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THE THING ABOUT AMIR ALI: THE DECONSTRUCTION OF COLONIAL DISCOURSE ON  
THUGGEE IN TABISHKHAIR'S *THE THING ABOUT THUGS*

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ABSTRACT

This article studies TabishKhair's representation of Amir Ali in his novel *The Thing about Thugs*. Amir Ali or Ameer Ali was a noted Thug immortalized through Philip Meadows Taylor's nineteenth century novel *Confessions of a Thug*. Thugs, or the practitioners of Thuggee, were described by the colonizing British as cruel murderers who deceived and befriended people before murdering them. Khair deconstructs this colonial view. His Amir Ali appears as an injured innocent who becomes a 'Thug' under the pressure of circumstances. Up to a point, the novel appears to uphold this image of Amir. Khair's representation, however, is open-ended, and as the novel closes one is left in doubt whether Amir is really an innocent man or a genuine Thug as he reported himself to the British authorities. Khair's deconstructionist approach problematizes colonial Thug narratives, but does not provide a concrete answer. His novel only suggests the various possibilities that a researcher on Thuggee must keep in his mind.

Key Words: Thuggee, Amir Ali, TabishKhair, Philip Meadows Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, *The Thing About Thugs*.

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Ever since the 'discovery' of Thuggee by the British in the early nineteenth century, this 'Indian' type of crime has drawn attention to itself time and again. The incessant outputs by scholars, which have led to the establishment of an ever increasing Thug archive, evince the enduring appeal of the subject. Outside the academy, interest in it has been kept alive by popular novels and cult movies. One may mention novels like Captain Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* (1839) and John Masters' *The Deceivers* (1952), and movies like *Gunga Din* (1939) and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) as examples. As embodiment of an antediluvian evil which lurks unrecognized beneath the thin crust of familiar civilization, Thuggee has the power to both fascinate and terrify. It is this feature of Thuggee that writers and filmmakers try to tap to attract the audiences and the readers. TabishKhair's *The Thing About Thugs* (2010) is one of the newest attempts to capitalize on the rich associations that Thuggee evoke. Of course, Khair's novel is not about Thuggee itself, though the title seems to suggest so. His subject is the criminal underbelly of nineteenth

century London seen through the eyes of an expatriate Indian. However, in so far as this Indian is the well-known Thug Amir Ali, Khair's novel participates in the on-going discussions on Thuggee. Amir is a quasi-historical figure; a Thug named Sayyid Amir Ali is mentioned in William Henry Sleeman's monumental *Ramaseeana* (1836). His deposition was also officially recorded, and Martine Van Woerkens points out that it is the largest of its kind being about eighty three pages in length. (Woerkens, 327) However, what made Amir Ali (or Ameer Ali) famous is Captain Meadows Taylor's novel *Confessions of a Thug*, where he appears as the protagonist. Khair's novel, which reimagines the story of Amir Ali, deconstructs Taylor's text up to an extent. In doing so, he adopts and mimics some of the methods and strategies which Taylor himself had used. Surprisingly, Khair's deconstructionist approach does not exonerate Amir as one would suppose. Instead, by the end of the novel, Amir's identity as a deceiver (*thagin* the proper sense of the word) is reaffirmed. Is this a failure of the writer or is it intentional? This article examines how Khair's reconstruction of Amir's life opens up multiple possibilities which were carefully precluded from both colonial narratives on Thuggee as well as from several contemporary interpretations.

