Veritas: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

Region, Religion, and the Discourse: An Exploration of Culture and Identity in Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh*

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Abstract

Anees Salim's novel *Vanity Bagh* explores the intricacies of a region that has been made and unmade by innumerable events of communal cacophony. The space in which the story is set is a forlorn ambience of tragic incidents and unfortunate lives. The pathetic plight of the inhabitants is narrated using the metaphor of a location filled with socio-political unrest. The inseparable nature of social and political facets of the region, from its religious inclinations manifests a new reality in India. Salim has the gumption and insights to ponder the ecosystem of minority communities, and the town that he narrates could be identified as any place in India where minorities are ghettoized. The study of the interaction within and outside of the region, considering the religious orientation of the inhabitants, appears to be an appropriate method to analyse the impact of religion on informing the mindsets of a population. *Vanity Bagh* weaves a narrative of cultural production and articulation in regional space through the prism of religious identity. The paper attempts to study the various methods with which institutional prejudices turn into the lived experience of muslims in Indian small towns. It examines how the resistance of muslims in small town rebound and transform into a paradoxical discourse

Keywords: religion, region, Indian minority, identity politics and discourse

Introduction

Indian writing in English has changed the direction of storytelling as the lives in India are undergoing tremendous deviations. There is a paradigm shift in societal perspectives as the people overlook the concepts of secularism and pluralism in India. These concepts are questioned and challenged due to vested political motives.

Religious feelings govern our mode of thinking. Thus, there is a clear contradiction between the basic tenets of the constitution and the characters of our society. These get reflected in our politics and public administration, which often work in a manner contrary to what is envisaged in the constitution. (Ashok, 2007,. p.609)

Indian writers in both regional languages and in English have always been keen on exploring the changing political climate of India. There are many works produced over the past seventy five years of India's independence about how multifarious aspects affect the core principles of Indian socio-cultural milieu, in different capacities. Many writers have incorporated sensitive and relevant themes into their works of art to voice the injustice fluttering in India due to caste, religion, language, region and others. From Khushwant Sing's *Train to Pakistan*(1956*)* to Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* (2023) , Indian English novels have traveled through many genres and narrative styles to envisage the values and visions of India as a nation, by faithfully portraying the crude realities happening around.

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

Anees Salim's Vanity Bagh connects to the current socio-political culture of India.As the country experiences intense religious polarization, the novel exposes the reality of minority populated small towns in India. The existing scholarship is revisiting the postulates of secularism in India in order to heed the tremendous changes happening in the manner with which these small towns are treated. Socio- economic conditions, religious identity, and the analysis of characters are the few aspects emphasized in this study. Vanity Bagh is portrayed as a land of wickedness, crimes, terrorism, and religious tensions that are unfortunately some of the many social realities of India. It points out the selective discrimination faced by the underprivileged people, due to inefficient and biased government policies. The study attempts to capture why a society is tagged immoral and what role does the system play in making such discourses.

The Polarised Society of Vanity Bagh

It is significant to impart political reading to a novel like *Vanity Bagh*, especially in the age of minority mapping. "The Sachar Committee Report shows clearly that the literacy and educational status of Muslims is particularly low. The literacy rate among Muslims is far below the national average and this gap is greater in urban areas and for women." (Malik 3). This data steer clear the parity existing in the socio-economic condition of muslims in India. Vanity Bagh chronicles the life of muslims who are secluded from the mainstream politics of space, identity and agency. The novel opens to a jail, where a young man named Imran Jabari is imprisoned for alleged terrorist activities. The narrative pertaining to Vanity Bagh is controversial, therefore it questions the ethics of the people in Vanity Bagh. For instance, Salim notes how a policeman made fun of his place when he learned that Imran belongs to Vanity Bagh. "'Vanity Bagh?' he asked without looking up from the register. 'You mean "bag"?' He had never heard of our mohalla, maybe he had but didn't want to admit it, or he did not belong to the city." (Salim 3). The novel explicitly narrates the need and greed of the youth in Vanity Bagh, who are destructively influenced by the infamously affluent intra-communal members. They consider gangsters and criminals as their role models to prosper without hard work and ethics. The youngsters in the Vanity Bagh take this newly attributed unethical identity for granted, and they find it as a way for easy money. The youngsters who celebrate such men of questionable character have deteriorated the quality of their own life. Salim reflects Imran's hero worship towards Abu Hathim, the 'don' of mohalla in these lines,

