



Resisting the British Raj: An Overview of The Unchosen

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Abstract- Varied were the ways through which the British Raj tried to maintain its rule in the subcontinent, yet it was not smooth sailing. The more the Raj made exploitative inroads into the resources of the subcontinent, the more it encountered resistance as anti-colonial consciousness gained momentum. One comes across critics like Eva Geulen who suggest that the term 'resistance' is no longer tenable and should be replaced by interests generated in cultural and cross-cultural studies. Through a focused reading of *The Unchosen*, a historic novel by Riaz Hassan, the present paper attempts to dispel the impression that the term is out of fashion. While asserting the continued relevance of resistance, the study also argues that displacing the term from its cultural habitat and renaming it euphemistically would amount to re-colonizing it in the postcolonial arena. It also endeavors to indicate how through 'unchosen' ways, the narrative accounts for resistance to the colonizers.

Key Words: resistance; colonialism; Hassan; Hakim Khan; The Unchosen

I. INTRODUCTION

"Long trains of ill may pass unheeded, - dumb, -

But vengeance is behind, and justice is to come."

Thompson (1838: 11)

Though the British *Raj* prevailed over the subcontinent for well over a century, it was not without perils and pitfalls. It met resistance in varying degrees and in different shapes and forms. The biggest reason was, to quote Soloman (1994: 324): "the British carried on repression relentlessly in India." In the words of Bhambra (2007: 16), for the nations of the subcontinent this was "...a colonial encounter...a conquest, domination, and enslavement of peoples and forms of life." With bodies and minds enslaved, how long would people live unmoved and unalarmed? Perhaps more importantly, when coloniality also appears to be "a matter of consciousness", then, as Bhambra (2007: 17) argues, "it needs to be defeated in the minds of people."

As used above, the phrase "colonial encounter" suggests two sides to this phenomenon, repressive masters on one side and repressed subjects on the other. For the former the encounter is advantageous, but at great physical and psychological cost to the latter. The masters want their forceful authority to be heard, propagated, and implemented, while the repressed subjects work to wriggle free of the colonial yoke. As Abraham (2006: 144) holds, "the ability of the individual to begin to break free of tradition and to start anew, represents a radical act of freedom, a necessary act of resistance that occurs between culture and system."

It then follows that resistance is a natural corollary to power, especially that generated by forceful, greedy colonization. But discussing the fate of the term 'resistance,' Geulen (1996: 3) remarks that "it is falling out of fashion," because of the emergence of the field of cultural studies greatly influenced writers such as by Foucault, Gramsci, Althusser, Derrida, Lacan and Bourdieu among others. This paper, however, poses 'resistance' to this assertion for the following reasons: (1) the term conveys its nature, force and gravity like no other term: (2) this force is still at work in many parts of the world, especially in the neighborhood of Pakistan, where well armed, well equipped imperial forces have been trying to suppress local resistance with little success for decades: (3) through its historic protagonist the selected narrative strongly suggests the continued validity of the term. Camouflaging it does not put an end to resistance of arms or of minds. Postcolonial coloniality is still at work in such statements. We see further, in Geulen (1996: 4 - 5), assertions like the following:

Resistance is never only and purely resistant but always also complicitous and compromised, separated from itself through its intimate relationship to that which is resisted. Resistance is radically immanent, in other words; and because it is radically immanent, it remains forever impure, always infected, compromised, and undermined by what is resisted.

This muted neocolonial attempt to dilute and neutralize the substance of the word is worthy of note. Of course, it hardly needs to be said that if there is nothing to resist there is no point to resistance, so its link with the thing it resists is formally established. However, resistance is not always 'complicitous (or) compromised' by what it resists. It may become impure, but not "forever impure." Compromise, however, may appear to have made 'resistance' impure and infected, but if it makes or starts making compromises under compelling circumstances then it may be said to have undergone hibernation which may resurface itself when it regains power. Besides this, resistance may transform itself according to changing circumstances. Given the context of the novel under study one may safely recall Foucault's famous line from his *History of Sexuality* which says "where there is power, there is resistance." Keeping this in view, Medina (2011: 10) holds that "Struggles of resistance should be studied in their specificity, but without thereby renouncing investigation of their connections, intersections, and points of convergence and divergence."