### **The Facts about Thugs**

It is a fact worth noting that Tabish Khair chooses to call his work a "novelized history", thereby underplaying its status as a fiction. (Khair, 3) This is not an unprecedented manoeuvre, because his predecessor Taylor made a similar claim. In the "Introduction" to *Confessions of a Thug* Taylor asserts, "The tale of crime which forms the subject of the following pages is, alas! almost all true; what there is of fiction has been supplied only to connect the events ..." (Taylor, iv) For Taylor, this claim had a special import. Writing during the mid Victorian period when novel-writing was condemned both by the Evangelicals and the Utilitarians, the only way Taylor could solicit the favour of the serious minded public was by masking his novel as history. Of course, it is a different matter that Taylor's novel is faithful to the official Thug depositions to the letter. Though some scholars like Kim A. Wagner doubt this, Taylor himself participated in British operations against Thuggee and had ready access to official records. David Finkelstein notes the close similarities between the records of Sleeman and the events which Taylor describes in his novel. (Finkelstein, 58) Taylor's (hi)story is thus objectively verifiable. Same is not the case with Khair's narrative. His postmodern 'revisionist history' is beyond verification. Khair writes, "Sometimes, though not often, the locks of the past can be opened with keys that lie buried in the present." (Khair, 4) The keys he speaks of are, however, chimerical – some letters in Persian by Amir Ali, which are no doubt fictional, and some equally dubious newspaper cuttings. To give him his dues, Khair is aware of the impossibility of constructing a proper official history with such dubious materials. Hence he admits, "whether authentic or not, these voices are true. For, in a very basic sense, any story worth retelling is a true story." (Khair, 4) Here with a bit of cunning equivocation Khair unsettles the earlier claims he made for the historical authenticity of his narrative.

If Khair makes a claim only to undermine it a few sentences later, why does he make it at all? This question naturally troubles a reader. It is obvious that through his novel Khair is making a statement. His retelling the story of Amir Ali is not a simple literary exercise but the enunciation of an ideological stand. By retelling the story of Amir Ali, Khair problematizes British Thug narratives, bringing into question their ideological assumptions. The nineteenth century British Thug narratives present seamless accounts of Thug convictions, thereby effortlessly criminalizing an entire section of Indian populace. Khair's narrative deconstructs British discourse on Indian criminality by reversing the gaze back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century London – a London sheltering criminals like Burke and Hare and later, Jack the Ripper. The criminalization of the Thugs by the colonizing British fostered a certain reductive understanding of India as a land of inherent corruption and barbarism. Indeed, a nineteenth century reviewer of *Confessions of a Thug* was emboldened enough to observe, "To Europeans, familiar with regular roads, public conveyances and houses of reception, an efficient and responsible police – in most countries a system of passports, and in all the various results of an enlightened civilization, which regards the protection of life as the first duty of society – it appears impossible that such a system of wholesale murder could ever have been carried on." (Anon, *The Spectator*, 805) It is this attitude that Khair challenges by showing the existence of such brutality even in London. His work certainly

cannot claim the status of an official history, as there are no objective evidences to prove his story. His story only tells of possibilities – things that might have happened under those circumstances.

To appreciate Tabish Khair's revisionist representation of Thuggee, a preliminary understanding of the matter is required. The British colonizers looked upon Thuggee as a sort of organized crime whose practitioners were bound together by the feeling of fraternity. The Thugs were deceivers who befriended the unwary travellers on the road and murdered them thereafter. Indeed the English word *thug* has come from modern Indian (Bengali, Marathi, Hindi) *thag* meaning "deceiver" or "swindler". The Thugs were also known as *phansigars* (from *phans* meaning noose). They strangled people with a piece of cloth called *rumal*. The Thugs always strangled their victims before robbing them. This they did to avoid detection. The Thugs always operated in gangs and were believed to have been efficiently organized. They were also believed to communicate in a secret language called 'Ramasee'. Though the Thugs mainly killed people for pecuniary gains, the British colonizers usually attributed an even more sinister motive to their crime. The Thugs were said to worship the Hindu goddess Kali irrespective of their personal religious affiliations. As votaries of the goddess of destruction, the Thugs were seen to be at a never-ending war with the rest of mankind. Taylor's Ameer Ali admits that "relentless, unerring destruction" of mankind was considered as the sacred duty of a Thug. (Taylor, 1) Clearly, to the British, Thuggee appeared as an insidious evil that threatened the very fabric of order and civilization.