Abu Hathim Sahib's love for football made me love the game even more dearly; I dribbled with a flourish, developed a force deftness and bore down on defenders with an unnecessary aggression every time I heard Abu Hathim Sahib's crutches pick their way to the window through which the sound of a television frequently drifted out. It tickled me to think that Vanity Bagh's hero in exile was watching us, his gaze finally setting on the Messi of the Mohalla. (Salim 81)

The novel envisages the life of the financially and socially backward section of people who are kept aloof from the developments outside the Vanity Bagh. The economic instability in the region paved the way for the growth of fraudulent activities and it cultivated an unethical behaviour in the poorly educated youngsters of the locale. However, these realities are the outcome of the socio-economic crisis faced by the inhabitants of Vanity Bagh. Mistry opines that globalization and liberalization will worsen the economic plight of muslims in India, for they demand highly educated and skilled

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

labourers in the market economy. (409) The religion of the inhabitants, as well, is criticised over and again for the degradation of the place. Vanity Bagh also exposes how people hold to their belief system for both good and bad reasons.

The story of Vanity Bagh is told, covering decades of the post-Independent India and it shows how stories are formed, how they travel across the minds of the people, both in the exterior and the interior of a community. When Imran's mother recalls her earliest memory of the place, she remarks that there has been no notable change that occurred in the street for many decades. "In my memory those buildings haven't changed a bit in thirty years. -Bushara Jabbari (1962-)" (Salim 12). Salim has enlisted dates through the length and breadth of narration to notify that the small towns of minority settlements have never undergone any constructive changes in the post-independent India. Vanity Bagh outcries the negligence of the state towards a section of society and the place where they live, by denying to provide better infrastructure to the citizens. Segregation of muslims in urban India exhibits signs of state sponsored social exclusion and neglect, propelling socio-political unrest. (Susewind 1288). Salim elaborates on the pessimistic condition, "That is one thing I have always noticed about Vanity Bagh. It is always busy, unreasonably so because it houses no important places- no government office where you get important licences or certificates for bribe, no famous shop which run discount sales all year round, no eminent fakir who can cure even Hepatitis B by merely blowing into your years, nothing of the crowd pulling sort." (12)

The society of Vanity Bagh should be studied considering the political and religious factors described in the text. When the space and time or rather the history of Vanity Bagh is narrated by a prisoner, it explicitly conveys the tonality of the story. According to Luri Lotman, "In this way the dual nature of literature is displayed: while representing a particular event it at the same time represents the whole picture of the world, in telling of the tragic fate of the heroine it tells of the tragic nature of the world as a whole. For this reason the good or bad ending is important: it testifies not only to the completion of the plot but also to the construction of the world as a whole (Lotman, 264). Therefore, the tragedy of the hero in the novel has a repercussion in the world around him. The Muslim majority of the Bagh has a peculiar connection with the space where they dwell because of the isolation they face from the outside world. Individuals living in conflict societies have shared memory and history that leaves a perennial impact in their complicated identity and victimhood. (Keynan 20,21).

