Shakuntala. The famous character has borrowed from Kalidasa's seminal drama *Ahijnana Shakuntalam* (The Recognition of Shakuntala) from the nineteenth century Sanskrit Literature. The play had influenced post-play Indian Literature. Tabish adore classics of Kalidasa and his play memorized in his poetry.

Rita Kothari brilliantly put her observation that “the memory of Kalidasa and many similar literary conventions served to remind us that texts came with cultural residue. This knowledge introduced to us untranslatability not merely as a resignation, but as a productive site in which to study the incommensurability of concepts.”¹ Shakuntala has presented as happy girl living in the lap of nature. There are green parrots, marvelous guava trees with flora and fauna. She was true daughter of nature living elemental life but modern times changed her elemental life into turmoil. Here, my modest attempt is to highlight the character of Shakuntala in the poetry of Tabish Khair. The perspective is that how it is assorted from the play of Kalidasa and Khair’s poetry. Here I have selected new collection of poetry *Glass of Man* (2010). It will certainly stimulate the reader to read Sanskrit literature and English Literature as phenomena of comparative study. This is the first example of intertextuality in poetry. It will also open new horizons of knowledge resource and contribute to the core wealth of literature.

First poem in *Water* section of the *Glass of Man* is retold from the classical play of Kailas’s Shakuntala. The loss and betrayed of Shakuntala is still in continuation in the period of modernization. The poem *Backwoods* reflects the forgotten happiness of parrot and guava trees. Now a day parrots are screaming across the sky forgetting old memories in the time-cleft corridors. The guavas are also hanging on the forgotten tree, even the flowers of lily has lost natural brightness. It was artificial borrowed from wrapped and rusting metal. The conditions of days are also very critical. It was full of dryness. The stones on the floors are looking moist. It was not naturally because of spelling diesel from trucks and jeeps alongside the road. There were car, van and auto repair shops on the roadside. There is smell of burnt rubber tires and exhaust smoke of vehicles. The first part of poem express the natural condition how damaged in the modern period. Everything on the earth is in crisis and facing ugliness. The innocent happiness

has lost in the ancient time of Shakuntala. The pleasant nature has been facing problems everywhere in the world.

Further, the poet raises many questions; does parrot have no sense of smell? The memory doesn't remind them all that failed to flowers? The seed of flower have no chance to come through the dirty air of the sun. It was acceptable but parrot should know the smell of the day. The first part mostly highlights on the mood of nature how changed and proposed many questions to think us. It is rightly commented by Ranjit Hoskote, "Khair dwells on the persistences of historical memory...on events that course through the bloodstream or spark along the nervous system, to explode in the brain." ²

The girl, who cycles has been leaving past garbage, traffic rush, mini-bus and three rickshaws. She is no flower, even if her face lingers in memory. Her face is simply pleasant, pony tailed and wide eyes. It is the face of almost a woman because there may be some tensions. She has inevitability of expressing her teenage. She lost memory of old time but the streets are still green with hope. Many hands held the banners against the sky. They are waiting for justice and freedom. Thousands of throats are dried in waiting of justice and freedom. The only one dry throat came forward for demand. It shocked the world for a moment. It deserves the great cost of body that was beyond the recognition pulled from the stone. It was discussed in international conferences and news articles. Shakuntala and her friends are far away from this unjust world. They will know only after something twisted, buried and dead.

The parrots have forgotten all things in the course of time. Once, the street was green with mango, guava and rose apple. The girl has also forgotten the greatness of the time that was buried the shops and fields. She becomes blind and lost entire history of temple and mosque. It

was the place, where all future once formed. Now, it become the past and kept like a public secret of sacred stone. About past memory, S Anandh Raj in his article remarks that, “The past dominates his poetry. Besides living in Denmark, there is nostalgia in his mind which brings him back to his native country. And he is missing his lovely spend days of his childhood.”³

Sometimes the forgotten things pop out suddenly in the world. The past has never covered with blue lotus but full of drainage water and nature flower. Besides, she knows so well that the beautiful forest was without any boundary. There were no children’s have descended by oversight. The ground of forest was soft with rotten rose apples. It was free to enjoy the insects like butterflies and Moths. The marvelous things are already whipping. The silence has bitten between leaf and caterpillar. The trees left the sullen and oversize guavas alone to face the memories of raised hands to the ancient attack of parrots. Here, the stone slabs of time are crushed the roots of sacrifice. That was repeated and never bears fruits.