As the incarnation of disorder, Thuggee challenged the 'rule of law' that the British were trying to establish in India. It is no wonder that after the official discovery of Thuggee by Sleeman in 1830, the British government in India zealously applied itself to the task of eradicating Thuggee. A new department known as the "Thuggee and Dacoity Department" was created for this purpose. Between 1830 and 1839, thousands of Thugs were convicted and punished with either death or life-long imprisonment. Some like Ameer Ali managed to mitigate their sentences by becoming 'approvers' or the King's witnesses. By the 1840s Thuggee was completely eradicated. As the reviewer of *Confessions of a Thug* for the *British and Foreign Review* notes, "But if there be a subject to which an Englishman may look with pride, it is to the influence which the energy of our government in India has had in extirpating crimes which appeared to be indigenous in the soil..." (Anon, *British and Foreign Review*, 554)

The detection and the eradication of Thuggee have been greatly lauded by the early twentieth century British historians who looked upon it as one of the outstanding achievements of British rule in India. Contemporary scholars however question colonial representation of Thuggee and challenge the validity of British operations against it. Analyzing British representations of Thuggee, modern scholars have come to the conclusion that Thuggee provided the British with an opportunity to spread their propaganda and to strengthen their presence in this country. Mary Poovey points out that the campaign against Thuggee began at a time when the East India Company was facing criticism in England. At such a stage, "the campaign against Thuggee promised exactly the kind of fiscal and judicial efficiency that the English government was demanding of the Company." (Poovey, 11) The 'discovery' of Thuggee allowed the British government in India to interfere in the administration of the Princely States with impunity. A native prince could be easily bullied on the charge of supporting the Thugs. Thuggee also provided the British with an excuse to enforce stricter control over recalcitrant social groups. The reformist factions in England used Thuggee to denounce Indian civilization and to call for immediate and sweeping reforms. As David Finkelstein states, "Thuggee provided good material for those urging an increase in Britain's evangelical mission." (Finkelstein, 46) Most importantly, Thuggee enabled the British to be conscious of their own superiority and to construct the Indians as the degenerate 'Other' against whom the achievements of the 'Self' can be measured.

Arguing that Thuggee itself is a British construction, many modern scholars condemn British operations against it. Hiralal Gupta is the first historian to criticize the colonial operations against Thuggee. In his article "A Critical Study of the *Thugs* and their Activities" (1959) Gupta maintains that the British themselves were responsible for the creation of Thuggee. He argues that Thuggee was "an outcome of particular and peculiar conditions of a specific period of the East India Company." (Quoted in Wagner, 169) According to Gupta, the

expansion of British rule in India dispossessed many natives who were forced to take up Thuggee as their profession. He dismisses the claim that Thuggee was an ancient evil whose practitioners formed a criminal fraternity. Several later historians have supported these claims of Gupta. Stuart Gordon believes that the British purposefully misrepresented “locally organized, small-scale marauding groups” as Thugs. (quoted in Wagner, *Stranglers and Bandits*, 263) Kathleen Gough and Christopher Kenna feel that the Thugs were engaged in anti-colonial activities. Some critics like Amal Chatterjee and Caroline Reitz go to the extreme length to claim that Thuggee was not a social reality but largely a British ‘construction’. Chatterjee asserts, “during the period of civilizing administrative conquest if the Thugs been ‘unreal’, some other ‘police’ matter would have been ‘found’.” (Chatterjee, 5) He clearly implies that the British ‘created’ Thuggee to serve their own ends. Caroline Reitz says point blank, “if Thuggee had not been ‘discovered’, it would have had to be invented.” (Reitz, 98) Such claims, of course, appear contentious. Scholars like Martine Van Woerkens and Kim A Wagner take a more moderate stand. They argue that Thuggee was indeed a social reality which pre-existed the British, but which the British (mis)represented in their own way. Wagner points out that Thuggee was not a mere “colonial phantasmagoria”. There was really “some correspondence between representations of India and the social reality of India.” (Wagner, *Thuggee*, 7) Whatever the case is, all these scholars agree on one point. They feel that the British operations against Thuggee did as much good to the British as the Indians.