The backstory of a timeless rivalry between the Hindu neighbourhood and Muslims, is one of the major binding factors of the people in Vanity Bagh. Economic disparity, poverty, lack of education and the negligence of the state are all other factors influencing the narrative pertaining to Vanity Bagh but religious identity in Vanity Bagh undoubtedly appears to be the source of all the issues. "The assertion of religious identity in the process of democratisation and modernization should not be seen only as religious fanaticism or fundamentalism; it should also be seen as a method by which deprived communities in a backward society seek to obtain a greater share of power, government jobs and economic resources" (Ali Engineer 4). "If Vanity Bagh is a pocket-sized Pakistan, it is only natural to have a line of control, however tenuous, running through some part of Mangobagh" (Salim 60). Salim further narrates why there is a need for Line of Control in Vanity Bagh, "This neighbourhood is called Mehandi, a rambling Hindu colony which celebrates every festival with saffron flags and

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

yolk-coloured laddoos" (Salim 61).This dangerous but usual scenario is highlighted in chronicling the story of Vanity Bagh through the lens of a prisoner who is an Indian Muslim and a terrorist. A group of young men from lower-middle-class families, building a friendship for illegal activities is not an appreciable venture in any small town. Vanity Bagh vocalises a space that has no religious harmony, no peace and calamities fluttering in the air without any impediments. The Christian inhabitants in the Bagh are people with absolutely no voice and the Hindu neighbourhood named Mehandi is a potential threat to the inhabitants of Vanity Bagh and vice versa.

The assertion of identity has been the only powerful and effective method in a society which discriminates against people based on religion (Ahamed 521). A detailed study of the time period in the novel exposes how minorities are treated in post colonial India over time. The author was keen on maintaining the anonymity of the place, which would rather account for India's political and social circumstances which worsened the dignity of living, for certain sections of people. The electoral battles, communal riots, and vote shares, are factors that can shape the political discourse of a particular region. In his monumental work *Culture and Society,* Raymond Williams discusses the changes that happened to the term 'industry' and 'class' which eventually demanded to analyse 'culture' and 'society' as new terms with various other prominent parameters. Economic progression in various aspects of social life has woven 'class' and its derivation in Europe (Williams). It has been one of the significant reasons for the growth of cultural studies in Western academia. In India, 'caste' and 'religion' can efficiently replace the notion of 'class' in Europe. The point of focus is that the western idea of 'class' can never be equated to 'caste' and 'religion' in India, but the inevitable and pervasive reality of discrimination can be accounted as a unifying variable in both cases. The humour and pathos in the story-telling encompasses how meanings are produced out of a particular region. The craftsmanship enabled the story to travel through the various institutions in a political territory to make the story realistic. The homes, school, jail, shops, mosques, playgrounds and even the cemetery in Mango Bagh chronicled the story of an Indian Village filled with communal cacophony.

Vanity Bagh underlines the Indian political reality of negating all the crucial circumstances that twist the narratives of a space or a person by fixating the focus to their religious identity. If an Indian village is named 'pocket-sized Pakistan', the dominant narratives on the culture of that particular space becomes contentious. The perspectives formed out of such a lousy track record may be unfavourable to excuse the people who are not involved in it due to obvious reasons. In simple sense, perspective formation imparts collective consciousness, it leaves collective memory of violence and brutality, and there is hardly any escape from it. Low rightly points out that"…it is often impossible to escape the pressures of one's cultural group when one remains in the community." (387) It stays with people and creates impressions that will destroy the dignity of a region forever. There are several Indian villages which are infamous for their criminal background, but it does not mean that all the inhabitants of such places are criminals.

Every society consists of different social engineering strategies, which account for social stratification and social order. Likewise, in Vanity Bagh, there is compartmentalisation of society, primarily among Muslims and Christians. Among Muslims, again, the divide has extended to rich, poor, religious, non-religious, patriots, and so on. The irony is that these stratifications had no momentum outside

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

Vanity Bagh; the whole place is united with a single amoral tagline. Social stratification within the Bagh is reflected in each family, where people build their relationships based on ranks. In her profound speech 'The danger of a single story', Adichie sketched the nuances of how the cultural turn happens outside of a particular region. She says,

"I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar".