There is yet another perspective of resistance which Kaplan & Kelly (1994: 126) note:

To Gramsci, mere "resistance" was simply the mark of subaltern discontent, not the actual stuff of transformative change. At the other extreme is the organic intellectual, core of the vanguard that will lead the subaltern from resistance to revolutionary agency. The organic intellectual does not merely resist hegemony. He or she overturns it by organizing new collective cognizance of its exploitation, its limits, and the superiority of a new higher order for civilized life.

Some measure of disagreement with the foregoing can be registered here. Resistance might at times be 'simply the mark of subaltern discontent,' but it can also be the stuff of transformative change, by virtue of which it tends to manifest itself in the presence of all hegemonic practices. The question as to how colonization produces a resistant organic intellectual can be answered when we understand the process of colonization. Merriman (1999: 307) states as follows: "colonization is thus a process of separation, of alienation from oneself, in which the minds, bodies, spirits and languages of the colonized are abused." The form and shape of the term resistance which emerges now, refutes what Kaplan & Kelly (1994: 126) assert, namely, that "resistance itself is largely unconscious activity." Resistance in colonizing context tends to be conscious and active.

This delineation of the term makes for an easier appraisal of Hassan's second novel, *The Unchosen*. The novel is significant in respect of modern times. Set in the tribal areas of undivided India, near Peshawar, its historic range is extended from the nineteenth century to the second decade of the twentieth century. The time of its publication coincides with an epoch-making event of 9 / 11, though it was published a year later, in 2002. There is, however, another important aspect of time which this narrative strongly refers to and that is its future time.

The narrative opens with excerpts from a letter, Landi Kotal, c. 1850, from Mrs Tomlinson to her sister in Essex, England. Before we are introduced to two Muslim Pashtoon cousins, Abdel Rehman Khan and Abdel Hekim Khan, we are taken aback at the demonizing categorization of tribal sardars and Asiatic people. The description of the Pashtoon cousins is not commendable. Abdel Rehman Khan is known to have "authored so many" woes of the British, and Abdel Hekim Khan is thought to be "the worst of all..."(1). Abdel Hekim Khan, however, formally starts the narrative in the first-person pronoun. It is he who, with mixed success, seeks to mobilize the split tribes of the hill areas under his leadership and makes successful, if inconclusive, attacks on the advancing British Indian forces— a threat to the tribal people and their way of life. A thorn in the British flesh, Abdel Hakim Khan has to be removed from the scene if the rulers are to advance their imperial ambitions on lands not yet under their sway. The resilient Hakim Khan has to surrender to the British, albeit under intriguing circumstances, yet his mind and soul remain invincible as he opens new avenues of resisting the *Raj* through the indigenous production of weapons. Till his last days, Hakim Khan keeps resisting the British *Raj* in one way or the other. He thus frustrates the colonizers' euphoric claims that they have conquered the tribal areas. The 'unchosen' ways of struggle that the protagonist chooses leave marks on the pages of history that lands may be occupied by force or guile, subjects may be deceived and betrayed, but the spirits and minds of the people can hardly

be occupied. A heavy-handed attack on one's way of life can become an attack on life itself: nobody surrenders life easily.

II. DISCUSSION

The narrative substantively points to the politics of 'us' and 'them' which the British Raj advanced in their private as well as public discourse in order to alienate and marginalize Asiatic people, especially Muslims. Mrs. Tomlinson's letter alludes to private British attitudes towards Asiatic people. Derogatory judgments are made against the latter, like "*Brodie (and others) think we are being altogether too kind to these savages...*" or that "*Time means nothing to Asiatic people in general, one of the several abrasions in our daily commerce with them,*" (1) Aladaylah (2010: 1) also records such discourses

Constructs of Othering is a construct of Western colonialism discourse . . . in the process of Othering, the Self is centered, glorified and made visible while the other is vilified . . . the fundamental element in the project of Othering is the provision of positive features to the Occident and negative ones to the Orient . . .

