

Nation or Civilization? Problem of History in Intizar Husain's Basti

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Abstract: Basti (1979), a novel by Intizar Husain (1923- 2016), makes a remarkable contribution in this regard as it focuses on the strength of cultural history, which this novel interlinks with civilizational memories. In that sense, the novel addresses the notion of a modern nation-state, people's experiences and their own version of history and civilization, as well as pre-colonial Hindostan, history and civilization. This paper is about the representation of history and civilization in the literature, memory and cultural context represented in the novel while keeping in mind Urdu as a language of exile and Basti as a modern Urdu novel. This paper also explores the layers of meaning that Husain provides us, and these delineations help us to understand the subtle and comprehensive response to the nation-state Indian subcontinent context. For theoretical and critical support in this paper, I referred to the ideas of literary critics such as Aamir R. Mufti, and Erich Auerbach. For literary references and discussion, Muhammad Hasan Askari, Naiyer Masud, Mehmood Farooqui, Muhammad Alim-ur-Rahman and Muhammad Umar Memon have been cited.

Major literary critics of Intizar Husain's works have appreciated as well as criticized his novel Basti. While no one has been entirely dismissive of its significance, there is a lack of fresh approaches in considering Basti as a text of civilizational memories and about the subjectivity of history. There is one major similarity that can be observed among the major critics who have looked at the novel: they mainly focus on the first part of the novel, which they write, is on the mythic side, the mystic and the exaggerated. The first part of Basti is based on pre-partition India, situated in the fictional village of Roopnagar. Many critics say it is Dibai (Bulandshahr district), western Uttar Pradesh situated near Meerut and Hapur, where Husain was born and lived his entire childhood. Among the major critics and writer, Muhammad Salim-ur-Rahman is one of the first Urdu literary critics to review Basti (Urdu). He writes:

Getting back to the two enriching experiences mentioned above. Well, what are they? The basic experience, a centripetal one, is that of settled, mythic childhood. It is the basis of Husain's fiction. He builds upwards and outwards from here, from a place of mystery and wonder, where the real world is not easily distinguishable

from the one made up of fancies, where no decisions have to be taken, no traumas have to be encountered, a place guarded peremptorily by the elders, secure in their guilt-edged wisdom and elaborate superstitions. (Rehman 1983:207) (emphasis mine).

In this paragraph, Rehman, writes that it is the mythic childhood of the protagonist, Zakir, that is repetitive and mystic. Rehman mentions that this is the basis of Intizar Husain's fictions. Before an elaborated argument on this and a further part of the paragraph, there is a need to look at what other important critics say in framing repetitive and mythical Husain's fiction. Muhammad Umar Memon, who wrote an introduction to a translation of *Basti* (2007) (translated by Frances W. Pritchett), has also engaged with his early works and has conducted a long interview with him before the publication of *Basti*. While Memon does not agree with many of Rehman's views on the novel, he writes in the introduction to *Basti* (English translation) that he agrees on the "mythical framing" of the first part of the novel. Taking a closer look at the first chapter of *Basti*: The hypnotic idyll, which breaks upon the senses with its immense evocative beauty, underscores the beginnings of a faintly tragic note: the perception that

the paradisiacal time and space of Rupnagar, seemingly impervious to change, have finally succumbed to the corrosive powers of time. Zakir's paradise is a pre-industrial town in memory -- pristine, whole, full of wonder and harmony between man and nature. Above all, it is a town full of religious accord. The latter aspect of the town's corporate identity is brought out in the largely cordial interaction of its mixed population of Hindus and Muslims, and in the symbiotic existence of two diametrically opposed visions of truth, as embodied in the Hindu and Muslim stories of the creation of the world. Here the parallel worlds of Bhagat-ji and Abba Jan, of Hindu mythology and Muslim legend and lore, could coexist (Husain, Translation, 2007: ix) (emphasis is mine)

Worlds, which are emphasized, hypnotic idyll, immense evocative beauty, Zakir's paradise, wonder, and harmony between man and nature, Hindu mythology and Muslim legend and lore gives the impression that these critics clearly consider the first chapter to be of the greatest quality but it indicates that this is Zakir's personal childhood imagination and not that is something close to realities of any time. It does not hint at any relation to history and culture either. There seems to be a difference between what Husain tries to elaborate, and what the theorists argue the

ways in which he writes the first part. The emphasised words from the quotation indicate that for Husain, these are part of cultural history of the subcontinent. These myths and legends are important, but it is equally important to accept that these are part of history too, which is the reason why the reading/interpretation of the mythical keeps recurring throughout the novel. In their respective readings, neither Rehman nor Memon consider the first part as a historical reading along with the mythical, the paradisiacal, the pristine, along with a combination of Hindu mythology and Muslim legends.

