

. A Dive into the Past through New Historicist Perspective:

Reading Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazaar*

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Abstract

Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazaar* is a pioneer text that revolutionized Indian theatre, taking it towards People's theatre, where commoners were given prominence. This paper aims to foreground the milieu of the text and compare the laymen image of the Mughal Agra bazaars to the marketplace conditions in the declining phase of the Mughal Empire, as presented by Tanvir. The corruption, poverty, lawlessness and an overall decaying social framework of the then society has been discussed. The reforms aimed at, are two-dimensional, the text's content aims to reform the society, while the form of the play aims to reform Indian theatre. The linguistic transitions in society, as mentioned in the play, have also been discussed. The paper also attempts to re-read the text in the light of New Historicism, which aims at parallel reading of Literature and History and gives prominence to the context.

Keywords – Corruption, Depravity, Commoners, New-Historicism, Context.

Agra was the capital of the Mughal Empire for a long period, loved by the six mighty Mughals. The city equally responded to their caress and prospered enormously. From textiles, trade, agriculture to architecture, art and culture, Agra flourished tremendously under the Mughals. It has left us its imprints in the shape of the timeless monuments of Fatehpur Sikri, Agra Fort and the Taj Mahal (one of UNESCO's world heritage sites). Its bazaars were

famous for their festivities, Mughlai cuisine, colours, Persian art, scriptures and an overall ambience of lush and thrift. Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazaar* captures the milieu of Agra from 1810. The historically unaware reader, from the title, obviously then expects to meet a romantic tale full of life and prosperity. However, Agra of 1810 had started sinking from heights of glory. This play is almost a requiem to the decline of it all. In the words of Anupam Yadav and Dr. YPS Solanki ,

“Agra, a city brimming with historical richness and cultural grandeur, stands as a testament to centuries of opulence, flourishing as a bustling epicenter of trade, masterful craftsmanship, and artistic brilliance during the illustrious reign of the Mughal emperors... Once a thriving nucleus of power and cultural magnificence, Agra experienced a gradual and relentless decline in its economic vitality under British rule.”(7).

Agra Bazaar captures the early stages of that decline. The East India Company was steadily rising, while the Mughal Empire was steadily losing its hold. The flux, as obvious is the hardest and emotionally tormenting, because the imprints of the bygone days are still fresh in the minds, while the dark reality hasn't dawned in fully to shatter all hopes. One is in a fix, neither there, nor here, reminding one of Arnold's famous lines, "But the old world, the world of your fathers' days,/ Is gone, and the new world has not yet come." (ll. 42–43)

Up until today Agra cherishes its Mughal legacy, its “centuries-old bazaars that exude Mughal flair” (“Agra's Vibrant Bazaars”). Satirically so, the play brings to fore a completely different picture of decadence, poverty, anguish, struggle and corruption. It is a historical play, with the common folk at the centre. The play is soundly embedded in the socio-economic scenario of those times. We have been accustomed to Aristotelian theatre that aims at Catharsis, but Brechtian Epic theatre aims at social change. Habib Tanvir in this play deliberately aims at distancing the characters from the audience (*Verfremdungseffekt*). There

is no one hero, with whose joys and sorrows the audience relates. The rampant degradation in itself is the protagonist. It is meant to cause the reader/ audience discomfort and thereby lead to cognitive analysis and brain churning. The play was first performed in the open-air theatre of Jamia Milia Islamia, and the commoners participated in the play. The play is divided into two scenes. The play's plot, however, is like a vignette with distinct scenes from the Agra marketplace, strung together by one common theme of depravity. There are no women characters in the play, except Benazir, who is a prostitute. This absence can be attributed to the then prevalent *purdah* system, in the society.

We first meet the hawkers who are lamenting over their low sales and economic struggles, while striving to sell something that day. Next we meet a poet and his companion, who visit a bookseller, where they are later joined by a *Tazkiranawis*. Overhearing their conversation, the *kakri* seller comes up with an idea that if some poet dedicates a verse to his *kakris*, it might help him in increasing his sales. There are two critical points here – firstly, one is reminded of W.H Auden's ironical comment from "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", "Poetry makes nothing happen". But we know that the prowess of poetry is immense, in Arnold's words it will be poetry that will always be there "to console us, to sustain us and interpret life for us"(260). Truly so, in scene I, *kakri* seller comes up with the idea, tries to conceal it from the other hawkers, who then get into a heated fight with him, which leads to a pseudo riot. However, this seemingly absurd proposition does get him desired results towards the end of the play. Nazir does compose a few lines on his *kakri* and he manages to make some business by singing that verse. The scenario in Scene I and Scene II is the same; with one major change, it is poetry that brings some respite to these hawkers.