But Hakim Khan resists this vilification campaign not only thorough his words but also through his actions. He says "I found it illogical to put all members of any tribe or community into one category" (33). The exercise of force and the coercive practices, whether indigenous or foreign in nature, are disliked by the protagonist. Resistance, therefore, to what is wrong is first felt within the heart; it then makes its way to the tongue and finally expresses itself in physical action. Though considered "worst of all" (1) by the British because he poses unyielding resistance to the imperial project and hence a big threat which needs to be eliminated at all cost, is in fact quite kind at heart. In chapter two of the novel, he and Fahim Khan are attacked by unknown assailants and during this sudden skirmish the protagonist manages to kill one of the assailants with his sword, Struck with remorse, he expresses his thoughts as follows:

'Yes, something else worries me. It's wrong. They looked like us, they spoke like us and above all they were believers like us, or I assume so. Why on earth were we trying to kill each other? We should have been fighting on the same side.'

Fahim Khan, however, replies in a more pragmatic manner. He says "'Hey! Don't bother about rights and wrongs... they were common thieves. I think they were after our weapons...That's how cheap life is nowadays...We had every right to defend ourselves. Stop feeling guilty about it!'"

The allusion is indirect, but one almost immediate corollary of colonization was the impoverishment of local people, directly affecting traditional ways of survival and imposing traumatic changes on them. We have Thomson's (1838: 7) historic lecture delivered in Rose Street Chapel, Edinburgh, where he reveals that "two million and a half, or three million sterling, are naturally sent out of the country, to pay pensions, divide dividends, or keep in half-pay independence the Company's retired servants." This was the 'official' amount. Unofficially, there was considerable drainage of wealth acquired through bribery and extortion. And then, of course, there was the maintenance of large imperial armies with their well-stocked garrisons, ostentatious pageantry and expensive weaponry—image-making was an essential feature of the Raj. What all this represents in terms of modern currencies is inestimable, but we can be sure that it made destructive inroads into local economies, especially the fragile ones of the tribal belt. Thompson (1838: 7) admits that "the system has turned out thousands and tens of thousands of peaceful villagers to become Thugs and Decoits, to prey upon the persons and property of unwary travelers." The plot of the novel thus locates, beside other important issues, the modern and non-modern status of the colonizers and the colonized. Doyle's (2011: 515) description is relevant here:

Arturo Escobar and Walter D. Mignolo have argued that "there is no modernity without coloniality, because coloniality is constitutive of modernity." Like other postcolonial thinkers, they highlight a system in which modern powers have become modern powers by draining the resources and energies of the "periphery" for use within the imperial "center." And so they urge us to place the two terms together in slashed relation – to speak always of modernity/coloniality, since the two are contingent and interdependent. (I reverse their order and refer to coloniality/modernity, to emphasize further the enabling role of colonialism.)

At this historical juncture of the time Hassan's protagonist rightly feeling the pulse of the new world order awakens quickly to the need of the hour and resists strongly the ills of his own society and the imperial

danger that looms large at the threshold of the hill areas. He assembles the split tribes under his command and prepares them for a resistance hitherto unknown to the tribal people. The impetus is given to Hakim Khan by several factors including his uncle Murad Khan who after his early attempts at resistance feels it futile to fight against an organized army and signals that he wants peace with the British. He even toys with the idea of getting Hakim Khan killed. However, despite his willingness to enter into an understanding with the British, he realizes that there must first be some effective resistance to old ways of thinking among his own people before they can think of dealing with an overwhelming new threat—in effect, they must accept peripheral change in order to resist substantive change. This is how Hassan shares with his readers the private thoughts of Murad Khan:

. . . I dearly loved brother Habib, but in the interest of the rest of us I had to remove him. I would never have risen to my rightful place. He was too old fashioned, holding us back to the dead past with his unthinking adherence to obsolete custom and tradition... I don't see why we should be tied forever to an ossified Arab vision... we have to move forward. . .