It is necessary to investigate the possible reasons why a reading along historical and civilizational lines is not considered by Memon and Rehman. The reason is not simple, it is related to the question of western enlightenment, modernity, and colonialism and hence, nation-state. The western modern tradition does not consider pre-modernity (western) or the sub-continental context/pre-colonial ways of understanding histories and civilization that comes from continuity of history, cultural experiences and memories. This can be seen in the way Basti (1979), in the original, starts with the Quranic verse, *La uqsimu bihaadha al-balad* (Quran, 90:1) (Husain [Urdu] 1979:4); or *Main qasam khata hun is shahr ki* " I swear

on this city"] (Husain [Nagari], 1979:7). The Quran is not myth or legend; it claims its own historical veracity and authenticity, as epic and Old testament. Husain in the novel mentions Quran, Mahabharata, Katha-sarit-sagar, Jataka and Sufi malfuzat (utterances and sayings of the Sufi master), as well as other literary tradition and forms of subcontinent's literature. He uses the Quran for technique, in a modern Urdu novel. In an interview with Asif Farrukhi ...twentieth-century fiction, with regard to stream of consciousness and 'free association', is present in the Quran. You can see examples of this, and a glimpse of these new techniques, in the way the way events are described in the Quran. A single event, the whole event, isn't described. An event is referred to, there's some small description of it, and after that the text moves on. Then after the text goes on for some time, that same event returns. So if it's considered from this point of view, then the Quran's narrative technique is extraordinary (Husain, 2007: 243).

Husain's claims on Quran indicate that his novel is significant on the basis of a technique from the pre-modern era and hence to understand the Urdu modern novel, particularly in the context of Husain's works, as well as Basti, it requires a pre-modern understanding of the literary traditions. A look at the

passage from its first chapter, which Memon and Salim-ur-Rehman claim to be only mythical, would give a better perspective.

When the world was still all new, when the sky was fresh and the earth not yet soiled, when trees breathed through the centuries and ages spoke in the voices of birds, how astonished he was, looking all around, that everything was so new, and yet looked so old. Blue jays, woodpeckers, peacocks, doves, squirrels, parakeets -- it seemed that they were as young as he, yet they carried the secrets of the ages. The peacocks' calls seemed to come not from the forest of Rupnagar, but from Brindaban. When a little woodpecker paused in its flight to rest on a tall neem tree, it seemed that it had just delivered a letter to the Queen of Sheba's palace, and was on its way back toward Solomon's castle. When a squirrel, running along the rooftops, suddenly sat up on its tail and chattered at him, he stared at it and reflected with amazement that those black stripes on its back were the marks of Ramchandar-ji's fingers. And the elephant was a world of wonder. When he stood in the entry hall and saw an elephant approaching from the distance, it looked like a mountain moving. The long trunk, the huge ears waving like fans, the two white tusks sticking out and curving like scimitars -- when he saw it all he ran

inside, wonderstruck, and went straight to Bi Amma (Husain, 2007:1).

We do not get a modern understanding of time and its specifications in this excerpt, but somehow it assumes that industrialization is yet to reach Roopnagar. The machine is yet to become, as worlds 'new', 'sky is fresh' are kind of words, giving hints to the reader. Animals especially birds, used to visit every house, and everyone is aware of their sounds, presence and timings. These birds have an association with human life - bluebacks, woodpeckers, doves, and peacocks etcetera are all part of the individual's life. They tell us about the rains, seasons and even the probability of a guest visiting. Similarly, they are part of the literary, cultural and religious traditions. As for Zakir, peacock sounds come from the Birandaban and we know that Birandaban still exists and reality (history), it comes under Mathura as well as the mainland of Braj Bhasha, known for the love story of Krishna and Radha. Another example is from woodpecker, and the story of the queen of Sheeba and Solomon come from the Quran, their story is the part of this world, it is historical.

For Husain, history comes along with myth, religions and animals' stories, it's history its mythical tradition, its history of Hindu and Islamic civilization, its

histories of memories and imagination and also a history of animals and human relation, in short, human behaviour. To get information about the animals and birds, children do not need to go to a zoo or become a zoologist, or join animals' rights groups; they are part of their emotions, their day to day life through various cultural sources and literary forms.

