

Book: *The Wandering Falcon*
Author: Jamil Ahmad
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Jamil Ahmad served for a long time as a bureaucrat in the Frontier province and in Baluchistan. He was posted as minister in Pakistan's embassy in Kabul at a critical time, before and during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. His last assignment in the Government was to work as Chief Secretary, Baluchistan. The Wandering Falcon, Jamil Ahmad's debut novel, published in 2011 is a product based on his personal experiences about the Nomadic life of the tribes inhabiting Baluchistan, Waziristan and Swat valley. It is, undoubtedly, a rich cultural and historical document. In The Wandering Falcon, Ahmad highlights the diehard old customs, codes, traditions of the Balochi people and their love and romance with nomadic life.

1. An Overview of the Story

The Wandering Falcon is a jagged piece of writing, a slackly woven collection of nine stories depicting the interior view of the Baloch life. The central among these stories is a saga of romance: Gul Bibi's eccentric crush on a man of humble race and her elopement with him desiring to settle in the haven of love. Gul Bibi's abscondment is sinful according to the tribal customs, putting her existence at stake. Both Gul Bibi and her lover remain under search and hunt of their people and are murdered, leaving a son Tor Baz behind. There are other stories out of which the "Kafir" Mullah Berari's tale, his wanderings, his baffling and enigmatic character is relatively more engaging. Additionally, there are women's stories, particularly about Pawindah women with their "boisterous humor", their resilience and struggle. There are stories within the stories which add expansion and depth to the narrative as a whole. In all stories, Ahmad emphasizes some distinct features common to all Balochi tribes: loyalty to the leader, chivalric traditions, hospitality, code of honor and their

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Nomadic ways of living. The hero Ahmad portrays in his novel is eponymous and yet he remains almost anonymous throughout the narrative. Tor Baz, the hero, keeps appearing marginally during the course of the narrative but never disappears totally. His last entry in the story “Sale Completed” is very intriguing in which he, in the guise of a dealer, is seen haggling over a woman with Afzal Khan, the seller. An under-thought makes him smile at Afzal Khan, “It’s almost incredible that Afzal Khan really believed I would marry this girl ...but then... I could settle down with this one. Who but God knows what the future holds for me and for this land? May be it is time now to end my wanderings” (Ahmad, 2011, p. 180).

2. Major Themes and Issues

2.1 Identity crisis

The Wandering Falcon deals mainly with identity crisis, a postmodern dilemma and also a centuries old issue of the human life. After his parents’ death, Tor Baz remains an assorted self and a homeless throughout the narrative. His parents’ death brings him a perennial disruption making him a lone fellow who has no one to own or to belong to. Being a little child he has no authorship to control losses of his life, instead life tosses him among many a self-acclaimed guardians: Ghunjcha Gul, Mullah Barreri, Bhitanis and the like. Life plays tricks with him and so does the boy in return after he grows up; changing his identity from a guide, spy, an informer to a tradesman, etc. He seems to have been left with nothing meaningful to stick to after his parents get killed. Throughout the story, he remains elusive and never talks about his real identity which reveals the dilemma of the divided self belonging to a community in the biological sense only and not spiritually. Tor Baz’s case fits into the postmodernist definition of the individual or “subject” given by Stuart Sim as a “fragmented being who has no essential core of identity and is to be regarded as a process of dissolution rather than a fixed identity or self that endures unchanged over time” (qtd. in Malpas, 2005, p. 57).

The issue of identity has been probed deeply by the writer through the character of Tor Baz. Perhaps there is something “rotten” in the tribal state he belongs to which makes him endure the agony of isolation and homelessness and wander like a falcon for a sin he never committed. The

roughly tangled structure of all the nine stories, I believe, also refers to the incoherent structure of Baz's life in which the central point of ownership is totally missing. His wandering continues, his hunt for the self continues but the crisis is never resolved. "I am neither a Mehsud nor a Wazir. But I can tell you as little about who I am as I can about who I shall be. Think of Tor Baz as hunting falcon" (Ahmad, 2011, p. 94), tells the hero to the Deputy Commissioner of Bannu to whom he supplies information. This proclamation wraps up Baz's story and his identity crisis.

