

TABISH KHAIR

## Postcolonial Resentments

I WAS A YOUNG MAN and in love when I moved to Denmark. It was a country I had little prior knowledge of, but there was no obvious reason for me to resent the place: after all, moving to Denmark enabled me to live with and, later, marry my girlfriend of the last two or three years, a long-distance relationship that had demanded much from both of us and our families. And yet, very soon I became aware of a kind of resentment in myself.

True, I did not come from circles with much direct experience of the West (or any place outside India). My parents and siblings had never been abroad. Two or three years before moving to Denmark, I had traveled for a few weeks through that country and what was then Czechoslovakia, but before that I had worked in Delhi, and, before Delhi, I had spent the first twenty-five years of my life in my hometown, a provincial place in Bihar, India. On the other hand, having gone to an English-medium school and worked as a journalist in English, I had a text-based familiarity with Europe, its cultures and histories.

My family was religious, but not orthodox; my parents were not Westernized but open in a way that, looking back, I associate with a certain heritage of basically cosmopolitan Indian Muslim cultures. Moreover, while my parents would never drink, I did. While they followed Islam's rituals and prohibitions, I had long given up on them. And I had not considered it a loss. As such, there was no reason for me to feel ill at ease in beer-drinking, pork-eating Denmark.

Having moved to Denmark, I became aware of these "usual" sources of resentment and even anger among some immigrants from religious Muslim backgrounds. I recall walking into a small shop in Frederiksberg, a district of Copenhagen. It was the sort of one-door shop that stocks everything on cluttered shelves, cans of tomato, cakes, packets of chips, sundry toiletries, beer . . . all the way down to porn and similarly sleazy publications on its magazine racks in a corner. I struck up a conversation in Urdu with its owner, a religious Pakistani, and, as often happens, we told each other how we had ended up in Copenhagen of all places. The elderly owner told me that his parents had migrated from India to

Pakistan during the Partition in 1947, because they wanted to live “a pure life in an Islamic country.” Then, with a gesture of sadness and despair, he pointed at the magazine racks and the bottles of whiskey and beer on his shelves. “And look,” he said, “Look at what I have to do for a living here!” After that, he subjected me to a passionate harangue on the superiority of Islamic morals and standards.

I could understand the resentment in people like that shopkeeper. It combined various factors. For instance, it used a certain idealization of one’s own religion to divert one’s disappointment at being stuck lower down the social order than one was “back home.” Hindu Indians did something similar with a construction of Indian culture: I still recall the portly gentleman, the brother or cousin of a successful businessman who had settled in Denmark, who spent at least two hours at a party in the Indian embassy basically boasting about the superiority of Indian culture to bewildered Danes, whose notion of Indian culture mostly did not go beyond chicken tikka masala. The Danes did not understand his driven need to relate real and imagined achievements of Indian culture—mostly in the past, because of course the present had been contaminated and degraded by Muslim and European invaders. Neither did they appreciate his dexterity in jumping from discourses of purity (which would have made a reactionary Nazi Aryan proud) to discourses of hybridity and multiculturalism that would have lit a glow of solidarity in the eyes of radical university postcolonialists; all was grist to his mill as long as the discourse adopted proved the superiority of India over Europe.

The Danish guests could not know that the colored immigrant does not just move up the economic scale, she or he also often moves down the social scale. He might make more money in the West, but he will also be conscious of a loss of prestige and place—further compounded by the fact that his entire culture (or religion) is seen as “less,” far less at times, in the West than it was back home.

The resentment of such immigrants is similar to and different from Friedrich Nietzsche’s notion of *ressentiment*, which might also exist in postcolonial subjects. This is so because while *ressentiment* arises from a sense of one’s own inferiority/failure (usually projected onto a scapegoat), the resentment that I want to highlight here is not based on a feeling of inferiority; it is based on a feeling of a deep personal and historical injustice. Actually, there is even a feeling of superiority behind such resentment: its bitterness is rooted in a conviction of unfairness, of superiority or at least equality thwarted by circumstances. Neither is this,

like Søren Kierkegaard's *ressentiment*, the creation of a "passionless age," where the masses have stifled all creativity and passion in individuals. The Pakistani Muslim shopkeeper and the Indian Hindu party-pooper were very passionate, and not at all convinced of their inferiority or the superiority of the West.

