



STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES REFLECTED IN JAMIL AHMAD'S *THE WANDERING FALCON*

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ABSTRACT

Written sometime in the early 1970s and published in 2008, The Wandering Falcon is a fictional piece of work that charts a slow meandering course through the lawless frontiers. Undercurrents of danger have always coursed through its veins but recent events have bestowed a more menacing look and feel to the wild west of Pakistan. Jamil Ahmad's The Wandering Falcon limns tribal customs with a storyteller's skill, a discerning eye and austere prose worthy of the environment depicted here, giving Western readers a window to the otherwise inaccessible. Jamil Ahmad takes us to the high desert and mountains of a region crisscrossed by hundreds of nomadic tribes for thousands of years. We read of lovers fleeing the deadly punishment of their tribal group, of women desperate for affection, buried under customs and habits millenniums old, of men of honor living lives of crime, of tribal members returning from exile who must carefully navigate each clan and sub-clan in order to stay honorable and sometimes to stay alive. In expressing so, Jamil Ahmad seems to be endowed with the sound knowledge of storytelling.

Keywords *The Wandering Falcon, Storytelling, Tribal Identity, Survival as the ultimate option*

Introduction

Jamil Ahmad has written an unforgettable portrait of a world of custom and compassion, of love and cruelty, of hardship and survival, a place fragile, unknown, and unforgiving. Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon* is an extraordinarily authentic piece of fiction. It takes the reader on a journey through Pakistan's tribal belt as it was for about two decades after partition. By the time the journey ends, not only foreign readers but Pakistanis too will have learnt much about life in this region. They should acquire a fair idea of the rugged terrain, the valleys between high mountains, the forbidding deserts, the fierce sandstorms, and the people who brave all these elements and find ever new ways of survival and try to come to terms

POONAM VALERA

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1 Page

with the people living across the border in Pakistani towns. Storytelling is an art that is not very common. This book is like a lesson in storytelling, how to open small windows to the story, how to change tracks and still hold the plot together by a delicate tread, how to introduce a place and its people to the world that they would probably never visit how to pass the message subtly that you intend to. Even if the subject does not interest you.

Application of Various Techniques of Storytelling in Jamil Ahmad's Wandering Falcon:

1. Revelation of Tribal Identity

In his wonderful collection of short stories, transformed into a book called 'The Wandering Falcon', Jamil Ahmad narrates the tale of a nomadic tribe (Powandas). In order to live, the tribe, accompanied by their dogs, herds of animals and flocks of sheep, has to roam, year after year, between the planes of Pakistan and the highlands of the neighboring country Afghanistan. This is the way the live, and so it has been for the past several centuries. As is the case with such tribes, these people are bound to no country and modern concepts of statehood, citizenship, identification etc are alien to them. After the demise of British Empire, restrictions are placed on their movement. In one of their journeys from Afghanistan to the planes of Pakistan, when the tribe attempts to cross into Pakistan, a soldier tries to stop them, referring to the government restrictions, and asks them to return back to Afghanistan. Now if they return back to Afghanistan, from where they're coming, their animals will die. This means the end of their life. They argue with the official citing their hardships, miseries and necessity of having to travel constantly, but to no avail. At last, they decide to move forward, irrespective of the consequences. As they move forward, all of them, including children, woman along with their flock are killed brutally

Ahmed tells tales of the rival tribes of the Wazirs and the Mahsuds who survive at all costs, Gul Bibi and her lover who run away from their tribe; the Frontier Crimes Regulations who have to mediate between the state of Pakistan and the tribes with whom they have contracts with to secure their cohabitation; Mullah Berrarai and the polarized opinions of him, and more. Each of the nine stories is connected by the character Tor Baz who we watch grow from birth to adulthood. Strangely, we learn about his life by reading about the lives of the people for whom he exists only in the periphery, making this one of the most innovative sets of shorts stories.

2. Description of Lived Experiences

The time period is the 1950s and 1960s, and states around the northwest frontier of Pakistan are enforcing strict borders and notions of citizenship. Tribes across the region find their lives thrown into chaos, their futures uncertain. In prose that echoes the language of fables, Ahmad explores, among other things, how the ambivalent nature of home comes into sharp relief at a

time of widespread dislocation. The land sustains and punishes inhabitants; tribes both protect their members and inflict devastating brutality upon them. The narrative traverses a vast terrain, following an orphaned boy who acquires the name Tor Baz, the “black falcon”—who is not so much a protagonist as a guide, often lingering on the fringes of events, surfacing and disappearing as we encounter men and women across the region. Ahmad’s expansive and intimate voice accentuates the smallness of the characters’ lives while offering vivid glimpses into each individual’s struggle for dignity and a foothold in the world. Ahmad writes,

“The pervading silence of their land had taught their people to be deliberate in their actions and slow in responding to emotion.”