#### **The Case of Amir Ali**

In representing Thuggee in *The Thing about Thugs* Tabish Khair follows the footsteps of the contemporary thinkers. To bring into question the authenticity of colonial Thug narratives, he reconstructs the story of Amir Ali as found in Philip Meadows Taylor’s *Confessions of a Thug*. Taylor’s book has been recognized as the premiere text on Thuggee. Amal Chatterjee feels that it is Taylor, and not Sleeman, who should be credited with popularizing Thuggee in Britain. (Chatterjee, 126) Indeed, for a long time, Taylor’s book was considered as a factual narrative rather than as a novel. Even in the early twentieth century T. O. D. Dunn called it “a startling journalistic success.” (Dunn, 13) Patrick Brantlinger is not wrong when he observes, “*Confessions* can almost be read as an actual, imperial police dossier rather than as a work of fiction.” (Brantlinger, “Introduction” to *Confessions*, xi) Khair’s choice of this novel as his source text therefore does not appear surprising.

What accounts for the popularity of Taylor’s *Confessions of a Thug* is its stringent realism. In narrativizing the ‘confessions’ of Ameer Ali, the novel accurately recreates the atmosphere of official Thug-interrogation. In *Ramaseena* Sleeman describes how the Thugs gave their testimony before him during interrogation. In Taylor’s novel the function of the British interrogator is performed by an unnamed white officer, who is only referred to as Sahib. Ameer Ali is the oblique narrator who gives his testimony before this Sahib. The listening Sahib intervenes little; he silently records Ameer’s story for the edification of the (English) readers at ‘home’. Ameer readily tells his story with minimal prodding. He describes his various exploits which are basically grisly tales of murders, his love affairs with beautiful and exotic women, and his final capture by the British. While recounting the tales of his murderous adventures, Ameer inadvertently incriminates himself. Despite all his valour, and heroic qualities, the response of the (white) readers become determined. To them, Ameer becomes a homicidal maniac – the quintessential Thug who voices, “superstitious, boastful, homicidal fanaticism.” (Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 90)

What, therefore, makes the retelling of Ameer’s story difficult is his own loquaciousness. The unnamed white narrator neither coaxes nor coerces him in any way. The Thug willingly tells his tale, stating:

I have no hesitation in relating the whole; for though I have accepted the service of Europeans, in my case one of bondage, I cannot help looking back with pride and exultation on the many daring feats I have performed. (Taylor, 1)

Ameer appears to be unusually boastful of his criminal exploits, even comparing the activities of the Thugs with the sportsmanship of the hunters. At the end of the novel, he concludes his discourse with the assertion, “I am proud that the world will know of the deeds and adventures of Ameer Ali, the Thug.” (Taylor, 280) Such abysmal vanity, with the near-absence of qualms, incriminates Ameer Ali most effectively. Robert Grant

Williams draws our attention to the fact that 'Confessional discourses' typically mark the beginning of moral transformation of the confessor, which does not occur in the case of Taylor's Thug. The ritual of confession is expected to change the confessor for the better. As he understands his own errors and shortcomings, he tries to rectify himself. Ameer Ali, however, displays little remorse till the very end. He even admits that if he is allowed freedom, he might once again return to his old profession. Ameer's incapability to recognize the heinousness of his crimes marks him as an irredeemable miscreant. Grant Williams correctly observes, "the hollow confession only underscores the unrepentant, incorrigible nature of the Thug, as though Calvinistically damned he could never be reformed." (Grant Williams, 187-188) Patrick Brantlinger also points out that Ameer Ali becomes the instrument of his own condemnation:

Taylor's Sahib does little moralizing, because he does not have to: his power is absolute; the situation is totally clear to the reader; and Ameer Ali can be given more than enough narrative rope to hang himself. (Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 88)

It is Brantlinger who first draws our attention to the 'Panoptical' structure of the novel. The Panopticon is the perfect prison designed by the English Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Such a prison allows constant surveillance of the inmates. Aware that an invisible jailer is keeping watch, the inmates are forced to behave themselves. Michael Foucault shows that the 'panoptic' design is effective for controlling any population. Alluding to Michel Foucault's theory of Panopticism, Brantlinger argues that in Taylor's novel Ameer becomes the Benthamite prisoner. He is under the surveillance of the unnamed Sahib as well as the invisible (white) readers. This forces him to behave as the readers would expect him to behave, and to incriminate himself accordingly. From Brantlinger's readings it becomes apparent that the Thug's 'confessions' may not have been as spontaneous as the author would want us to believe. The same reasoning can also guide us while reading other Thug-narratives. However, though this might seem plausible, there is no concrete evidence for this. What is irrefutable is that the Thugs, including Ameer Ali (or Sayyid Amir Ali), had publicly acknowledged their guilt. Any attempt to retrieve their voices from the darkness of history would necessarily become a Herculean task, if not an outright impossible one.

To reconstruct the story of Amir Ali, Khair, therefore, makes him unsay all that has been recorded in *Confessions of a Thug*. The very first time Amir is introduced, the novel parodies the source text. Khair closely mimics the language of Taylor, although he substitutes William T. Meadows for Philip Meadows Taylor and changes the name of the source text to *Notes on a Thug: Character and Circumstances*. Mimicry, however, is never perfect, and Khair's text deviates from Taylor's. It becomes evident from the conversation between Amir and Meadows that the former is submissive and the latter is arrogant and sanctimonious. The situation here is different from that of Taylor's novel where the Sahib or the white narrator remains mostly tongue-tied and Ameer is unusually garrulous. In Khair's novel, the pompous Meadows utters a long panegyric to European rationality and denounces 'Indian irrationality'. (Khair, 22) He is dominating and elicits from Amir Ali the 'confessions' that he wants to hear. In contrast, Taylor's narrator never prods Ameer Ali and he confesses of his own accord. Taylor's Ameer Ali boasts of his achievements and confesses that he would have murdered even more people if he had not been apprehended. (Taylor, 163). In contrast, Khair's Amir declares himself innocent - "a young boy taken along by older men." (Khair, 21) He asserts that though he assisted the murderers, he did not participate in the crimes himself. From the fact that he requires constant prodding from T. Meadows, it becomes obvious that his tale is not as spontaneous and genuine as it appears.

The actual truth about Amir Ali is revealed by him in a series of undelivered Persian letters addressed to Jenny or his 'jaanam', a maidservant working in the house of William T. Meadows. In these letters Amir admits that he has been fooling Meadows all along. He is not a Thug at all, but an injured innocent. He was a simple orphan raised by his relative Mustapha Chacha. A powerful enemy of Mustapha Chacha named Habibullah has his entire family killed. Amir, who was away in Patna, escaped the massacre. To avenge the deaths of Mustapha Chacha and his family, he goes to the British authorities and surrenders himself as a Thug. He falsely implicates Habibullah, exhuming the bodies of his murdered family members as evidences. Habibullah and his henchmen are punished for being Thugs, and Amir receives pardon as an approver. Being

stigmatized by now, he finds no refuge for himself and therefore takes up the offer of Captain T. Meadows to accompany him to England. In England, Amir spends his time by making up tales of his life as a Thug for Meadows to record. However, he realizes that he is trapped in the web of his own deceit; he observes, "Stories, true or false, are difficult to escape from, jaanam. Especially the stories we tell about ourselves. In some ways, all of us become what we pretend to be." (Khair, 108).

