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A Contrapuntal Analysis of *Othering* in Rabindranath Tagore's "Kabuliwala" and Tariq Rahman's "Charity"

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Abstract

This research paper analyzes two modern short stories Rabindranath Tagore's "Kabuliwala" and Tariq Rahman's "Charity" through the conceptual lens of *Othering*. Within the broader theoretical framework of Postcolonialism, the concept of *Othering* entails the dichotomy of the *Demonic Other* and the *Exotic Other*. The mentioned writers, through their respective characters of the Kabuliwala and the Clerk, provide an insight into the stereotypical discourse which constitutes and permeates a society segregated on the basis of cultural and class differences. Through a contrapuntal analysis of the said texts, this paper explores how the dominant community perceives and stereotypes the marginalized as the *Other*. It also propounds the reasons behind the psychological constructions of fear and fascination revolving around the *Other*, whic[1]h contribute to forming the image of the *Demonic* and *Exotic Other*. The aim of the paper is to make the readers realize the significance of the acceptance of the *Other* in order to build a society inclusive of all its multiple divisions.

Key words: *Othering*, *Demonic* and *Exotic Other*, marginalized, dominant, community

Introduction

Cultural and class differences permeate in any multicultural society whose individuals are either ignorant or discriminatory of its marginalized communities. The roots of segregation, marginalization and alienation lie in the diverse categories of class, culture, race and/or religion. Such categories give birth to essentially two divisions within a society, the dominating elites and the suppressed groups. Rabindranath Tagore's "Kabuliwala" and Tariq Rahman's "Charity" aptly represent the oblivious and derogatory attitude of the elite community through their characters of Mini and her family, and Bobby and Rabab, respectively. Besides, the two prominent characters of the Kabuliwala and the Clerk constitute the marginalized community whose lack of voice, identity or any kind of representation in the society impel the reader to ponder over the existence of such bias. It is indeed a matter of serious concern that the members of the dominant community are either unaware of the culture of the minorities — as in "Kabuliwala" — or are prejudiced towards their very existence — as in "Charity". The initial reaction of Mini and her family towards the Afghan Kabuliwala is replete with fear and unacceptability. Although this fear transforms into fascination of the Kabuliwala because of his alien culture, yet the desired inclusivity of the Afghan culture within the Bengali-dominated society is never seen to be achieved throughout the story. Quite similar is the case with Bobby and Rabab, who are initially fascinated by the poverty of the interior city of Rawalpindi which they consider as the real Pakistan. However, upon visiting the Clerk's house located at the heart of the slum areas of the city, the image of the poverty-stricken

[1] (**Note:** This research uses Mohammad A. Quayum's English translation of "Kabuliwala" by Rabindranath Tagore)

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locals takes a gruesome intensity of filth and repulsion, thus invoking fear in the two diasporic teenagers. The Clerk, as opposed to the Kabuliwala, is more vocal in asserting his identity in an attempt to subvert the stereotypical notions of incivility and vulgarity associated with the locals and perpetuated by the elite class. This fear and fascination revolving around the minority community result in labeling them, what Edward Said refers to, as the *Other* in the society. In accordance with Said's concept of the *Other*, both the Kabuliwala and the Clerk can aptly be defined as perfect embodiments of the *Demonic* and the *Exotic Other*. Several instances in the two stories depict how the dominant community perceives them either as individuals to be feared, the *Demonic Other*, or to be fascinated, the *Exotic Other*, thus propagating a discourse which perpetuates segregation and alienation rather than acceptance and inclusion of the marginalized communities in a multicultural society.