The second critical point that came to mind was the prejudice of the literary circles for the common man. While poets like Wordsworth advocated subjects from common man's life in common language, there has always been a sense of elitism, where poetry is raised to a

higher pedestal, beyond the reach of common masses. This is exactly what the *Tazkiranawis* and the poet do, when they rebuke Nazir, who writes on basic human suffering. This debate has always existed. Tanvir, however, openly sides with the commoners. The literary circles are perturbed that poetry was being written on subjects like Holi, Diwali that concern common man's joys, and sorrows. Astonishingly, while these literary circles show no advancement until the close of the play, the common hawkers, who take refuge in poetry, better their lives towards the end. The play, at some points, also feels like an absurd drama, where there isn't much advancement in plot, things seem degrading and decrepit, there is repetitive action, a sort of meaninglessness and existential crisis. However, the play is strongly rooted in history, attempts to provide a socio-political commentary, uses meaningful dialogues and has a linear narrative, thus cannot be classified strictly as an Absurdist play.

Another distinct image depicted from the marketplace is of the *kotha*. The *kothas* during the Mughal era were not merely places for debauches, but the *tawaifs* there were respectable women, who had knowledge of dance, art and Urdu literature. The Mughal perception of *kothas* was as stated in the article "The Tawaifs of Shahjahanabad", "These women were so renowned for their culture and knowledge that families would send their daughters to *tawaifs* to learn *aadaab* (politeness) and *tehzeeb* (refinement)" (Das para 2). With the decline of the Mughal era, the prestige of the *tawaifs* also began to decline. Benazir is an embodiment of that decline, there is no blooming joy with which her life and surroundings are described. Famous for Mughal love stories (the oft-repeated Anarkali Salim story), coy-ish Meena Bazaar stories, Tanvir's *Agra Bazaar* is bereft of enchanting love stories. We do not see rich, luxurious Mughal women, heavily bejeweled, but only Benazir, a prostitute, catering to her customers. An unnamed rake, who professes love to her, is her recent customer, while the constable is a regular visitor. The constable, who becomes infuriated due to Benazir favoring the rake, uses false allegations to imprison the young man.

The driving emotion in the brothel is lust. There is no talk of art, and culture, those are long gone. Towards the end, we meet one of Benazir's older customers, Manzoor Hussain, who is now in a pitiful state. He seems to be in a daze, is completely mute and unaware of the world around. It is said that he was a horse trader who went bankrupt, had been in love Benazir for years and had returned to Agra after quite some time. Once an intelligent businessman, this man becomes a symbol of unrequited love and desires. Somebody who is hopeless and despairing, he searched for love in the world of sexual trade. Benazir, who is by now hardened by her profession, though has a soft corner for him "... he has wrapped me up entirely in the blanket of his heart and soul" (Tanvir 104), is unable to do anything.

The treasured language of the Mughals was Persian. As Arshad Islam points out, "Persian cultural influence was intensified with the coming of Mughals to the Indian subcontinent. Zahiruddin Babur (r. 1526-30), the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India, introduced a new era in Indo-Persian literature" (162). Babur wrote his *Baburnama*, and Jahangir wrote his *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* in Persian, even Gulbadan Begam's *Humayunana* Akbar's scribe Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama* were written in Persian. Persian therefore was not only the official language of the court, but rose to become a symbol of class and refinement. Gradually in Akbar's reign the common man, and soldiers recruited from different places, began mixing dialects, as they conversed with speakers of other languages, and gradually Urdu evolved. In the words of Belmekki "Urdu, being a Turkish word, literally means "camp language" and it is widely assumed that it originated in Mughal army camps, where Muslim officers used it to communicate with their native regiments who spoke variants of local languages and dialects"(287). However, for later day poets Urdu itself became the language of love. For Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Mirza Ghalib, Allama Iqbal, Josh Malihabadi Urdu was a treasured language. "Whether it's the delicate expressions of love or the introspective

reflections on life's complexities, Urdu quotes possess a unique ability to stir emotions and touch the soul.”(Ali).