The narrative challenges the British Raj's claims about the people of the region. Thomson (1838: 2) describes them as "the neglected and defenseless tribes of uncivilized human beings," and "unenlightened inhabitants of our colonial possessions." Hassan's narrative, further, strongly resists the idea that resistance to decolonization can be neutralized by the colonizing mindset and its tools. Once raised, anti-colonial consciousness rarely subsides. It is through this anti-colonial consciousness, as *The Unchosen* shows, that the plans, wishes and desires of the British Raj are exposed. The prize was possession and control over the huge pastiche of the subcontinent. Many, including Bharmachari (1910: 210), had quite adequately noticed that

England wishes India to be ruled for her benefit, and uses every means, whether fair or foul, to bring it about...England's best interest lies in India; loss of India, Lord Curzon truly said, would be the setting sun of British glory.

To achieve this agenda, the British had, therefore, gone to the age-old colonial policy of divide and rule. One observes in the novel that they were quite successful in this policy when Abdel Rehman Khan is used against his own cousin Abdel Hakim Khan; and they, colluding with compliant elements among the colonized, manage to trick the hero into surrendering. Through this colonization, Bharmachari (1910: 210) opines, the colonizer "has been trying to convey to the civilized world the impression that it is in the best interest of India and of humanity that she has condescended to take up the huge responsibility of Indian administration."

The narrative also highlights the double standards of the colonizers in excerpts from letters and dispatches included in chapter five of the novel. In one excerpt from a letter from Major Marston to his friend in Plymouth, England, the former says that they [British] are trying to "*persuade them to join us for the good of all,*" and that "*In effect we are trying to guide our foes into the fray on our own terms*" (58). He further writes "*we buy all this cannon fodder for a few coins, and can afford to be prodigal with it. The source is inexhaustible; our recruiting centers are swamped with applications*" (60). How glaring is this contradiction? It is like blowing hot and cold in the same breath; declaring the natives "*foes,*" buying them to fight "*for a few coins,*" and expecting them to join the Raj "*for the good of all.*" The letter thus indicates, what Ashcroft et al (2003: 97) argue, namely, "the great myth of salvation becomes a saga of destruction," and it is evident from the text how the innocent natives lose their lives in the name of their welfare and salvation.

Similarly, Major Marston at one place in the letter says that typecasting one's adversaries "*is a common error,*" (59) yet he himself does so while talking about the tribal people as he says "*... invention is not encouraged in their frozen, self-sustaining, self-satisfied mode of thinking*" (60). At the question of invention not being encouraged amongst the people living at the borders, the text on numerous occasions resists such sweeping generalizations as one notices that there is a steady progress from swords to a weapon industry. The weapon industry starts producing quality stuff. At the end of the novel, in chapter sixteen it is through Yusuf Khan – the son of Hakim Khan, in one of his letters addressed to his brother Habibullah Khan, that we learn how "*even the Ferenghis buy our goods*" (157).

Abdel Hakim Khan becomes a symbol of resistance, change, and most of all leadership. He is a symbol of resistance not only to the colonizers but also to the immoral forces that threaten his efforts in creating "a society of moral excellence" (79). Hakim Khan's higher ideals and the practical steps taken for eliminating

the ills of his society, therefore, strongly resist the argument of Reverend Tufnell for whom "...it is a sad society indeed in which cheating, theft and murder are so lightly countenanced, even defended, nay, even applauded" (62). Hakim Khan is the symbol of change and leadership because of the strength of his character. This has a considerable appeal amongst the scattered people and tribes. This is how he describes it:

I was surprised at the number of people who wanted to join me in the experiment, and rejoiced at this expression of piety, welcoming one and all. In no time the numbers swelled until I had more than two hundred families, representing more than a thousand people, looking up to me as their leader.