Literature Review

The short stories "Kabuliwala" and "Charity" have been analyzed as representations of class and cultural differences, and complexity of human relationships. Scholars Aziz Ahmad and Tariq Khan (2019) have read "Charity" from the perspective of cultural clash within the postcolonial discourse. Several critics also highlight the characters of the story as apt depictions of the colonial mindset, resulting in a cultural collision between the elite colonizer and the marginal colonized. In contrast to "Charity", the focus of "Kabuliwala" shifts towards the discernment of complex human relationships and alienation. This is evident in S. Nancy Jaya's (2020) article which accentuates the parallelism between the filial bond of a Bengali father with his daughter and that of an Afghan father with his daughter. Her article emphasizes upon the sentiments of a father yearning to meet his daughter, a peculiar emotion which surpasses all cultural barriers. Moreover, Rafia Khan *et al*. (2022) discuss "Kabuliwala" from the standpoint of its narrative stylistics, whereas Malashri Lal (2010) studies it from the viewpoint of *Othering* — a principle necessary to create unity in diversity. However, none of these articles investigate Edward Said's concept of *Othering*, particularly in terms of the fear of the *Demonic Other* and the fascination of the *Exotic Other*, which this paper endeavors to explore.

Methodology

This research follows the methodology of contrapuntal analysis of the dominant and marginalized cultures portrayed in the two primary texts. Through their close textual analysis, and an in-depth study of their characters — like the Kabuliwala, Mini and her family in Tagore's "Kabuliwala", and Bobby, Rabab and the Clerk in Rahman's "Charity" — the paper focuses on the perception of the dominant community towards the minority. By keeping in view Edward Said's concept of *Othering*, this perception of the dominant culture oscillates between the feelings of fear and fascination of the marginalized termed as the *Other*. Various secondary sources, including books and published articles, have been employed to examine the perspectives of other researchers regarding the diversity of cultures portrayed in both stories.

Discussion and Textual Analysis

Stories by writers such as Rabindranath Tagore and Tariq Rahman constitute the quintessence in the literary canon of modern short story. Both the writers, although having their native roots in the Indian sub-continent, do not merely appeal to the Oriental readers but also to those of the West due to the richness and universality of their themes which surpass the bounds of

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time and space. One such pertinent theme which dominates multiple writings of Tagore and Rahman is the plights and predicaments of the marginalized community. "Kabuliwala" by Tagore and "Charity" by Rahman are amongst their several popular short stories which aptly represent a society segregated on the cruel yet crucial divisions of culture, race, class and ideology. This paper analyzes such a society as depicted in the two aforementioned short stories through the lens of Edward Said's concept of *Othering*, which is one of the essential elements framing the theory of Postcolonialism in the literary discourse.

During the middle of the twentieth century, Postcolonial theory gained widespread recognition in literature with the publication of books like *Orientalism* by the famous postcolonial critic Edward W. Said (1978). Said's works explore not just the consequences of imperialism on both the ruler as well as the ruled, but also aim to analyze literature and revise history from the perspectives of the marginalized groups in a society. Although the concept of *Othering* was first introduced in the Postcolonial theory by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay "The Rani of Sirmur", it was further elaborated by Edward Said whose connotations widened the horizon of the said concept and generated a discourse which embodied all marginalized or suppressed communities as the *Other* in a multicultural society. This paper evaluates two apt examples of the depiction of such marginalized communities, found in Tagore's "Kabuliwala" and Rahman's "Charity", and accentuates the concept of *Othering* not through the perspective of Postcolonialism but through the lens of cultural and socio-ideological multiplicities present in society.

Published in 1892, the short story entitled "Kabuliwala", composed by the first Indian Nobel laureate in literature Rabindranath Tagore, gained widespread recognition when it was translated into English. Originally written in Bengali, the story revolves around the Bengali culture, particularly depicting a stereotypical Bengali family of a little girl named Mini. The second short story "Charity" by Tariq Rahman, unlike "Kabuliwala", depicts a society of the post-partitioned Indian subcontinent, particularly that of Pakistan. Published in the collection entitled *The Legacy and Other Short Stories* in 1989, the story revolves around two Pakistani diasporic teenagers Bobby and Rabab who are on a visit to Islamabad, Pakistan from Europe. Both the stories, although written almost a century apart, run parallel to each other by delineating strikingly analogous societies which are segregated on the basis of cultural and class differences. Moreover, the characters of the two stories resemble in terms of their experiences revolving around discrimination of the marginalized community.