Here on the stone-slab of Time are the crushed roots

Of sacrifice that is ever repeated and never bears fruit. (P.6)

The poem ‘Cycle’ has described the event of girl. She is going with cycle wearing salwar-kameez. The girl has fallen on the ground due to her flowery salwar locked in the chain of cycle. There were many people including grime trained mechanics but no one came forward to help the needy girl. The fair and tall man came forward immediately to help the girl. He is very adventurous person. He speaks language that is familiar to girl. They speak in fluent English. The mechanic ran away from the place with shame and strangely angry. The wielder wears goggle and cuts steel with electrical blue flame that was in his hands. On the other hand, the stranger cuts salwar and clear from the lockjaw of her cycle chain. They walk some distance

together, talking quarry fluently in English. The wielder was hammering the chassis of truck whispering and slagging. The girl wears very simple cloths of salwar-kameez but she became prisoner of her dress code.

Here a digression for the knowing: Note,
She wears no garment of rough bark
Fastened at the shoulder in a fine knot.
Her shalwar-kameez is of terrycot
Or some such synthetic material.
And yet she is a prisoner of her cloth.
For her this daily prison is so real;
Her dresses coded: no jeans, no frocks. (P. 8)

The girl carrying her cycle back, walk with that fair man. He is now herdsman because his job is wandering all over the world. She falls in love, the dream of moon that permitted her class and generation. The memories of the gentleman always strike the girl. She was left alone by her friends with lots of dream memories. The image of that young man engaged her head and heart. She loves all that incidents like a stolen kiss of memory. The talk that was impressed her too much. It has blossomed lot of possibilities that promise of palace. The world around her became blur and her throat become dry with the beautiful dream. She doesn't know when she was caught in the web of love.

In the last part of poem, poet comments on the betrayal faced by the girl. She never heard the voice of the fair man. They never touched to each other. She never saw him again but he was always in the mind of the girl. The invisible king was far away from the sight of the girl. The

appearance of king, she finds in the friends of king. The king never crossed the path her city. She was in love with him. The language of love has defined in unusual way by the king. The hopes of her education, that attempts to show harsh realities of her world. The moon of hope runs through the murky tide for lost looking ring. Those signs made us red as cash oppressed the sweat of workers. In this regard, Sudeep Sen says that “There is always a peculiar kind of poignancy in his poems - sometimes wise, sometimes naive, sometimes fatalistic, but always moving.”⁴

In the third poem *Forms*, poet once again highlights the situation of girl. After meeting with fair man, she was left alone facing the rumors in the society. The name of fair man was attached to the girl. She was in trouble to face everyone. It was good that she has fine English and her parents are able to sustain her for two years. She turns her attention to the education and fills many forms to achieve good job in other country. She gives many exams like TOFFEL and GMAT to go abroad. The paper becomes her life until the king of hope will recognize her. In Europe, there was a grave condition because no one recognize to each other. The condition of Shakuntala was very bad in the play also, the king refused to recognize her but fortunately one of the fisher produced symbolic ring before the king, and then the king remembered the meeting with Shakuntala. In the play, there was the fisherman but in this world there is no one to provide the evidence of the sign to the fair man.

In third stanza of the poem, poet laments on the situations of the Shakuntala. He expressed that the stamp of our past never leave us. It is the major cause of sorrow. The lost king cannot find out easily in the multicolored world. The king has done silent murder of Shakuntala and stolen her heart. It was not possible to find king with the language and letter. The curse of forgetfulness never ends easily because other country sleeps soundly. The real question is that will she find out the forgetting king in the world of trade, business and language. In world,

everything has exchanged except the graves of human being. She will find the king of her hope or the curse will fell down on her like a *Lady of Shallot*. She has to clear the examination of her fate and at the same time her study. The examination of her study will open many doors to her star-crossed fate.

In poem *Letter* Shakuntala become a mature girl with her two friends Priya and Anisa. She chased the beautiful butterfly in the garden and become coy on the mentioning of love proof that was the scholarship letter. The letter will provide chance to find out lost king. It is like the golden ring of Shakuntala in Kalidasa's play. The ring of hopeful words will certainly fulfill her moon dreams. She loves butterflies and moths. There are many moths wandering around her in the season of monsoon. The butterflies are also hovering round the buds however their beauty seldom attracts the buds. The ghazels sung by moths on the odd hours never find place in the books of English verse. There is no end of moth, when he loves the flame. There are many moths wander between power cuts are different from a honey bees. The bee hawk wanders around the white Sadfuli with drone of the wing. However, those are courageous who attempt to the clock of night.

In second last chapter poet puts forward various troubles faced by the girl. The sunrise comes with grave shadows under the trees and bushes. It has frightened the lovers of the daytime. The rich cousins of moths and fickle butterflies are among them. The garden fills with the darkness and the buzz of the moths. In the flight of moths, Shakuntala observed that moth's story was not heard by butterflies. She realized her meeting is not possible without marching the bridges of the Europe. There are many hidden and rigid paths. The wind moves through her lovelorn heart. She realized that to achieve love of fair man is not simple task. Here, Shakuntala

wishes to find her lover urgently in the world of different colors and meanings. Yet, she is full of confidence and determination to find out her love in the world.