From the movement of the narrative Hassan tries to raise a historical mirror wherein his readers can see the true faces of the colonizers and the colonized. The excerpts from the letters of the British civilian and army personnel, which Hassan uses to start and end the novel, draw an ugly picture of the natives, especially of the protagonist as he being a 'subject' dares to stand against his 'masters.' On this occasion, Fanon (1963: 41) comes to one's mind. He says

...the native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil.

What is further disturbing in this regard is that the natives happen to be Muslims who are portrayed negatively. Kamppi (2008: 299), in this regard, asserts "Muslims are depicted as a coherent group, aggressive and threatening, or with a tendency towards these attributes. Strong and charged words are used." But one is surprised also to read that Abdel Rehman Khan is praised by Colonel Cranwell when the former meets the latter to discuss the lot of the protagonist of the novel. Rehman Khan is described by Colonel Cranwell in the following words: "*he is a likable, open, human sort of man*" (64). The reason behind this liking is that Rehman Khan is willing to surrender his identity as a free tribal and help the colonizers in the advancement of their imperial agenda. While dealing with the two cousins – one helping the rulers while the other is fighting them – the discriminatory attitudes of the British are foregrounded, reinforcing Said's (1994 xviii) observation about the colonial mindset in the following excerpt:

We Westerners will decide who is a good native or a bad, because all natives have sufficient existence by virtue of our recognition. We created them, we taught them to speak and think, and when they rebel they simply confirm our views of them as silly children, easily duped by some of their masters.

Notwithstanding, it appears that Rehman Khan's efforts for winning Hakim Khan over to the side of the rulers has some elements of fear to that. Fear and threats do wonders. Moore (2004: 51) asserts that "Fear works . . . you can make people do anything if they are afraid" and "you make them afraid by creating an aura of endless threat." The text substantiates this idea and we see how Cranwell infuses fear into Rehman Khan's heart. The protagonist being the topic of discussion between the two, Cranwell says

Most of our army planners are furious and want to wipe him out, to push him and his followers off the face of the earth. If they really set about it they could, you know. We have to keep them in check with cool hands.

On the contrary, we see that Hakim Khan has a defiant personality and he, like an army expert, is quick at reaching to conclusions by analyzing the situation. He is praised, therefore, by his cousin who warns Cranwell not to take any hasty step against the protagonist as he "*is very quick at understanding things. Nothing would work if he suspected me*" (67). The sharpness of the mind of the hero of the novel is due also to his keen assessment of the rapidly changing circumstances and he realizes that what he and his people are in is an all out war and that their identity is at stake. This is substantiated by the notes in Cranwell's diary:

. . . we are witnessing an unfortunate recrudescence of the bellum iustum among our administrators . . . who feel that a state of war should be maintained until all other nations become exactly like us in thought, speech, worship, dress and behavior.

However, the way the colonizers try to create and disseminate a universal identity of themselves – the superior, and the colonized – as inferiors, the narrative makes us realize that it is not universal. Regarding the universalism of the identity Richards (1994: 20) holds that it is "only an optical illusion . . . an effect created by a discourse." The resistant identity which Hakim Khan carries with himself despite all odds is significant. Huntington (2005: 22) is of the view that "identities are important because they shape the

behavior of people." The identity, therefore, of Hakim Khan is like Sartre's "being-for-itself," which the colonizers try to portray as "being-in-itself." The strong identity of the protagonist of the novel is summarized by what Grossberg (1996: 21) refers to when he says "identity is a structural representation which only enhances its positive through the narrow of the negative. It has to go through the narrow eye of the other before it can construct itself."

III. CONCLUSION

One may conclude that replacing 'resistance' with other words or trying to absorb the concept into larger considerations would be like divesting the king of his robes. Attempts to reframe or dilute it generally fall flat. It remains rooted in its cultural habitat. Its continuing existence is reaffirmed in the shape of Hakim Khan whose actions and thoughts put a great deal of resistance to the ills of his own society and its conservatism, as well as to the imperial projects of the British Raj. It is through this 'resistance' that the protagonist ushers in a new wave of change despite being colonized.

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