According to Edward Said (1995), the creation of binaries or what he terms as *Othering* occurs when critical, academic or any other text is conditioned and institutionalized by the reigning culture to promote its dogmas and play second fiddle with any other culture. Said re-evaluates the meaning of text and calls it *worldly*. The word *Othering* is often considered a pejorative term as it implies the perspective of the dominant or privileged community towards the marginalized, ultimately resulting in discrimination. Tagore and Rahman, through the selected short stories, subvert this established narrative by giving a distinct voice and identity to the characters representing the marginalized. This is evident from the standpoint of the narrative techniques of their stories which is in the first person personal pronoun "I". In case of Tagore, this "I" represents the dominant culture, that is of Bengal whereas for Rahman, "I" represents the "Westernised elite of Pakistan" (p. 87). Although written from the perspective of the privileged class and culture, yet both stories do not fail to address the stereotypical notions attached with the *Other*. In fact, the

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stories implicitly yet thoroughly accentuate the importance of assimilating the *Other* with the dominant community to maintain a social balance.

Edward Said (1995) asserts that the process of *Othering* is initiated by "power, of domination, of varying degree of a complex hegemony" (p. 5). Although Said defines *Othering* in terms of Oriental versus Occidental, it also includes "us/them, The West/the rest, center/margin, metropolitan/colonial subjects, vocal/silent" (Moosavinia *et al.*, 2011, p. 105). The concept of *Othering* subsumes all such binaries. *Othering* is represented in the two stories when the characters of the Kabuliwala and the Clerk are introduced. Both these characters are identified merely on the basis of either their place of origin — in case of the Kabuliwala as being from Kabul, Afghanistan — or their profession — as in case of the Clerk. Mini, the little Bengali girl, upon seeing the Afghan vender on the street just outside her house starts "calling out at the top of her voice, 'Kabuliwala, O Kabuliwala!'" (Tagore, 1). The Kabuliwala constitutes the *Other* in the eyes of Mini whose family symbolizes the dominant Bengali culture of the society.

Quite similar is the attitude of the Pakistani diasporic youngsters, Bobby and Rabab, who refer to a native man as 'the Clerk'. "The clerk's---for he was a clerk---house was towards the end of the street" (Rahman, 91). The Clerk constitutes the *Other* in the eyes of Bobby and Rabab who are a symbolic representation of the rampant ideology of Westernism controlling the elite class. It is pertinent to mention here that Mini's father gets acquainted with the real name of the Kabuliwala, which is Rahamat, after a few interactions. However, in case of the Clerk, neither Bobby nor Rabab invest any effort in finding out his real name. This namelessness on part of the Clerk, although unintentionally normalized by the elite class, is evident of the fact that individual identities of the marginalized remain suppressed, sidelined or unrecognized.

The description of the physical appearance of the Kabuliwala as well as the Clerk is an exemplary evidence of how the dominant gaze dehumanizes and alienates the marginalized by considering them as inferiors or savages. Right from the onset of the story, Mini's father depicts a rather pitiful image of the Kabuliwala by describing him as "a tall, shabbily clothed Afghan street vender, with a turban on his head, a bag over his shoulder and a few boxes of dry grapes in his hands [who] was passing through the street slowly" (Tagore, 1). Mini's father initially considers the Kabuliwala as a "nuisance with a sack over his shoulder [who] will show up in a moment and [he] won't be able to finish writing the seventeenth chapter of [his] novel" (p. 1). His "customary sack", "long hair" and "burly look" reflect the physical characteristics often stereotyped with the image of a thief or a savage (p. 5). Although Mini's father gradually establishes camaraderie with the Kabuliwala as the story progresses, eventually expressing his sympathy for him as a father towards the end, yet it cannot be denied that the majority community of Kolkata, Bengal perceives this Afghan man as the *Other* in their society.