She criticises how outsiders judge people who do not fit into the mainstream culture, religion, race or even language. *Vanity Bagh* also contemplates how analysis through a single-window limits the view of the wholeness of a place that is rich in its own delight and despair. Such single stories have greater influence in the socio-emotional development of people in a place, especially among youngsters. Unfortunately, such narrow perspectives make meaning which transform into discourse. In the introduction of his book, *What is cultural sociology?* Lyn Spillman wrote " Our lives are full of meanings and meaning-making. Sometimes our ideas and values are totally taken for granted. We are supported and sustained by perceptions of the world which seem natural and inevitable passed on to us implicitly by those who raise us. Our meaning-making is like breathing and we don't notice the air that surrounds us. (Spillman)

The Characters and their Names

Salim designs Imran, the central protagonist in the novel, as a man of complications. The character's arc imparts a vivid trajectory of the psyche moulded by the immediate social experience that he has undergone. Imran knew the value of money, he hated his Hindu neighbourhood, mocked Christians in his locality, and his only aspiration was to become a don in the mohalla. The memoirs of Imran, while in prison, record that he is misunderstood and manipulated by the social life he led during the formative years of his life. His ardent admiration for Abu Hathim Sahib, an old rich man, who built an empire of his own in the mohalla by indulging in unlawful activities, is enough to conclude, how corrupted a mind Imran possesses. Imran and his friends shared indistinguishable goals in life, which is to make money, and they were daring enough to challenge the law and order of the Bagh.

The references in the novel are sharp in terms of the political spectrum it represents. The author has chosen the names of Pakistan's influential political leaders in his novel to describe a local story. These fictional characters with the names of real-life personalities make the subject of discussion hilarious but cannot dismiss the political intentions of the narration. The names of the people have been added to the discourse of the premises. It has attributed a meaning which would leave long lasting impressions of ambiguity to the region.

Zia looked expectantly at Navaz Sharif, who had a genuine reason not to come along: Jamal Sahib and his father were not first cousins but, worst enemies. Zia discouraged an enthusiastic Jinnah from being anywhere near his future wife's house, the windows of which Jinnah had threatened to smash when Jamal sahib refused to contribute to Sadam Hussein Peace Foundation, a charity organisation Jinnah solely managed and was the sole beneficiary of. (Salim 137)

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

Characters and in fact, fiction, are seen to imitate or to allow perception of a meaning or reality outside of or above or behind the fiction itself. We understand fictional characters, according to this critical perspective, by measuring them against this outside reality, by observing to what degree they conform to it or surpass it or fall short of it, by analysing to what extent they reflect it, illuminate it, or obscure and distort it. The task this criticism sets for itself is to explain the presence and the meaning of fictional characters through recourse to a non-fictional to a real. Let us call this critical perspective "referential," a term that will help avoid undue emphasis on both "reality" and "external," notions that are not essential here to the category. Characters in literature and in film have meaning and are understood because they refer to a second dimension of meaning, to some outside reality or truth. (Mead 441)

Now look at how Salim has done the nomenclature of the characters in the novel; all his leading men and women in the narration, mostly share their names with the presidents and prime ministers of Pakistan. Zia, Yahiya, Jinnah, Navas Sharif, Benazir, Zulfikar and many others have become the unemployed and conflicted youth of Mango Bagh. This brings a political shade, or rather can be understood that the outside reality of these names would give a strictly political dimension to the reading. Also, the narration justifies calling the vanity bagh as the 'little Pakistan' in its literal and political perspectives. The employment of these names is controversial when its connotative aspect is explored. It makes the readers giggle, but the open ending interpretations of these names cannot ignore the political landscape of Vanity Bagh. Salim has left a hint in these lines setting the subtleness of his sharp political narration, "Zia, who had this bad habit of digging deep things and coming up with laughable trivia of life, who said we all had the names of Pakistani politicians, we could not stop laughing for a whole week." (Salim 26)