But did I share the condition of such immigrants? After all, it was not the "purity" of my "identity" that I was worried about; I had sullied that many years ago in my hometown, and I had done so willfully, because I detested what was done to people and what people did to themselves in the name of this and similar forms of "purity." I had also come to the conclusion that all *given* definitions of identity ran against the complex facts of history, and were basically a simplification of them—usually employed by leaders, like Hitler, to empower themselves.

The Pakistani shopkeeper's resentment and perhaps anger at Denmark—and a generalized West—was born of deprivation of some sort, and in this it shared Nietzsche's *ressentiment*. But I did not experience even that deprivation, or not significantly. I did not feel that drinking wine deprived me of my Muslim cultural heritage, because for me that heritage also included the praise of wine in Ghalib's poetry and Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*. Having taught myself about the ways in which cultures interpenetrate each other, neither my Indianness nor my Muslimness felt threatened or impoverished in the face of cultural and other differences. When faced with cultural imperialism, I could counter with facts and data: white triumphalism left me feeling hugely amused, not insecure or reduced.

Formal education had little to do with this: both the shopkeeper's and the party-pooper's (educated) definitions of the West and themselves were situated on old colonial binaries—for instance, that of science and religion/spiritualism, and hence white triumphalism left them feeling affronted and angry. True, like me, they did not feel inferior, but they were trapped in exactly the same discourses that enabled white triumphalism. I have since then met highly educated people from the East and the West—and a few authors too—who are trapped in exactly the same *education*. If it leads to open or hidden white triumphalism on the one side, it leads to resentment on the other: not based on feelings of inferiority but due to a gut feeling that one is not, and has never been, inferior. What one has been is . . . trapped.

I did not feel trapped. I had not come to the West seeking emancipation, and I did not end up in the West feeling trapped. I had immigrated from choice, not compulsion; and my choice was personal, not economic

or vocational. So, no, I told myself, while I understood the Pakistani shopkeeper and others like him, the resentment I felt was not the same as what they felt. And yet—especially after the first few months—I did feel resentment at Denmark and Danes.

Was it because of the difference of language? Danes are usually fluent in English, but of course I was having to learn Danish—a language that can be difficult to pick up and even more difficult to use, as Danes, unlike English or Hindi speakers, are not used to hearing their words uttered in a thousand different accents. I must have resented these difficulties somewhat, and the fact that, at least in my first two years, the jobs I could find were right at the bottom of the social order: cleaning, washing, newspaper delivery, etc. But it was not a major resentment, for I knew that this was just a phase: very soon I would have enough Danish, or would complete my Ph.D. from Copenhagen, and move on to better jobs. Very soon, having fulfilled the condition of residence and work in Denmark for two years, I would be eligible for Danish merit scholarships. And, mostly, I liked doing the physical part-time jobs—as I suspected, and have since confirmed in academia, they tired out my body, but left my mind relatively fresh and uncluttered for the reading and writing that I had actually set out to do. And, in any case, the friends I was making in Denmark were more than willing to speak English to me. Most of them were English-speakers settled in Denmark, or Danes studying English. Also, I did not feel isolated, as the Pakistani shopkeeper did: the cosmopolitan spaces of Denmark enabled me to meet more people like myself than I would have met in my hometown. For each friend I lost by leaving India, I gained two in Denmark.

In short, my resentment seemed to be in excess of my travails as an immigrant. And what was more disturbing was the fact that it grew acuter every time I attended dinners and celebrations in my girlfriend/wife's family. I liked the family, and they liked me. There had even been a couple of visits to my family in India, and all sides—being united by careers in medicine—had gotten along very well. There was no reason for my resentment. Also, my wife's family was close-knit—in its own Danish way—as my family had been, in its own Indian way back in Bihar. I liked being part of what my father always called my “Danish family.” Where, then, did my resentment come from?

