

Re-visiting the Homeland: Philosophical and Aesthetic Dimensions in Adib Khan's *Spiral Road*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the fiction of the multi-award winning Bangladeshi-Australian novelist Adib Khan. From the plurality of cultures in which Khan's fiction is embedded, the paper draws out its subcontinental philosophical and aesthetic dimensions. The paper hypothesises that in Khan's fiction, the diasporic's return to the "imaginary homeland" is triggered by the desire for self-knowledge and self-fulfilment. It extends to an analysis of the aesthetics of this return journey. The paper will be framed by the classical Indian theories of *Rasa* (Aesthetics).

Keywords

South Asian diaspora, literature, aesthetics, desire, homeland

I would like to end up in Bangladesh. Complete the circle.
Adib Khan

This paper is a reflection of the ways in which the Bangladeshi-Australian novelist Adib Khan responds as a diasporic to the philosophical and aesthetic ideals of his motherland. My focus is on Khan's most recent novel, *Spiral Road*.

Historically, both Khan and his protagonist in *Spiral Road*, Masud, fall into the category of the post-1960s "new" Indian diaspora that comprises mainly of "the

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movement of economic migrants (but also refugees) into the metropolitan centres of the former Empire as well as New World and Australia....” The “new” is distinguished from the traditional diaspora by “the complex and often internally fissured communities of Indians... who have had unbroken contact with the homeland” (Glassie 336).

My premise is that the “new” post-60s South Asian diasporic author returns either imaginatively (in his/her creative work) or physically to his/her homeland in search of self-knowledge (*atma*). Translated as “soul” in our colloquial exchanges, *atma* attains a more profound and complex meaning in the philosophies of Hinduism/Islam as “the seed, the life force, the presence of God within the human being that brings people together with one another and with nature and with God” which leads to true restfulness of the spirit. Khan’s own musing in an interview seems also to validate my premise: “I would like to end up in Bangladesh; complete the circle” (“Strength on Parallel Roads” 170).

Adib Khan migrated to Australia in 1973. Retaining tangible ties with the motherland as is characteristic of the “new” diasporic, he returns physically and imaginatively to Bangladesh. After his most recent physical visit in 1999, he claimed that Bangladesh could no longer anchor him, as “the familiar landmarks have disappeared” (“Home is Where...” 1). At a recent talk, Khan reflected further how, on his return from this last visit, he removed from his Melbourne flat an old photograph of Dhaka as it was no longer real – Dhaka had changed unrecognisably in his absence. This confrontation with the disillusioning truth is of course a common feature of the diasporic’s consciousness. Discussing his positioning within the context of diaspora, Salman Rushdie writes equally nostalgically in his seminal essay, “Imaginary Homelands,” of the pain-filled loss of failing to “restore the past [India] to [himself]” (11). Khan’s imaginative return to Bangladesh in *Spiral Road* continues the return; nor is it the first time he’s revisited his homeland in his fiction. In his award-winning first novel, *Seasonal Adjustments*, the protagonist Iqbal Chaudhari returns to Bangladesh 18 years after his migration to Australia. Set in Dhaka and Shopnoganj, Iqbal’s native village, the novel engages with the complex formation and transformation of Iqbal’s identity as he engages with a Bangladesh that has changed radically in his absence. *Spiral Road* continues this pre-occupation with the reshaping of diasporic identity as a Bangladeshi resident in Australia revisits Bangladesh after a very long absence.

Along with many other theorists, Stuart Hall expresses the view that the diasporic identity lies ambivalently between two vectors, of *being* and *becoming*, or “the vector of similarity and continuity” and “the vector of difference and rupture.” The diasporic’s *being* is located within the homeland’s collective history of which he/she is an integral part. The *becoming* recognises the significance of the present circumstances of the diasporic’s life in new lands, opened up by new experiences, where “[he] cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about one experience,

one identity, without acknowledging the other side – the ruptures and discontinuities of the diasporic experience.” Ultimately then, the diasporic’s cultural identity is future-directed, and “not founded on the notion of some absolute, integral self” or “some full closed narrative of the self.” To quote Hall:

Cultural identity... is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (223-26)

This theory on the significance of the dual territories of *being* and *becoming* in the formation of the diasporic’s identity is crucial to a reading of Khan’s *Spiral Road* in the context of this paper which considers Khan’s creative response (from his position as a diasporic continually *becoming* in his host-land), to his *being*, the shared communal history of Bangladesh that he left behind.