2.2 Love versus honor

The story "The Sins of the Mother" highlights the clash of codes: tribal code of honor playing against a code called love which doesn't obey any rational dictation. Gul Bibi, Tor Baz's mother who rebels against the conventional codes of honor is left with no option but death. The sword of death hangs upon both, Gul Bibi and her lover and they survive each moment to each day following existentialist stance. The tribal hunt to approach them may succeed any time. But Gul Bibi and her lover struggle to turn each moment into love. The more the fear smells black, the more the couple hold upon each other perhaps to un-chill the fear and not let the precious time go wasted. They struggle to remain cool and unafraid in each other's company though the doom seems lurking at hand. "Stay for a while, I like looking at you. There is an air of peace around you" says the man to his woman, Gul Bibi, one day. And the doom does reach soon after leaving the man with no second option but to shoot Gul Bibi, his lady love and get stoned himself by the suitors. Home, the centre of love, breaks into fragments and pieces. Their child, Tor Baz, is left behind to face a number of jigsaw puzzles in the course of his remaining life.

When human love gets threatened by the customs and stereotypical conventions of a society, the notion of a settled family life seems just an illusion. Ahmad seems to have taken extraordinary pain in this narrative to show the family disintegration which is the direct result of the imperialistic kind of tribal system.

2.3 Tribe versus state

The clash between the Balochi Nomads and the state is another issue which Ahmad highlights in his *The Wandering Falcon*. The story narrates

how the new laws of the rival Governments to control the natural resources of Baluchistan and to inhibit the nomadic life of the Balochi people through geographical restrictions result in a great loss of human and animal life. For instance, one of the tribes called “The Kharot” inhabiting a huge number of people who were attuned for centuries to wander with the seasons: to the plains in winter and back to highland in spring, get threatened with the emerging laws. Obeying the new state laws about “statehood”, “citizenship”, “undivided loyalty” to one state than to mini tribal states and leading a settled than Nomadic life would mean total collapse of their tribal system. But the conformity to these laws was inexorable implying that “One set of values, one way of life had to die” (p. 38).

Similarly “Pawindahs”, another tribe, whose survival depends upon their animals, camels particularly and whose fluid movement is unavoidable to search for the animal feed, also face the doom with the newly imposed state laws. The new restraints for the Pawindahs, the “foot people” was to have no inter-border movement without “travel documents”. For Pawindahs, there was no way “to obtain travel documents for thousands of their tribesmen; they had no birth certificates, no identity papers. They could not document their animals; the new system would certainly mean the death of a centuries-old way of life” (p. 54). Hence a huge number of Pawindahs, in an attempt to move to the plains of Pakistan, are halted, shot and put to death by the state-appointed soldiers. “The firing was indiscriminate. Men, women and children died” (p. 60). Pawindahs claimed that they belong to “all countries or to none” as stated by Sardar Karim, and this seems true when they die amidst the borders of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. Their sovereignty, freedom and their pride in their community all are put at stake and they are hurled to the graveyard of anonymity.

3. Stylistic Elements

The Wandering Falcon is imbued with various motifs, literary allusions, metaphors, imagery as well as with postmodern features and all these elements contribute to the force of the narrative.

One strong postmodernist feature of “The Wandering Falcon” is the blurring feel of fact and fancy, real and the unreal and its inversion of the linear concept of “reality”, “settlement”, “identity” particularly if we

interpret the tribal life as a metaphor of humankind at large. *The Wandering Falcon* presents a world where “everything goes”: where ‘refuge’ is denied but not ‘shelter’, a woman is less the value of a bear and sold for “a pound of opium”, a world in which theft, killing, kidnapping are licensed but those kidnapped are served with a breakfast of fried chicken, where life is all wandering and ‘home and permanency only meant a stay long enough to wash clothes or to fix the cradles to the trees’ (p. 50). Ahmad narrates all this in a voice which is “clear and sharp like the sound of plucked strings from a musical instrument” as said rightly by a reviewer, Alan Cheuse (2011, para. 7).