LOOKING BACK, after years in which much more has happened to me, I have finally started understanding my resentment. My earlier sense of it was right: this was not the same as the anger and frustration of the Pakistani

shopkeeper. And yet there was a thread—a postcolonial thread—running between us.

To explicate this, I need to jump almost two decades, and move on to a piece I wrote for the Indian paper *The Hindu* in August 2016. Starting with Donald Trump’s cultural imperialist reaction to Khizr Khan, I argued that many of the (right-wing or conservative) political movements today—the Tea Party, Islamism, Hindutva, etc.—can be seen as the attempt by men to latch on to their male privileges in the wake of real or perceived gains by women. I noted that Islamism and Hindutva have obvious sexist tendencies, but Trump, with his trophy wives, his Republican opposition to forms of family planning, his big male ego, is no different. I got many positive responses from Hindu and Muslim Indians, but there were also two or three angry postings: they were united by their perception of me as someone who had sold out to the West, because obviously I was living in the West. They angrily listed all that is supposedly wrong with the “West”: promiscuity, suicide rates, racism, neglected parents, wayward children, failing families, rapes . . . the list was long—and absurd in exactly the same way as white racist criticism, just as sweeping and uncontextualized, of colored cultures is absurd.

But some of it was also based on actual and genuine critiques of “Western societies,” or (more exactly) “Western modernity.” Once again, they did not consider themselves inferior. If anything, they thought I was trying to “assimilate to the West,” as one put it, because I had “bought Western notions of cultural superiority,” simply by conceding that some interpretations of Islam were sexist. They had their data right at times: to cite just one example, numbers do indicate that rapes take place far less often in Wahhabi Saudi Arabia than in liberal Denmark. Numbers, as is often the case when dealing with complex human issues, are misleading, but to controvert them one has to contextualize the matter: for instance, by pointing out that rape within marriage is not recognized in Saudi Arabia, where women are strictly policed and intimidated by the system, and men are allowed many liberties in the form of legalized (including marriage-based) satisfaction of their sexual urges while women can be strongly penalized for unproven rape accusations.

Reading these litanies of the infamy of the West, I realized once again that when I had moved to the West, I had expected affluence, development, and all the rest: fat burgers, wide roads, and big cars. I had been totally prepared for them, as had been the Pakistani shopkeeper and the Indian party-pooper. I had also been prepared for Western infamy. After all, much

of the genuine critique of modernity, America, Europe, etc.—some by leftist scholars too—was familiar to us. Yes, the wine and the pork were not a problem for me, as they were for the other two, but basically all three of us were totally prepared for modernity, with its lurid skyscrapers of success behind which lurked the inevitable slums of dysfunction. I was even prepared for postmodernity, with its glorious images cast on the thin surface of an inevitable hollowness.

The common notion—so often sustained by prize-winning multicultural novels based in the West—that the immigrant resents the *modern* changes encountered in the West is not true of many immigrants. Most of them come prepared for the changes, and many have encountered its versions in the non-West too. I know now that in my case it was not what I had expected—call it modernity or postmodernity—that caused resentment. It was what I had not expected—because it had been left out of critiques of the West. My resentment rose from the confused, blurred realization—which grew slowly—that this critique was partly untrue. The Denmark I encountered was not just a soulless place, where families were falling apart, and men and women fornicated in bouts of drunken absentmindedness. Instead, it was a place of parks for children, and institutions that prevented most people from falling beyond a certain level. It was a society that thought seriously about relationships and responsibilities. Neither was it a place without a past. As I slowly discovered, Europe—or, for that matter, even America—was not just rushing into the future, leaving its past behind. Despite all the noise I had heard about history and culture in India, both seemed less appreciated and cared for in India than in Denmark and other European countries: I recall going back to my hometown in India and discovering that a tall, sculpted, seventh-century stone temple had been cemented over by its caretakers. If the Nietzschean notion of *ressentiment* applies to such resentment, it does so only to the extent that the immigrant—especially those like the Pakistani shopkeeper and the Indian party-poopers, who come with strong notions of Western decadence—loses a position of easy superiority over the West, which thus perhaps becomes all the more powerful, even threatening.