The poem '*Immigration*' is very apt poem that comments on the situation of Shakuntala in modern times. She leaves her country in search of her hope. She has compelled to produce her identity proof at airport. Here, poet uses the myth of Dushasana, who pulled the sari of woman to find out the sign of dishonest pregnancy. In the same way, man behind the metal counter demand the proof of her being. Shakuntala hastily fumbled her new bag to search her identity proof but she can't and thinks she might lose it. She was in worry but fortunately she got it in the bag and escaped from the mythical hands of Dushasana. She produced it with full force and pride to officer. The officer cuts the stamped letter like the belly of smelly fish. She feels relaxed that she has sign of royalty. She is a common girl so cannot call the God to her help immediately. She cannot trust the length of her jeans. The sari of Dropadi was so long that's why she escaped by Krishna. She arrived at the old city that once robbed gold of India. The beautiful place of freedom creates slavery. She saw her face in the corridors of the airport and many eyes staring to her like someone's wife.

In this poem, poet makes harsh comments on the colonial past and mythical cruelty. The brilliant narration about country culture makes amazing to us. The fear of Shakuntala lingers from ancient period to modern period. It may be sari of Dropadi or jeans of girl. That is why, Goethe celebrated *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* and remarked: "Wouldst thou the young year's blossoms and the fruits of its decline, And all by which the soul is charmed, enrapture, feasted, fed? Wouldst thou the earth and heaven itself in one soul name combine? I name thee, O Shakuntala, and all at once is said."⁵

Poem '*Arrival*' focuses on the nostalgic memory of the girl. She leaves her home and now the memory of her mother country recalls her. The enquiry by custom officers still lingers in her mind. In the morning, she saw different picture of the new country. The sky was like a patient etherized upon a table. The thin bandage of cloud was draping the yellow pus. All the hostel rooms are closed and no one comes out side. In India, daylight starts with morning bells and birds chirping. There are many voices of the street vendors and children's crying. The kitchen starts with the crack of dawn that water pouring into buckets. The beautiful sounds of Indian morning dawdled in her mind.

What is sound but state of mind
Note policed by custom officers,
Whose absence is what she hears
In this land of regulated waves;
What is knowledge but the plant
The sprouts from the seed of loss? (P.18)

Shakuntala was alone in the room but when she turned her eyes, she saw the man standing in the corner of the room. He was staring at her with bloodshot eyes and says he was burning rock star. She was caught in the web of his language. The conversation goes on very smoothly. The question poet puts forward is that "will she discover that a burning out star is not just spoken memory? It is the evidence of act." The signs of street meeting still have fingerprints like a thousand years back Shakuntala keep ring to show king Dushyant. The life never goes without the love and everyone needs company of two eyes.

She saw first time those eyes outside her home. She hears the first time sound of her street town. The absence of town will fill the nectar of nostalgia. She will face the emptiness the truth of her loss. The roots are starched from hostel to the walls of her home. The memory cannot be shattered easily. It was like the opium or the forge of anger. The ending of the poem is brilliantly constructed regarding the condition of the girl. She has to break the rhyme of the reason that was divorced from many years. Though, her father and aunt were dead. The poet wishes her to see the danger in life, her will and her anger. It means that she should learn the lesson of life. There are love, violence and peace. The reason can be transformed into revolution. She has to face many challenges of life and become very strong to face the strange realities of the life. Actually, this is the mouthpiece of the poet himself. Ranjana Singh correctly find out that, “The author is not only suffering with the dilemma of identity but also a severe tension of longing for his native region. Therefore in the poems of the collection he emphatically focuses upon the idea of his homeland with its culture and the day to day life.”⁶

Tabish Khair’s poetry has been rooted in western thought and Indian classical literature. The blending of two cultures is the soul of Khair’s poetry. The passion for Indian classical literature is the prime consciousness behind his verse. Though, he wanders in the memory of childhood India however, westernization has also great impact on his personality. He employed western ideology in his poetry. There are many examples of intertextuality in play and fiction but Khair’s *Man of Glass* is the first one in Indian English Poetry. The first section of poetry ‘Water’ has the depiction of Shakuntala in modern times. The romantic and classical period has been replaced by modernization. The elemental happiness has lost in the course of time and poet is in search of the pure happiness. The autobiographical element plays major role in his poetry. The memory, history and experience converted into poetry. The identity of women is still in crises

from ancient to modern period. The life of Shakuntala goes through love, loss and betrayal. The girl is from Muslim family and struggling to achieve her goal of life. Kalidasa's Shakuntala had faced the same identity crises after meeting with Dushant. The luck fortuneed her and he accepted Shakuntala as a queen. Will modern Shakuntala accepted by any modern king? What we learn is that endless struggle of human civilization never ends and we have to fight to live our life with great respect. That's why the classics of Indian Sanskrit literature are the best source of stimulation to the poet and also reader. It will certainly open new way to comparative and intertextual study. It is the major function of this research paper.

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