The concept of “wandering” though bears very wide philosophic and mystic implications but in *The Wandering Falcon* “wandering” seems to be an emblem of “to be or not to be”. Mullah Berrari was a “wanderer” “an unusual tribal mullah” who “needed a change now and then” (2011, p. 75) But surprisingly Mullah “did mention more than one time the virtues of a settled life” and behind all his talk one could sense an undertone of worry and fear; a feeling of failure” (p. 76). Tor Baz—The Black Falcon, disrupts the reader by saying “seeking out one’s past is of little consequence” (p. 119) and perhaps future too, involves nothing but risk for him. Both Berrari and Baz wander amidst the uncertainty of life, both suffer from conflict. Through these two characters, we can trace the Lacanian “lack” or loss or Derrida’s signifier which never reaches its signified. One trace of desire follows another and yet another but the “lack” is unreachable. This may be called an ontological search of the self present in the new millennium. This specific “lack” and the search for the self can also be traced in its intense form in Rushdie’s “Shame” which shows Umar Khayyam, the hero, using a telescope to see the outside world. The telescope can be taken as a metaphor to search for the lost self. Umar Khayyam’s use of telescope to see the “outside” world and Tor Baz’s desire to escape from the outside world appear to be the two sides of one issue; periphery or no-identity. Both suffer from the identity crisis which is a crucial aspect of the postmodern philosophy and Ahmad traces this predicament in *The Wandering Falcon*.

There are intertextual references like “the battle of wits” which alludes to Jonathan Swift’s “The Battle of the Books”. Gul Bibi’s great utterance “I

am ready” equals her to the mythical elocution of characters like Hardy’s Tess and Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The tribal logo of “we belong to all countries” seems to echo Iqbal’s (1990) profound philosophy of “*her mulk mulk-e ma ast key mulk-e Khuda-e ma ast*” (Every land is ours as it is the land of our Lord) disseminating a message, a bonding across all human yokes and boundaries. There is a direct reference to the tribal poetry, “*bad-e-sad-o-bist-roz*”---wind of 120 days, which steadily blows day and night particularly in Chaghi, Balochistan, from around the middle of May to the middle of September.

There is an element of hyperreality in the story “The Mullah”. Mullah narrates the story of a destitute man who was keen to perform pilgrimage but could not finance it. “One day when he was sitting under a tree lost in his thoughts, a voice suddenly appeared to speak to him. ‘Get up, go to your donkey and it shall take you for a pilgrimage’, it commanded. The man was bewildered but did as he was told. As he approached the donkey, its stomach seemed to open up. The bewildered man sat in it and the walls of stomach closed around him. The donkey, then started trotting and, believe me, it took him straight to Mecca and the poor man performed Haj. This man died long ago. He must surely be resting in paradise. I can imagine him roaming in a cool forest where trees bear grapes the size of water pitchers and one grape can provide you your fill of food and water and bath too, if you wish it” (p. 73). Mullah explains later to Tor Baz that such kind of stories are like an “ointment” or “hope” for the poor people who have “hardly enough food or water” to make their living. Mullah’s stories create a simulation, a “make-believe” kind of reality or a parallel representation to the real “reality” of his poor listeners. Baudrillard’s “Disneyland” is exactly the same kind of representation of “make-believe” which he creates parallel to the “real” world of America. So Baudrillard states:

It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real... (qtd. in Malpas, 2005, p. 125).