The depiction of the Clerk's appearance as well as the place of his dwelling is no less pitiful than that of the Kabuliwala's. Bobby recounts the Clerk's miserable demeanor by calling him "a reedy looking man of twenty five or thereabouts [who] wore shabby clothes…He had an intensely absurd look on his face and his eyes were full of naked longing" for Bobby's attractive girlfriend, Rabab (Rahman, 90). His "leering" looks, "drooling" mouth and "gaping" eyes are all reflective of the animalistic features associated with the *Other* (p. 90). Bobby even refers to him as a "grinning half-starved ape" that is ready to devour Rabab anytime (p. 90). Commenting on the stereotypes related with the East, Praveen V. in his paper "Postcolonialism: Edward Said & Gayatri Spivak" (2016) argues that "…the orient [is] deemed remote, unchanging, primitive or

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backward…strange, fantastic, bizarre,…represent[ing] Arabs murderers and violent, the lazy Indian and the inscrutable Chinamen…coward, lazy, uncivilized…while the west [is] usually presented [as] culturally sound and civilized" (p. 48). This "primitive", "bizarre" and "uncivilized" image of the natives is evident in Bobby's perception and discernment of the Clerk who is presented as a detestable local, nothing less than a beast.

It is imperative to note here that Bobby considers Rabab and himself as the representatives of the Western, elite class of Pakistan. For him, "[wearing] jeans, listen[ing] to pop music", and studying from European institutions are the key features of a modern generic man which they proudly possess (Rahman, 87). Although Bobby realizes that their ancestral heritage lies amongst such native Pakistanis, yet neither Bobby nor Rabab pay any heed to assimilating themselves in their culture while exploring it. The striking difference which sets them apart from the natives and eventually becomes a subject of the Clerk's gaze is their dress, particulary Rabab's "hip-hugging jeans", that makes her "voluptuous curves" stand out in contrast to the women wearing "black burqah[s]" (p. 88). Ironically, at one instance, while sitting amongst the locals in a "dirt, dingy" restaurant, Bobby describes their countenances as "coarse brown" (p. 89). This clearly evinces that how the dominant culture of the West influences in creating discrimination amongst people of the same race. Moreover, Bobby's urge to employ the word 'native' as an abuse to show his scorn at the staring waiter evidently manifests that Bobby and Rabab regard themselves as the privileged diaspora of superior race while the natives as inferior.

Two essential components of *Othering* include the *Demonic* and the *Exotic Other* which are evident in the responses and attitudes of other characters towards the Kabuliwala and the Clerk. Lois Tyson, in her book *Critical Theory Today* (2006), portrays the *Other* in terms of its *Demonic* and *Exotic* characteristics in the following words:

> Th[e] practice of judging all who are different as less than fully human is called *othering*…The "savage" is usually considered evil as well as inferior (the *demonic other*). But sometimes the "savage" is perceived as possessing a "primitive" beauty or nobility born of a closeness to nature (the *exotic other*). (p. 420)

Throughout the stories, the Kabuliwala and the Clerk come forth as the "savage" assuming the role of either the *Demonic* or the *Exotic Other*, depending upon the perceptions and reactions of the other characters. The reactions of the members belonging to the dominant community oscillate between fear and fascination of the Kabuliwala and the Clerk; in some instances, this fear categorizes them as the *Demonic Other* while in other instances, the fascination of the *Other* takes over the privileged members who perceive the two as the *Exotic*. Such categorizations, although unintentional and implicit, play a significant role in perpetuating the notion of *Otherization* of the marginalized members in a society.