Masud Alam in *Spiral Road* is a refugee diasporic who fled Bangladesh after being listed as emotionally and spiritually damaged by the Pakistan/Bangladesh massacre in 1971.² Having gone into this war as a dedicated and idealistic nationalist, he ends up branded by the national army as an insurgent/terrorist/miscreant. The story opens 30 years after Masud’s departure from Bangladesh and 12 years after his last visit to it. He returns reluctantly, forced by filial duty to visit his father recently diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. From the beginning of the novel when he returns to Bangladesh, to the very end when he’s about to depart for Melbourne, Masud yearns for his unchallenged routine life in Melbourne.

There’s an unvarying routine about most things in my life [in Melbourne] – the time I leave for work and when I return. A run on the Richmond oval most mornings. Competition racquetball after work on Tuesday. Wednesday nights devoted to the washing machine, and the weekly jaunt to the supermarket on Thursday evening. I can even guess when my young neighbours are gearing themselves for a party. The unpredictable and the chaotic seem far away. I’ve

² For a factual summary of the massacre of 1971 when West Pakistanis cracked down on Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), in the ongoing struggle for autonomy by East Pakistan, see Henry Glassie, *Art and Life in Bangladesh*, 173-76.

learned to cage the familiar turbulence of the past somewhere in the maze of my inner being, where it remains perpetually dark. (17)

However, the *subtext* of meditations such as the above offers us the negative complexities of diasporic life. In fact, it distinctly informs the reader that Masud's life in Melbourne is rootless and that Masud's refusal to accept it is a mask. Just as diasporic life is about retaining tangible connections with the motherland, "[d]iasporic journeys are [also] about putting roots 'elsewhere'" (182), as the postcolonial theorist Avtah Brah expresses. The subtext in *Spiral Road* is that neither Masud's "inconspicuous" personal life (with very few "infrequent" friends) nor his undemanding professional life as a librarian has the capacity to fulfil him. It suggests that Masud is living in a stasis in Melbourne. His relationship with the Melbournian single mother, Amelia, is desultory and unsatisfying while he remains a kindly but detached "mate" to her two teenage daughters. Although he constantly "yearns" (261) to return to Melbourne, particularly when life in Bangladesh threatens to enmesh him emotionally, it seems more a deliberate attempt to escape his memories of Bangladesh than a sincere desire for the diasporic life. As one Australian poet and scholar, Jennifer Strauss, writes:

Voluntary migration is one thing, but perhaps one of the saddest divisions in our contemporary world is that between the anguish of the involuntary Ishmael – the exile, the refugee – and the cheerfulness of the well-adapted global citizen. And, for all the examples of the latter, I will ask: Will globalisation ever do away utterly with the wanderer's yearning to turn homewards, to be 'at home'? (133-48)

Masud returns to Bangladesh as a reluctant, resentful visitor. His entry into it with an Australian passport and the lengthy interrogation that it entails emphasises the outsider persona into which Bangladeshi airport officials force him. Ironically, it is when they recall his "heroic" activities in the war for which he was included in the army's "Most Wanted" list that he is permitted to enter Dhaka. This belated national recognition of his nationalist past further antagonises Masud against its earlier betrayal of him, and he continues to express the desire to escape to Melbourne.

The subtext referred to above is frequently reiterated by Khan's authorial interventions which together develop a philosophy that seems to further contradict Masud's jaundiced view of his motherland. The family-orientated experiences of his childhood that Masud relives, however cynically viewed by him, become shrouded as Khan recreates them, by a luminous aura of innocence. Comparisons then arise between this glorious past of Masud's *being*, that collective past in the heart of the extended family which held no darkness, and the present of his *becoming* in Melbourne, in which he seems to have degenerated into defeated

inactivity. As the story unfolds, Masud finds himself opening up again, his feelings which were put on hold in Melbourne, gradually spark up in both real life and hallucinatory connections with individual members of his family, particularly with his sister Nazreen, his father and his uncle. Through them, he confronts uncertain discoveries about them as much as about himself. Here is one of Masud's dreams:

Despite the stifling heat, sleep comes instantly. I slide along a tunnel of fog and stumble into a dimly lit house. I recognise it as our family home. There are people gathered in a room. Years have been shaved off my father. Ma sits in a chair, weeping. He's gentle with her as he explains why he must leave. He has to be honest with everyone, Abba explains. He's in love with another woman. I shout out her name from a corner where I'm huddled with Zia and Nazreen. And from behind the screen, Sumita appears. She's younger and prettier than Ma. She takes my father by the hand and leads him away. Abba turns to look at us. He begins to speak and then changes his mind. We gather around Ma.... (272)