It can happen at the personal level too. I started understanding my resentment during functions in my girlfriend/wife's family: they reminded me of all that was seldom possible in middle-class families in places like India. I had grown up in a close-knit family, with roots in a village near the town where we lived. But like many other middle-class families, we had not been able to create secular festivities—or develop religious occasions in ways that also

turned them into secular festivities. This was probably more pronounced in my circles, as I had grown up in a religious minority (Muslims), but generally speaking the ease with which European atheists celebrated Christmas was not available to us, for better and for worse. We had to choose between celebrating and not celebrating a religious festival. The option to be genuinely atheistic and still celebrate a once-religious festival was mostly denied to us, both within the community and from outside it.

We cared for children in my family in India, and the families I knew there—but were unable to provide them with parks or safe streets or even the many options that children had in Europe. Let alone the horrors of the postcolonial working classes, even middle-class families in India seemed to spend far more time around the TV set than families did in Europe, where there were more and other opportunities for families to congregate. Even education was a burden, and shorn of many choices, for us in India. Careers were coercive.

The sheer ease of personal or group fulfillment—yes, even that safe suburban existence so often ridiculed by the left—was far more difficult to obtain in postcolonial countries than in formerly colonial ones. Today I am aware that Scandinavian countries, with their effective social welfare systems, might offer the best examples of this in the West, and that the United States, in general, trails behind Europe here. And yet, the fact remains that there is much that is functioning in all these societies, and much that can be admired. By “admired,” I do not imply a nationalist pride based on imperial blindness. Far from it, because for me—and surely this played a role in my resentment too, and connected it to the resentment of the Pakistani shopkeeper—all these admirable aspects are also rooted in the past of colonization and the present of imperialism.

Having said that, however, it is important not to throw out the baby of Western achievements along with the bathwater of Western oppression—also because both were and are not solely Western. A discourse needs to be evolved that does not merely castigate Western hegemonies—because otherwise we will continue to run the danger of reacting with resentment (or, its opposite, abject adulation) to what has been achieved in the West and underplaying non-Western hegemonies. The consequence of these two dangers, taken to their extreme, are virulent forms of religio-cultural militancy in postcolonial societies, including Islamism and Hindutva. This discourse is slow to evolve in postcolonial circles, as our criticism—for historical and necessary reasons—has been focused on colonial and imperial injustices.

Just as greed was too easy a temptation for the possessor of rampant colonial power, resentment might be too easy for the postcolonial subject, who is made perpetually aware of her own deprivation (not inferiority, mark you!) when faced with much of so-called Western achievements. It is far too convenient to see the West—as many Islamist and Hindutva ideologues do—as simply and entirely a place of depravity, a civilization in free fall. In reaction, it is too tempting to take legitimate criticism of the West and turn it into fuel for something else: a dismissal of achievements of and in the so-called West, and a justification of failures and hegemonies in the non-West. In this sense, leftist and liberal Western criticism of the West can become something else when taken up and repeated in the non-West, unless it is matched by an equivalent criticism of the non-West too.