Tagore and Rahman sketch several instances in their stories which depict fear and fascination of the *Other* instilled in the hearts of the members of the privileged class and culture. This fear and fascination present the *Other* as everything which the dominant community is not, that is, demonic, "…exotic, alien, dangerous, unreliable, to be tamed, exhibited, a threat" to the other members, an "alter ego" and an "inferior reflection" of the dominant class and culture (Moosavinia *et al.*, 2011, p. 105). Such characteristics construct the stereotypical notions associated with the identities of the marginalized, such as the Kabuliwala and the Clerk, which are further perpetuated by the reactions and attitude of the dominant community towards them. A befitting representation of this fear of the *Other* can be found in the character of Mini's mother

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whose reaction upon finding out the growing friendship between the Kabuliwala and her daughter is no less replete with suspicion.

> She was not free of suspicion about the Kabuliwala, Rahamat, and nagged [Mini's father] to keep a watchful eye on him. Whenever [Mini's father] sought to make light of her suspicions, she asked [him] a few pointed questions: 'Are there no such instances of child abduction? Isn't slave-trade still in practice in Afghanistan? Is it altogether impossible for a giant Afghan to kidnap a little child? (Tagore, 3)

Such groundless suspicion indicates how fear of a man, belonging to another culture, has penetrated deep into the hearts of the locals who no longer trust any outsider. Although the Kabuliwala is a regular vender of that area, still the questions posed by Mini's mother instigate feelings of insecurity and skepticism regarding him.

Mini's initial reaction towards the Kabuliwala is also immersed in "unfounded fear" just like her mother (Tagore, 2). In fact, it is the repercussion of her mother's upbringing and her perception of the Afghan man, which has been passed on to her daughter, that results in Mini dashing inside her house upon seeing the Kabuliwala approach her. According to Mini's father, "she ha[s] this childish fear that if someone looked through the bag of this Afghan man, several living children like herself would be found in there" (p. 1). This "childish fear" of Mini undoubtedly resonates with the fear of the *Demonic Other*. However, the fear is soon transformed into fascination when young Mini, due to her personality being "chatty" and "feisty", befriends the Kabuliwala in no time (p. 1). Nonetheless, this fear re-surfaces towards the end of the story when the Kabuliwala, after serving his sentence of eight years, returns to Mini's house with the hope of meeting her. Mini's father "ha[s] never seen a homicide before…He wishe[s] he would leave the house immediately on this auspicious day" (p. 5). Although Mini's father later empathizes with the Kabuliwala, he initially fears that the unwelcomed presence of a convict might hinder the celebrations of her daughter's wedding. This attests that the fear of the *Other*, no matter how unjustified it is, always lurks amongst the members of the dominant culture.

Disgust and aversion replaces fear, in case of the Clerk, which are other attributes associated with the *Demonic Other* and are vividly evident in the characters of Bobby and Rabab. In the eyes of Bobby, the Clerk comes forth as a "reedy creature" with an "unhealthy face" and a "cadaverous expression", who has an "obscene swagger" urging Bobby "to beat his face into a pulp" (Rahman, 91). Rabab, too, with her "cold eyes expressed more disdain for him then she had ever expressed for a dying fly. He was a non-entity for her" (p. 91). This repulsive depiction of the Clerk represents how the members of the dominant social class consider the *Other* as crude and uncivilized. Furthermore, the abhorrent sight of the poverty-stricken places — including the Clerk's house in a slum — which Bobby and Rabab visit are all indicative of the implicit yet pervasive and "unbridgeable gap" that exists between the culture of the elite class and that of the *Other* (p. 89). In the research paper entitled "Cultural Clash: A Postcolonial Analysis of Tariq Rahman's "Charity"", Ahmad and Khan (2019) critiques that this "unbridgeable" distance is due to the "financial misappropriation in a class-led environment, that in turn creates a gap between cultures" (p. 51). While portraying the slums, Bobby uses such humiliating phrases like "the very house of squalor" where "the sun could never have peeped even once in a day". It is "the heart of wretchedness" where "even God seemed to be much too far from these wretched members of the globe". This is where the *Demonic Other*, represented by the "vulgar poverty" and "impoverished humanity", resides breathing in "petrified and stagnant" air (Rahman, p. 89-91). Such culture of

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the lower marginalized class is alien to the two diasporic teenagers who are astonished and disgusted by its filth.