In another instance, Masud confronts the truth both about his uncle Musa and himself, when he discovers his uncle's real reasons for marrying for the fourth time, a girl young enough to be his grand daughter:

The ensuing silence is the perfect cue for me to enter. Yes the moment is fragile, so intimate and tender, as though the most intricate of feelings have been created in a mesh of harmony. I want to tell Uncle Musa that I admire his guts and that he has the right to live as he pleases. And to hell with *izzat*, propriety and what others may say about his marriage. Yet I feel like a bungling gatecrasher. I cannot disturb them. They're entitled to sit there, dream and talk about their problems. I shall cherish the sight.... Today the universe has opened up to me just that little more. (356)

In the final pages of the novel, Masud makes an impulsive decision not to return to Melbourne. He is forced to recognise an essential part of himself that he has tried so deliberately to deny – that his connections to his family, with all its chaos and emotional charging, are more who and what he is, than his routine and soulless life in Melbourne. His *being* is seen to be integrally significant to his *becoming*. He is not a happier man at the end of the novel, but one who is fully engaged with life's challenges and re-awakened to love, tenderness and duty. "I close my eyes. I'm levitating. Then, the daggers of ghostly awareness. The burden of what has to be.... I'm unable to run anymore" (362). In fact, however brutal and unwelcome the daggers of awareness, the reader is left with the feeling that Masud's healing actually begins at this point whereas Melbourne had only succeeded in forming a superficial crust on his raw wounds.

Thus, the novel makes a variant contribution to Homi Bhabha's theory that expounds a "third space" for people between cultures, an "interstitial passage between fixed identification" which "opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4). In fact, *Spiral Road* ironically subverts the fruitful "third space" into something fraught, full of loss of dis-belonging. Masud's reflections impose darkness on life wherever it is lived. Melbourne is "soulless" but Bangladesh is also never idealised; it is no utopia in Masud's imaginary:

My mind swivels back to the giddy days of March 1971. There was an idea then. I thought it was more important than life itself.... In bed I reinvent my adult life. I don't leave Dhaka. The war never happens. Pakistan remains unified. I have an unexciting but well-paid job. Marriage and children. I'm towards the end of my working life, sitting on a balcony, contemplating retirement. The uneventful years have slipped away. I'm left wondering what else I could've done. (160)

Frequently, Khan's existentialist philosophy seems to belong with Naipaul's oeuvre that spreads similar "unsatisfaction" for the diasporic whose half-life offers nothing but illusory magic seeds. Khan's view suggests an important difference too, in that he projects luminous moments of fulfilment that relieve the hopelessness of our journeys from the known into the unknown and vice-versa.

In the ultimate analysis then, as Masud gets embroiled in the politics of family and nation, Khan's diasporic philosophy develops uncertainly to emphasise that the precious little epiphanies that light up our way are contained within the *being*, the past, the homeland, not in the *becoming*. In this, he resembles another South Asian diasporic, Michael Ondaatje who projects a parallel philosophy – that we can know ourselves as adults only if we re-connect with the innocence that we have lost and the people that we have loved in our childhood and teenage years (*Divisadero*). Neither Ondaatje nor Khan reflects a trans-national or global identity that moves easily from nation to nation, and culture to culture, absorbing the best of both, but a dichotomous fissured subjectivity, constantly renegotiating the self within the homeland and the host-land. The significance of *being* and its place in our shifting multiple subjectivities as we fumble through the diasporic journey are reiterated in the novel by Masud:

Fragmentation has grown in me here. I feel emotionally torn. All these landscapes are too diverse to unify my thinking. The wandering migrant.... The roaming atheist. The sense of loss is maddening because I'm unable to pinpoint the reasons for the regret I feel. I doubt if I'll ever come back to live here again, and yet there's an elusive being within me that wants to redefine

belonging, and whispers about homecoming and mortality. About ending where I began. About a completion to the cycle of life. (170)

With these words, Khan creatively engages with early diasporic voices such as of Trinh T. Minh-ha:

The moment the insider steps out from the inside she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider. She is, in other words, this inappropriate other or same who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference and that of reminding, 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at. (182)