Imagery Ahmad employs in *The Wandering Falcon* is not flamboyant but is coherently integrated to the theme, desert culture, environment and geography. The imagery of the “two small towers”, for instance, evokes a

subtle web of meanings. Gul Bibi's construction of "two small towers" in the wee hours of romance signifies her foreboding of the imminent doom or a mystic brooding over her fate, implying that she is ready to face the consequences of her "sin" committed actually by her family to have her yoked to a person who was not "even a man" and physically unfit. However it is no other but Gul Bibi who should pay the price, get killed/stoned to death and interred in the tower meant for the outlaws. Imagery of "divine wrath" by Mullah Fateh mohammad's father in the Gujjar's mosque is also worth-noticing. This man, one day, "frightened his congregation with his imagery of divine wrath. Another day, he would assuage the misery of their lives with glorious visions of ultimate heavenly bliss, where houris gamboled about" (2011, p. 158)—a brilliant piece of art. At times Ahmad stands out as a master sketcher of pictorial art and creates a live picture through very simple structures. For instance, the story "The Betrothel of Shah Zarina" endorses this point and stands in parallel to Hardy's "No Buyers" through a simple but powerful description. It reads:

The party---the husband and the bear in front and Shah Zarina with her dowry on her head bringing up the rear---walked mile after mile (162).

The most recurring motif Ahmad employs in "The Wandering Falcon" is a small "silver amulet" Gul Bibi leaves with her son Tor Baz which engages the reader for its intriguing play of various meanings. First, Gul Bibi places the amulet around her son's neck a moment before her death with the hope to save his life. Her father, Sardar of the Siahpads, endorses this sign (amulet) by asserting "The boy's death is not necessary" and Tor Boz remains safe. Second, the amulet becomes an indexical sign of Baz's identification, his "blood" and his representation. Gul Bibi's father acknowledges his "good blood" in the child through this emblem. Thirdly the dramatic play of the amulet, around Baz's neck, on his arm, on turban or inside the cloak, adds mystery to the story. Ahmad also employs this sign as a dyadic technique; to refer to the hero to build a thematic coherence and to highlight the ambiguity of the tribal perception which regards the peripheral marks to be the actual source of human identity.

The narrative does not lack even in sound effects, a melodious flow through a string of words or alliterations. For instance, "no pot or pan or

rag of cloth could be left behind” (p. 146) seems to carry three divides of rhythmic patterns creating meaning through their inter-relation.

Jamil Ahmad’s writing does not lack in humor either. In “A Kidnapping”, an effusive discussion among the bearded members of Mahsud Jirga creates a hilarious scene when they discuss “the safest smuggling routes, the most profitable items of contraband ...and all the current social gossip and scandals in the area” (p. 104). Equally strong is the ironic impact when the writer unveils the hypocrisy of the bureaucrats, politicians and even journalists of our country. In “A point of Honor” Roza Khan and his naïve companions get trapped in the “literacy” tricks of Government appointees and sentenced to death. Ahmad gives a very truthful picture here. “Typically Pakistani journalists sought slave for their conscience by writing about the wrongs done to men in South Africa, in Indonesia, in Palestine and in the Philippines—not to their own people. No politician risked imprisonment: they would continue to talk of the rights of the individual, the dignity of man, the exploitation of the poor but they would not expose the wrong being done outside their front door. No bureaucrat risked dismissal” (p. 33).

4. Conclusion

The Wandering Falcon, though a debut writing of Jamil Ahmad, is a great success in a number of ways. Writing about the peripheral parts of Pakistan like Tarar is a credit in itself. His writing style is simple but forceful. He possesses a maturity of conveying exactly a thing the way it happens, avoiding any kind of flamboyance and here he resembles with great writers like Hemingway or Somerset Maugham. Ahmad seems to be gravely concerned about notions such as glory, pride, honor, patriotism or conscience which in most of the cases turn out to be fake and empty and the same concern is present in Hemingway’s “Farewell to Arms” or “For Whom the Bell Tolls”. These vanities and prides provide humans with nothing except a cosmetic refuge. They are like masks or ghost frames for some of us to play hide and seek with some “others” and deprive them of their fundamental rights of life. Broadly speaking, the frame of human spectrum is seen divided among the hunters and the hunted.

In *The Wandering Falcon*, Ahmad writes the tale of the most-undervalued people, their mirth, hospitality and their taboos—all in a greatly humanistic

manner. Through his arid prose, he captures “the silence of the desert” and the stoic manners of the desert people who “eat raw onions and survive.”

References

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