The reconstruction of Amir Ali's life allows Khair to voice his criticism of British Thug narratives. His reformist view of Thug narratives should not be simply dismissed as pure novelist's fancy. From the very beginning many discrepancies have been detected in Thug narratives which are too eye-catching to overlook. Even the British could not gloss over them, as the following observation by Sleeman shows:

An approver may be strictly correct in describing all the circumstances of a particular murder; and four approvers examined at the same time in different parts of the country may agree in all the principal points, and yet they may all differ as to the expedition to which it took place ...

They will often describe with wonderful accuracy a murder perpetrated many years ago ... and yet they will be found to have placed the murder, so admirably described, in an expedition that really took place two years before or two years after that murder. (Quoted in Bruce, 90)

Such mistakes seem unusual for people gifted with such photographic memory. Martine Van Woerkens, in fact, distrusts the excessive meticulousness which characterize Thug-narratives; she judiciously asserts, "the more I contemplate the 'five rupees and eight annas' [a paltry amount] collected twenty years previously in the course of an expedition that included more than a dozen equally precise takes, the less I believe it." (Woerkens, 66) In view of these inconsistencies and improbabilities, one is tempted to question these narratives – as Khair has indeed done.

In retelling Amir Ali's life, Khair seems to suggest that the approvers often mislead the colonial authorities to suit their own purpose. This assumption of Khair is very correct. His Amir Ali is not the only one to falsely implicate his enemy. Evidences show that this was a common practice; so much so, that the British themselves felt the need to adopt precautionary measures. In a letter preserved in the National Archives of India, New Delhi, the writer M. L, an officer of the Thuggee and Dacoity department, mentions a case where the approver maliciously implicated two individuals against whom he had some grudge. The writer cautions the authorities to look out for such occurrences. Amir's case is therefore not a solitary one, but probably a common occurrence in those days.

By presenting the infamous Amir Ali as an innocent victim of circumstances, Khair challenges the Thug archive created by the British colonizers. His deconstruction of British discourse on Indian criminality, however, does not stop here. The basic contention of the colonial authorities was that India was too degenerate to allow crimes like Thuggee to thrive. To counter this claim, Khair reverses our gaze back to the nineteenth century London where crime was as rampant as in India. It becomes evident that he has the infamous Burke and Hare murders in mind when he describes the murderous exploits of the criminal trio – John May, Shields and One-eyed Jack. Burke and Hare were two criminals who murdered as many as sixteen people in order to supply the corpses to their patron Dr. Robert Knox who was a well-known anatomist. Incidentally, the favourite method of Burke and Hare was to smother their victims, something similar in principle to Thuggee. Like these two murderers, May and his gang go on a killing spree to collect skulls for Lord Batterstone, who is an amateur phrenologist. Lord Batterstone is keen on collecting 'specimens', whatever the cost might be. Unable to guess the reason behind these murders, the press vents its ire against Amir Ali, who is forced to go into hiding. Worse, Amir's lover Jenny, who unwittingly becomes a witness, is raped and killed by the miscreants. Finally, through the intervention of a resourceful Indian woman named Qui Hy, the murderers are apprehended. While the other two are arrested, John May is murdered by the riffraff of London. The incidents described in the novel happen in 1837, the year of the coronation of Queen Victoria. The operations against Thuggeewent on in India almost during the same period. Khair thus shows that British discourse on Indian criminality was inherently hollow as crime thrived in England even at the same period.