3. Survival as the Ultimate Option for Characters

The researcher thinks the survival of people in the rugged and naturally unjust terrain is the recurring theme of the book. Whether it is the Baloch tribes’ ‘rebellion’ against the Pakistani state; the Mehsuds’ or the Waziris’ tribal vendetta for supremacy; the nomads from Afghanistan fighting the odds of the nation state system; the killed couple, Gul Bibi and her lover, fleeing the spell of honor killing from the enraged Baloch tribesmen; their son, Tor Baz (Black Falcon), the wandering protagonist who appears with peculiar faces in the novel; or, the two women, Sherakai and Shah Zarina, escaping domestic violence and hate into an unknown world, all are in quest for safer and better lives.

4. Prose with No Unnecessary Curlicues

Ahmad burdens his prose with no unnecessary curlicues. Like a Kuchi tribesman, he brings along on his literary hejira only what is absolutely essential. But in his stripped-down prose lies a beauty that is almost sublime, akin to the beauty his nomads find in the land that nourishes and bedevils them, offering them a thousand shades of gray and brown, with which it tinted its hills, its sands, and its earth. There were subtle changes of color in the blackness of the nights and the brightness of the days, and the vigorous colors of the tiny desert flowers hidden in the dusty bushes, and of the gliding snakes and scurrying lizards as they buried themselves in the sand. Eroticizing his characters would have been easy, but it would have been a cheap trick. Instead Ahmad lifts the veil from their little-known culture delicately, respectfully, allowing us a look without violating their privacy. We learn of women who insist on taking their chicken on months-long desert treks and shame their husbands into battle; of men who sell women into prostitution and cheat their way out of revenge killings by wearing children’s clothes—for the Pashtun honor code, Pushtunwali, prohibits visiting revenge on children (this, too, we learn from the novel). Ahmad does not romanticize the tribes’ people, nor does he condemn them. One gets a sense that he truly loves them,

accepting them in their entirety, with their strengths and their flaws. A migrating herdsman accepts both an unexpectedly lush pasture and a relentless sandstorm this way.

5. Description of Ways of Surviving

The tribes of the area have developed ways of surviving in the inhospitable landscape. People living in rocky, unproductive lands raid their neighbors in the richer plains, for example, and such theft is not considered shameful, but simply part of the natural order: Despite their differences, the two tribes share more than merely their common heritage of poverty and misery. Nature has bred in both an unusual abundance of anger, enormous resilience, and a total refusal to accept their fate. If nature provides them food for only ten days in a year, they believe in their right to demand the rest of their sustenance from their fellow men who live oily, fat and comfortable lives on the plains. To both tribes, survival is the ultimate virtue. In neither community is any stigma attached to a hired assassin, a thief, a kidnapper or an informer. (p. 86) The nomads who roam with their herds are also simply following nature, although to governments attempting to enforce borders, it's against the law. Dawa Khan believes that trying to stop the nomads moving “would be like attempting to stop migrating birds or the locusts” (p. 46), but of course, Dawa Khan is proven wrong. If you don't mind the deaths of animals, people, and entire cultures, it is possible to stop the nomads. Following the laws of nature does not save Dawa Khan from dying for violating the laws of man.

6. Unique Way to Introduce Us about the Central Character

Till the end, the protagonist remains on the periphery. He, like the land, is an enigma. And not being tethered to a single tribe means that he can weave his way in and out of no-go areas with ease. But he ties the seemingly disjointed portions of the book together, whether it is the story of a sardar who goes by the rank of a general (not a real general) with a son “*the colonel*”, again with no real claim to the title, or a mad mullah/clever conman/mentor who wanders the pages concocting an intricate plan involving German promises and British gold. Each story turns out to be a beautiful link forming an ancient chain carefully preserved in time.

It can be said that the character of Tor Baz, drifts in and out of the stories, often just at the very peripheries, sometimes almost unrecognizable. Ahmad has said, “A Perpetually strong central character is unnatural. I feel a human being is like a twig carried by a strong current. It is only for brief moments and infrequently that he bobs to the surface, but is then rapidly swept into the depth of the stream of life.”

7. Using the technique of symbolic exclusion and holding back:

In *The Wandering Falcon*, the narrative does not delve much into the emotions of character and by this technique of symbolic exclusion and holding back, the narrative becomes aligned with the cultural norms of the characters. Characters do not give away much through words and exude quintessential Baloch and tribal forbearance. The barren and unforgiving landscape of the desert and mountains become an important character and relay more information than the expression of characters.

Conclusion

At last, there is no exaggeration in saying that *The Wandering Falcon* was originally a book of short stories; the idea to weave them into a novel was a brilliant concept, just not perfectly executed. Yet all the way through, the characters, the tales, and the landscape are rendered with clarity, sympathy, and insight. The author makes us travel with him. We feel as though we ourselves are with the miserable soldiers posted in Pakistan's western desert, where an annual sandstorm lasts a third of the year. We are with the nomads who annually drive their herds of animals across the international border, only to be baffled and enraged when they learn the border is now to be enforced. We are witnessing in North Waziristan, a region better known to news consumers as a hideout for Afghan militants. This has become possible only due to Jamil Ahmad's mastery to develop the story in a particular and unique style.

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