In the play itself, there is a divide between the perception of the literary circles and that of the common man. While poets like Mir Taqi Mir are hailed by the elite circles, poets like Nazir are hailed by the masses. Mir wrote in Persian and talked about the glory of Mughal Empire, while Nazir talked of the commoners and general society. The *Tazkiranawis*, poet and bookseller are nostalgic about the bygone days of Persian supremacy. This was the time of flux, when Persian declined and Urdu started to encroach in. Accepting change has always been one big human challenge. Also, it is visible that *Tazkiras*, books and literature in itself were declining, and publishers were moving towards newspapers, and magazines, as they were on a rise. More so, towards the end we see *Munshi* Ganga Prasad advising the bookseller to get into newspaper business. He planned to start an English newspaper, pointing out to another change “...that is the language of the future. It will be the language of the whole country tomorrow. (Tanvir 99). The Persian-Urdu debate thereby became completely futile.

New Historicism believes that history and literature are co-texts, and a parallel reading is therefore possible. Undoubtedly, *Agra Bazaar* is a rewriting of history. It is impossible to study *Agra Bazaar* in isolation. A context, provided by embedding it in history, the socio-political and economic life of those times, makes the text comprehensible. The bygone days of the six mighty Mughals, the declining Mughal Empire fighting to preserve the crown, and the rising East India Company, are all vital historical moments which need to be studied in order to understand the text. New Historicists, like Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose believe in “historicity of texts and textuality of histories” (Greenblatt 16). *Agra Bazaar* too has inseparable historicity. Reading Tanvir’s *Agra Bazaar*, one becomes aware of the historical scenario of the 1810s. It is almost as if history gives a skeletal

framework to this text, over which the entire fictional fabric of that day in the marketplace is woven by the author. Who knows if there might actually be a *kakri* seller back then who decided to find a poet to write a verse on his *kakris*? Who knows if there might actually be some Benazir and Manzoor Hussain in 1810 living a similar life? A historical play writer understands historical scenario and rewrites it in a way that adds emotion to lifeless facts of history. Here, Tanvir not only rewrites history but makes a strong comment on social hierarchy, prejudices and rampant corruption.

New Historicism believes that power relations govern a text. The commoners, hawkers who are struggling to sell their wares, are oppressed by the police, who exact a fine from them, for initiating a riot. Those uninvolved are also pulled in. In hierarchical order, our characters include the brothel house residents, the vendors, the literary circles and the police. New Historicism aims to foreground the marginalized, i.e. to write alternate history. As far as one can remember about Mughal history, the Emperor was the Empire. Most mainstream history has the king as the epicenter, but Habib Tanvir's *Agra Bazaar* has the common man and his sufferings at the epicenter. Thus, somehow trying to subvert the center-margin relationship and thereby other stories, i.e., voices of the marginalized are heard.

Last important consideration in the text is of the role of chorus. Traditionally *fakirs* are intellectuals and mystics who have renounced worldly pleasure in favour of devout piety and spirituality. Tanvir uses *fakirs* as his chorus. Every little incident in the play is summed up by highlighting its themes, human failings, follies etc. by these *fakirs*. These songs sung by *fakirs* are powerful and attempt to bring awaken and sensitize the reader. The other songs in the play are poems of Nazir recited by Hamid, the revelers celebrating Holi, *themadari*'s song, and the ending song which is sung by chorus (not named here as *fakirs*). Tanvir not only takes us back in the past but also attempts to revive righteous living and belief in inclusivity.

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Glossary

Adab/aadaab - politeness

Fakirs- mystics, who have renounced worldly pleasures

Kakri- loner, thinner version of a cucumber

Kotha- the modern-day brothels, which were then also centres of art and culture

Madari- street performer who entertains with a monkey

Munshi An accountant or clerk

Purdah – veil, a system where Muslim women cover their faces from public view

Tawaif – the trained dancer at a kotha

Tazkira- biographical record of significant poets of a time

Tazkiranwis- one who writes a Tazkira

Tehzeeb- refinement