Husain, in *Basti*, through his characterization of elders, particularly through their language which is full of rare or obsolete words, make us realize that many things have been vanishing under the impact of modernization, colonialism, and nationalism. The novel is a space for Husain where standardization is being challenged by the kind of novel he writes taking on earlier novels which had attained a standardization of its own. Another example is where which tells that people used to love many lands or regions at the same time (and still do), and it is because of their cultural histories, where the idea of a nation has no space in the consciousness.

I asked him, "Hakim-ji, you didn't go to Pakistan?"
"No, young man." "And the reason?" "Young man! You ask for the reason? Have you seen our graveyard?" "No." "Just go sometime and take a look. Each tree is leafier than the next. How could my grave have such shade in Pakistan?" I laughed inwardly.

Yaar, you Muslims are wonderful! You're always looking toward the deserts of Arabia, but for your graves you prefer the shade of India (Husain, 2007:107).

This dialogue shows that people love the land but that love is not national love. Someone who loves a nation today is not expected to love more than one land. But people with pre-colonial consciousness used to have a love for many lands and this was not regarded as a problem. To show some love to another nation does not imply that they do not love their homeland. In modern consciousness and in a world of nation states, it is hard to imagine that love and subjectivity can fit in the equation. In Basti, love for Karbala, or circulating stories of Basra and Mecca does not mean Abba Ji, Bi Amma and Hakim Ji have any less love for Rupnagar. Their memories of Rupnagar are a part of their love for Arab (Islamic) lands including the histories and the cultural histories which are so closely interwoven into their daily lives in Rupnagar that their understanding of events as 'history' becomes more personal, more intimate, varying from that of the Arab people themselves. Rupnagar's own conception of history with culture, which is related to the history of the Arabs history only in certain respect, is otherwise imagined in provincial rang-roop (cultural imagination) of the subcontinent. These kinds of

representation of characters' consciousness indicate that nationalism or idea of love for the one land or motherland, is something which has historically never been a part of subcontinent or cultural history of the East.

Zakir's father's association with the histories of many cultures are an example of the concept of civilizational memory (Mufti's term), which perceives land or provinces and their connections with multiple cultures in dynamic ways. This cautiousness, when inserted in the Urdu modern novel, becomes suffocating for standardization projects of languages, cultural, history and civilization run by the colonial state during colonialism and during the postcolonial era by the modern nation-state.

In this way, *Basti* as an Urdu novel is more related to the Auerbach description of the Old Testament rather than a mixture of the two Homeric and Biblical tradition which he said had happened due to modernity. As mention in the previous arguments, Husain's representation also tells us that the novel comes from Europe, but Husain all Urdu novels do not follow the same techniques and patterns as classic European novels. In *Basti*, we find similarity with Kafka's novels, in the context of individual suffocations and state's political behaviour. As Naiyer Masud says,

after reading Dostoevsky's works readers realize a change in themselves but after reading Kafka readers see a change in the world (Masud, YouTube).

This paper started with a debate that framed Basti in a mythical past. It referred to exaggerated narratives, which includes a skewed interpretation of the author's past basing it on his Shia identity. Basti is a kind of modern Urdu novel that takes us beyond free expression, opens a sort of expression that is about the clues and intuitions, one where Husain believes that "things can be conveyed in hints" (Husain 2007:240). Husain's modern Urdu novel adopts pre-modern ways of telling stories. Basti has similarity in many ways with western novels yet it's not the same as a western novel. The reason may lie in Husain's experiences of his, his homelessness of Urdu, and the colonial history of the subcontinent. Husain understands the discontinuity of cultural history and civilizational memories due to the colonial rule, modernity, and industrialization, but novel also represent continuity. The Urdu modern novel is a response to the three or four hundred year of western economic and political dominance; due to this substantiality and its concern with mysticism, Basti's relevance cannot be underestimated or simply related to its time of publication. It is no wonder that the need

to understand Basti has also increased with time.

Endnotes:

This idea about the Old Testament and its claim to be universal history are taken from the first chapter of Auerbach's *Mimesis*, pages 15 and 17, respectively.

2 Asif Farrukhi spent many years and the specifically the last year of Husain's life engaging with the author's work and wrote on almost all of Husain works. One of his remarkable and recent works, published in Urdu from Pakistan, is called *Chiragh-e-Shab-e-Afsana: Intizar Hussain Ka Jahan-e-Faan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2017).

3 Here, there is no distinction between literary and religious traditions.

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