Vanity Bagh as a Gendered Society

The society in Vanity Bagh throws light upon the life of its women. Salim made the air around these women very normal and realistic. This pattern of representing women augment the reality of the narration. "Whereas earlier writers have glorified women's suffering, however, Indian novelists in the last two or three decades have on the whole presented it unpalliatively , with much greater realism, and without minimizing its impact by giving it the halo of noble self-sacrifice. Recent Indian novelists tend to present oppression of women with great consciousness, a deeper sense of involvement, and not infrequently a sense of outrage." (Gupta 299-300). Even the portrayal of Bushra Jabari, Imran's mother, clearly cleared the fact that this story is not about the women, though it is about the shared place where these women are doubly marginalized. The fight won by Bushra Jabbari could only account for her overreactions and tears. Imran believed that his mother could even make into soap operas for her exaggerated emotional responses. All the mother figures in the Bagh shared a common template of behaviour. They are benevolent towards their kids, no matter what these sons did for their earnings. The inequality prevails all through the representation of women in the narration. The tale stays close to reality by exploring how women are strategically removed from the socio-economic mainstream. The subjugation is evidently recorded in the novel with the subtle dialogues they pass. Encroachment into personal spaces and many gender biases ranging from displacement of locality

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

after marriage, broken marriages, choice in partner selection, education and others are spoken in a realistic language without digressing from the main theme of the narration.

As with women from other communities, Muslim women are differentiated across gender, class, caste and community, and are subject to the interface between gender and community within the Indian social, political and economic context. At the same time, Muslim women's location in modern India also derives from their status as a minority, which colours their life experience and self-perception in distinct ways, and in this respect they differ from women belonging to other communities. After five decades of independence the majority of Muslim women are among the most disadvantaged, least literate, economically impoverished and politically marginalized sections of Indian society. (Saeed 118)

In the novel, the women characters appear occasionally as supportive agents in the narration. Their intentions were uncomplicated, and nothing eventual happened with these interventions in the narration. They were asked to behave in a way that would be tender, caring and most importantly, naïve. The narration was sarcastic at times, as the author demanded a predictable characterization pattern for the female characters. The narration thus turned into the most befitting answer for the patriarchal notions pervasive in Vanity Bagh. The women in Vanity Bagh were the women of post-Independent India, who were simultaneously the necessity and the useless figures. “Most Muslim women remain 'invisible' workers in the informal economy”(Saeed 124). The discourse of an underprivileged society would be preferably unfair in treating its women. The lack of meaninglessness in their lives carve the meaning for a socio-cultural space deprived of the active participation of women.

Conclusion

Salim is keen on showing the space’s nuances, which initiates irksomeness in the saga. The politically miscellaneous culture built around Vanity Bagh satisfies the accurate picture of many small towns in India. The regional and religious inclination of the people is always an oeuvre for analysing how people connect with each other.An individual's identity serves as a conduit for the transmission of culture both inside and outside. People acknowledge their identity by placing themselves within a network of ideologies. The socio-economic, political, and religious features are placed in a region, and the individuals locate themselves somewhere in this spectrum by virtue of their birth. Therefore, the individual is a product of collective memory that forms a culture. Having been raised by a system which enables personality development through societal and cultural influences, an individual has innumerable ways to determine their social self. Imran and all his friends identify their social selves as frauds because they are thrown into a misleading network of ideologies, and they hardly get an opportunity to introspect.

In Vanity Bagh, Salim is curious about exposing the building blocks of culture, juxtaposing them with the political landscape of contemporary India. The way Imran and his friends bully their fellow Christian inhabitants and humiliate their Hindu neighbourhood is an agenda they have, it can be also read as a terrible ‘normal’ tendency that any random kid raised in such a precarious zone gradually develops.. This normalisation terminates the scope for principled emotional growth. The system’s approach to labelling a region as immoral for its socio-cultural pattern is atrocious. This monstrosity

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

has far-reaching reverberations in the myth, jokes, language, and even political records regarding the Bagh. Thus, it transgresses the framework of cultural space forever and eventually introduces a new discourse in the space. The strategically evolved cultural pattern gradually gets imprinted in the people's collective consciousness.. It dismisses the slightest possibility to understand the region devoid of prejudices and preoccupations. Most often the state-sponsored cultural prejudices are meticulously crafted, spontaneous and informidable. Salim foregrounds how a society attempting to break away from an agenda driven political ambit is persistently targeted and how even their attempts at resistance further entangle them.

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