The *Other* is not just looked at through the lens of the *Demonic Other*; many a times, fear replaces fascination and for the dominant community, the *Other* becomes the *Exotic*. This is precisely the aura which exudes the Kabuliwala once Mini's father begins having regular conversations with him. Mini's father is "like an exile in [his] own home as [his] mind constantly likes to travel to other places. The moment [he] hear[s] the name of a foreign country, [his] mind longs to visit that unknown place" (Tagore, 3). The curiosity of the unknown attracts Mini's father towards the alien culture of the Kabuliwala. He is profoundly fascinated by the non-conformity of this stranger and shows immense interest in his incessant tales of his homeland, Afghanistan. Mini's father

> mitigate[s] his desire for travelling…by talking to this man from Kabul…[who] blare[s] out stories of his homeland in his broken Bengali and [Mini's father] fancie[s] it all before [his] eyes: tall, rugged, impassable mountains…red-hot with torrid heat, and a caravan moving through the narrow, dusty passageway in between; turbaned traders and travellers passing by, some on camel back, others on foot (p. 3)

The above quote narrates a detailed description of a land and culture utterly mysterious to Mini's father, which gives birth to feelings of fascination and amazement of the *Other*. The character of the Kabuliwala thereby also comes forth as the *Exotic Other* while reminiscing over his life in Afghanistan.

A similar fascination engulfs Bobby and Rabab when they set off to explore the area of Raja Bazaar in the internal city of Rawalpindi to see the "novel realities of [their] country" (Rahman, 88). The fact that Bobby labels this excursion as an "adventure" of "cultural exploration" clearly justifies the fascination exhibited by the privileged class towards the *Other* (p. 88). With a discerning eye, they are attracted towards the *Exotic Other* which comes forth in the form of a "strange medley of the medieval and the modern" in the old city, where centuries old tongas and Japanese cars rush simultaneously on the congested streets, thus colliding the twentieth century with the fifteenth (p. 89). Moreover, Bobby and Rabab's bus ride also becomes an emblem of the fascination of the *Exotic Other*. The "burqah" clad women, "snowy beard[ed]" men, "unblossom[ed]" school-boys and "innocently happy faced school-girls" are all spectacles of intent observation and captivation for the diasporic youngsters (p. 88). In this manner, "the public bus [becomes] a cultural hub symbolising the behavioural pattern and lifestyle of the commoners and the elite gentry as enthusiastic onlookers" (Ahmad and Khan, 2019, p. 50). Upon entering the slum area of the city, disgust soon takes over Bobby and Rabab, however, it cannot be denied that their curiosity and fascination of an alien class and culture impel them to explore the *Exotic Other*.

Findings and Implications

In their short stories "Kabuliwala" and "Charity", Rabindranath Tagore and Tariq Rahman through their respective characters of the Kabuliwala and the Clerk succeed in creating a world which is not far from reality. These characters, belonging to the marginalized community, become subjects of fear and fascination by the members of the dominant class and culture. The discriminatory mindset of the dominant community is evident through the characters of Mini and her family, Bobby and Rabab who perceive the Kabuliwala and the Clerk as either the *Demonic* or the *Exotic Other*. However, it is worth mentioning that both writers do not silence the voice of

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the *Other*. In fact, the Kabuliwala and the Clerk display their distinct identities in an assertive manner as soon as they seek an opportunity. In a multicultural society, segregation based on class and cultural differences is a matter of serious debate. The two stories, subtly yet effectively, focus on the significance of social integration and inclusivity of all members, whether dominant or marginalized, in order to maintain a social balance.

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