Of course, one cannot yet shirk the task of a critique of forces and tendencies in the West. To take just one example, the current media rhetoric on the muddle in the Middle East seldom takes into account the meddling by colonial, Western powers that went into it—the creation of elitist oil economies, the subversion of leftist and other democratic forces, the obstruction of nationalist initiatives by oil companies supported by Western powers, and, not least, the introduction of arms sales as balance-of-trade payment for oil. But when this critique comes from, say, a scholar like Timothy Mitchell (see, for instance, his *Carbon Democracy*), it means one thing; when it is taken up and repeated by Islamists in the Middle East, India or England, it means many other things too. A necessary, urgent critique of the West is turned into a kind of fruitless and self-defeating caricature of the West that, to my mind, resembles the colonist discourses of “native backwardness” used to justify or obscure the greed of colonization. This leads not just to resentment of all the structures of powerlessness that exist but also to resentment of those of possible empowerment: it enables reactionaries to throw out the baby along with the bathwater.

When I think of this kind of resentment, I think of the tragedy of Bastille Day in 2016. We know the facts: a French citizen of Tunisian descent, Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, thirty-one, plowed a twenty-ton truck into crowds on the Promenade des Anglais seafront in Nice during a fireworks celebration on Bastille Day, killing eighty-five people, injuring more than two hundred. The scene that comes to my mind is that of Bouhlel, perched in his massive truck, around which flow hundreds of celebrating people. There are families, couples, friends, solitary revelers—some white, some colored, some French, some not. There is something hugely attractive in such an occasion, and to dismiss it in terms of “nationalism” (or anything

else from its dark underside) is to miss out on a genuine achievement in French (and other) societies. Everything is in flow, functioning, radiant; people are able to relate, however fleetingly, to others across differences, and connect to the past and the future. Bouhlel sits there, watching them, yes, resentful, a hand on the ignition key.

Bouhlel was a disturbed young man, recently divorced, but one part of me suspects that the resentment he felt at that scene of revelry, amity, sense, and happiness, was not just personal or Islamic. He might have felt excluded, but I fear that at least a part of his resentment was not all that different from the resentment that I had felt during the functions—included, accepted, and participating though I was—of my “Danish family.” It arose from some of the underexamined and enmeshed factors that I have tried, despite the limitations and dangers of all such endeavor, to illustrate in this essay.

The limitations of such an essay are obvious enough: among other things, they are foregrounded by my inability to accept or reject either the Pakistani shopkeeper’s resentment or Nietzsche’s *ressentiment* as the same as what I had felt in my early years in Denmark. And the dangers can perhaps be best understood by giving a parochial twist to what I have written, toward the end of this essay, about Bouhlel’s resentment being not all that different from mine: “See, they *all* hate us,” the white racist would claim. It reminds me of the days after 9/11 when even well-meaning Americans went about asking, “Why do they hate us?”

The question was faulty. I have never *hated* Danes (or Americans), and I do not personally know an immigrant who does. But sometimes I have *resented* Danes. For some time I supposed that my resentment arose from the historical injustices of colonization and current forms of imperialism, which inevitably leave postcolonial citizens and immigrants feeling not just deprived but at times, as in Iraq and Syria today, devastated. I supposed my resentment arose from the ordinary Dane’s *educated* ignorance of this ongoing history, or her dismissal of it as something that was over. The “get on with it” sentiment, which is more easily uttered than executed.

But I have come to realize that there was another face to my resentment: this had to do with my own reluctance to countenance the political and personal successes of ex-colonial countries like Denmark. These successes were partly based on a history of colonization and the presently lopsided equations of imperialism, but that was not all the story. Not all of it could be conflated with postcolonial deprivation or devastation, as the ideologues of Islamism and Hindutva often did. If inheritors of colonialism mostly still

need to face up to the rampant greed of imperialism, which is by no means over, the inheritors of postcolonial deprivation also need to learn to stop resenting what, despite everything, has to be admired. It is difficult for ordinary postcolonial immigrants. It is difficult to walk under the grand trees of parks in Copenhagen and fail to note their colonial roots; it is difficult to visit the castles of Europe and fail to notice that most of them were refurbished or restored in exactly the centuries when the colonized nations were being looted. And yet, it has to be done—not just for the sake of those grand trees and houses, whose beauty demands it despite the nightmares of the past, but also for the sake of the fragile and desirable civility of the families, children, pets, students, friends, and lovers in and around them.