By relocating the centre of crime from India to England, Khair effectively counters the colonial discourse that constructed India as the hub of crime. One would assume that this manoeuvre naturally exonerates Amir Ali from the charge of being a Thug. This, however, is not the case. Instead of exculpating Amir as expected, the novel follows a trajectory that goes very near incriminating him, especially towards the end. From the very beginning one is made aware of the fact that Amir is an incorrigible liar. He appears a *thagor* a “deceiver” in the true sense of the word. He panders to Captain William T. Meadows to serve his own ends. For this, he fabricates stories for him. One may remember that the ability to pass off lies as truths is the greatest skill that a Thug can acquire because it is upon this skill that his livelihood depends. Like a Thug, Amir Ali thus earns his living by duping the gullible. There are also other similarities with the Thugs. Though he is himself a victim, the way he falsely implicates Habibullah shows his lack of scruple. He does not go for a fair fight, but takes the Thug’s way out. His conduct here is similar to Traylor’s Ameer Ali’s, who betrays his enemy Ganesha and has him hanged by the British. Given Amir’s penchant for lying, one wonders whether he is absolutely truthful even in his Persian letters to Jenny. It needs to be remembered that Amir himself reflects in one of these letters, “I discovered, a long time ago, ... that truth and credibility are two different things most of the time.” (Khair, 24) Could it be possible that Amir’s letters were also fabrications to entice Jenny and the posterity? One never knows.

In order to deceive people the Thugs had to be experts at assuming disguises. They were portrayed as being extraordinarily resourceful men, who could adapt themselves to any circumstances. Taylor’s Ameer Ali is an excellent past master who fitted well in the different roles that he adopted. Sometimes he posed as a merchant; at other times, he presented himself as a soldier. Same is the case with Khair’s Amir Ali. When he is forced to go into hiding, he disguises himself in such a way that he remains undetected even in a foreign city like London. He is extraordinary resourceful, and develops a command over the English language. Such adaptability shows that he possesses all the essential qualities that a Thug needs to survive. The conclusion of the novel reinforces the idea that Amir Ali is, or at least becomes, a genuine Thug or murderer in the end. At one point in the novel he almost comes closer to accepting his Thug-identity. In one of his Persian letters to Jenny he writes, “I had become my own story; my life had turned into the life I had narrated to Captain Meadows. Suddenly, I was the Thug I had claimed to be.” (Khair, 177) The end shows that he does become a murderer or a Thug. Amir finds out that Lord Batterstone was the man responsible for all the killings and accompanies him on his ship to Africa as a *lascar* or sailor. What happens next is not explicitly stated. Only a hint has been previously left in the “Acknowledgement” where the author mentions, “I found the yellowed cutting from a London newspaper announcing the disappearance and presumed death of Lord Batterstone, during a voyage to Africa.” (Khair, 3) Did Amir use the dreaded *rumal* or did a gentle shove do the trick? No ready answer is provided, but perhaps the indications given in the book point to the adoption of the former course. Whatever the case is, the reader cannot shake off the uncomfortable feeling that Amir is an enigmatic character who may have been a deceiver or a Thug all along.

The contradictory stories that Amir Ali tells about himself plainly shows that he is an unreliable narrator. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to give too much credit to his Persian letters. His assertion that “truth and credibility might well be beyond reconciliation in our world” makes it hard for the readers to accept his appeal, “I am not Amir Ali, the Thug.” (Khair, 24-26) Khair’s novel, while it deconstructs the colonial Thug-narratives including *Confessions of a Thug*, remains disturbingly open ended. True to his deconstructionist approach, Khair celebrates the aporia of contradictory possibilities.

### Conclusion

Khair’s ‘novelized history’ thus effectively problematizes the prevailing discourse on Thuggee. While it deconstructs the colonial Thug-narratives, its open ended conclusion also problematizes modern representations of Thuggee. Some scholars feel that Thuggee never existed outside British discourse. Unlike these radical scholars, Khair seems to argue that Thuggee may have existed in the life-world even if it was created by the British themselves. He therefore leaves the conclusion open-ended. It is to be noted that Khair’s deconstructionist approach has drawn the ire of some critics. The reviewer of the novel for *The New*

*York Time* observes, "But if everything is possible then nothing really matters, and this is the risk Khair is running." (McGarth, n.p.) He fails to understand that Khair is negotiating between two extreme positions – one that sees Thugge as mere phantasmagoria and the other that see it as a timeless evil. Perhaps the answer lies somewhere between, as the novel seems to impress upon the readers.

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