II

I move now, into the second part of this paper – a philosophical reading of the novel against the theory of *Rasa* (aesthetics) that was compiled in the *Natyashastra* (Dramaturgy) by the Indian aesthetician Bharata between the 1st and 4th century BC and which is the foundation of all Indian aesthetics. In Bangladesh, the *Rasa* theory weaves into another interesting indigenous folk song tradition, the *jarigan*. At this point, I offer a brief introduction to the *jarigan* tradition and the ways in which it is embedded in the *Rasa* theory. *Jarigan's* origin establishes a metaphorical connection between the Middle East and Bengal. The word “*jari*” derives from the Persian word “*zari*” (lamentation), while “*gan*” is the Bengali word for song. The modifier “*jari*” was acquired from the association of particular Muslim songs with the elegiac literature that originated among Muslims of the Persio-Arabic world of the Middle East in the aftermath of a battle that occurred in 680 AD in Karbala at which many lives were destroyed. The Karbala *jarigan* songs are lamentations that surround the heroics of this battle. But through the ages, the tradition of the non-*karbala* strand has developed parallel to it, and today *jarigan* broadly defines any Bangladeshi Muslim narrative song, whether it concerns Karbala themes or not (Dunham 42) and has, in fact, evolved to encapsulate contemporary realities of Bangladeshi life.³ In this light, *Spiral Road* can be read as an elegy to the passing of a way of life. The proud *zamindari* tradition has been humbled and all but

³ For an account of contemporary practices of *Jarigan* in Bangladesh, see Mary Frances Dunham, *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh*, 66-72.

destroyed. In this case, the *zamindars'* arrogance and abuse of their hierarchical status as well as their inability to evolve with time are held responsible. Islam, the religion that traditionally anchored the individual to truths, universal and personal, is all but lost to the diasporic Masud and with it he has given up, "Self awareness. Comfort. [His] place in the scheme of things" (89). By taking up residence in Australia, Masud has also distanced himself from the extended family lifestyle still practised in Bangladesh; often he finds it intrusive and "curbs a sudden urge to run. It's a familiar feeling" (201).

As mentioned above, the *jarigan* is embedded in the ancient Indian *Rasa* theory. *Rasa* in essence, is the savour of emotion, the taste or flavour of a work of art. The theory reflects on how this is depicted, inferred and transmitted through nine moods or sentiments.⁴ Mary Frances Dunham, in *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh*, makes tangible connections between the *jarigan* songs and the *Rasa* theory:

The *jarigans* are not only songs of grief: 'erotic, sweet and peaceful moods may also be found in them'.... The identification of moods derives from the *Natyasastra* (Performing Arts treatise) by Bharat that has served over two thousand years as scripture for artists and critics in India. (110)

It is important to emphasise at this point, that I am not trying to impose a theoretical view to Khan's writing but that I am interpreting Khan's poetics in his novel, and the philosophy that is projected by the poetics, from within a tradition that is unique to his cultural background. The fact that most other diasporic poets and novelists draw from their homeland's literary traditions in their writing gives credibility to my approach here. For instance, Salman Rushdie draws very deliberately into his narration of *Midnight's Children* the narrative techniques employed in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*; while Michael Ondaatje self-consciously falls back on the *Rasa* theory and the ancient tradition of Sinhalese and Sanskrit poetic tradition. As well, Khan refers spontaneously and almost at random to the *jarigan* tradition in *Spiral Road* confirming that this Bangladeshi folk inheritance lies somewhere in his creative consciousness. In the first reference to the *jarigan*, Khan makes us metafictionally aware that *Spiral Road* is a story, not historical fact, and that its truth is repeatedly embellished as it is passed down verbally through generations of *becoming*. Moreover, Khan draws from the more purist Karbala *jarigan* tradition when he refers in this context, to the theme of bravery. With characteristic diasporic objectivity and the sophisticated cynicism of

⁴ The nine moods (*nava rasa*) identified in the *Rasa* theory are as follows: *sringara* or *prem* (romantic or erotic); *hasya* (humorous); *karuna* or *korun* (sad); *bir* (heroic); *raudra* (angry); *bhayanak* (frightened); *vibhatsa* (disgusted); *adbhuta* (amazed); and *shanta* (peaceful). It is also considered that the first eight *rasas* (as listed here) lead up to the final, *shanta rasa*.

the global traveller for indigenous village superstition, Khan parodies the *jarigan* tradition by referring to bravery as a heroic act in connection with a small, intimate family “battle” with a cobra. More generally, the reference to “stories and *jarigans*” makes us aware that Masud’s memories, particularly of childhood that have shaped his identity, and continue to shape it in the present, are not inscribed fact, but are subject to constant interpretation and re-interpretation by the changing, maturing personality. Masud reflects:

Stories and *jarigans*. Words and music rippling in a continuum through time. But the truth? That’s a matter of individual judgement. Whatever the perceptions of this singular act of bravery, the facts themselves now lie crumpled beneath fabrications, distortions and exaggerations. It was nearly twelve decades ago, after all. (2)

Later Khan refers to the *jarigans* as women’s stories, which while homely and burrowing deep into the past also draw from superstitions that have travelled into the present. Through this he gives expression once again to the significance of the past, the *being*, to the returning diasporic, and to the theory of the diasporic’s double vision – of his insider/outsider view which regards this past from a distance of objectivity:

Making *achaar* was a communal affair for women and children. It was an occasion for *jarigans*, songs that dated back to Mughal times and offered fascinating glimpses of Manikpur’s history, and gossip about scandals and adulterous affairs. Fecund, rural imaginations unleashed extravagant stories too, about the nefarious activities of restless spirits that wandered the countryside on moonless nights.... (142)

One of the *rasa* or moods that is predominant in *Spiral Road* is *karun rosh* (tragic mood) which is singular to the Karbala *jarigan* tradition. As Dunham’s research divulges, “in the Karbala *jarigan* songs, *jarigan* poets, like the script writers of the Persian ta’ziyeh dramas, portray the grief of heroes and heroines in the lines they speak. The heroes of Karbala express grief in words of final farewell to mothers, wives and children. Other than in speeches, grief is not described verbally, except in the stock phrase ‘kandite lagilo’ (he or she began to weep)” (111). Khan diverts from this stylised approach by introverting Masud’s grief that resulted from his *Bir rosh* (heroic mood) in the 1971 massacre, from speech to thought. There are poignant moments in the novel in which Khan stirs in the reader the mood of *karun rosh* as Masud retrospectively relives his nationalist militant activity. Some representative passages are as follows:

A sad realisation chastened and frightened me on that terrace. My youth abandoned me. We had been dragged into the morass of a new world. And as the days passed, I mourned for myself and for the way of life that had died in front of me. This was the pivotal point in my life. (227)

And

Right and wrong are woefully inadequate words to describe the greyness of the worlds I traverse. Naturally. I've aged. Retrospective guilt can paralyse moral judgement. The confusion grows.... Sleep evades me. I walk through a dense forest, followed by flitting shadows and hearing ghoulish laughter. I come across a deep trench. There are people sitting on the dry ground, talking. They look up. I don't recognise the faces that mock me. They're all bloated, discoloured and in various stages of decay. Despite my reservations, I jump in. The bed of the trench opens like a gate and I'm sucked into an abyss of sights and sounds that can only be conjured up by a primitive mind. I continue to fall until the first light of dawn rescues me. (229-31)

The *karun rosh* in the novel, extends from grief in heroics, to one of the two aspects of *sringara rasa* which is *vipralamba*, the sadness arising from love in separation. The earlier section of the novel in which Masud recollects his life in Melbourne, his escape from Bangladesh in disillusionment, and his inability to engage with anyone in his family on his return to Bangladesh develops *vipralamba* through the sentiments of desperation, hopelessness and emotional apathy. However, as his family claims him back with relentless energy, transient moments of unadulterated tenderness, specially for his father when he discovers his father's sacrifice of his adulterous relationship in favour of duty to family, stir in us the mood of *samboga rasa* or love in re-union. Thus the two *rasas* of *sringara*: *samboga* and *vipralamba* (not of erotic but of familial nature, which is in keeping with the *jarigan* tradition that does not include romantic love) pervade the novel in the second section.

Spiral Road ends on a note of high drama and the beginnings of *shanta rasa* which can be defined as the culmination of the other eight *rasas* identified in the *rasa* theory (Dunham 16), the philosophical state of mind to which the eight *rasas* lead – self knowledge or *atma*. As Masud decides to remain in Bangladesh, Khan leaves us with the illusive suggestion that inner peace and restfulness are at last within his reach.

Meanwhile, Masud's reflection towards the end of the novel, reiterates Khan's consciousness of the indigenous Bangladeshi literary background in the shaping of his own artistry:

The first sound of *prui* caresses the melancholy of the approaching dusk. The *Mrus* [indigenous hill tribe in Bangladesh] are musical people, I've learned,

and the bamboo flutes are usually played by young women. Their music sounds beyond entertainment. They could be practising an ancient form of self-therapy. (316)

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