

Utopic Borders: Liminal Zones of Transition and Cultural Creation in Jamil Ahmad's *The*

*Wandering Falcon.*

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Abstract

Today's world is clearly divided into nation states that govern and rule the people according to a specific judiciary. The effect of this division is the collapse of human individuality and the identity which they hold as to their national homeland and cultural surroundings. Borders are the modern artifacts that help in building these states but the focus of this research is on the issue that whether these borders will be able to provide an identity that will both be intermediately transitional and culturally creative to the border people. This research will be analyzing Jamil Ahmed's book, *The Wandering Falcon* in light of the border theory by Homi Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldua.

Since Pakistan is one of the many countries whose borders on all sides were not always constructed, but among a plethora of reasons, one main factor to construct the border connecting Balochistan with Afghanistan was the political stance of the state against terrorism. But do tribal areas need to be cleaned off to avoid terrorism or is this division doing more harm to indigenous people than protect the state from outsiders.

Keywords: Border, identity, existence, homeland. transition

## Paper

This research paper deals with the most prominent post-colonial element present in Jamil Ahmad's (hereafter Ahmad) book *The Wandering Falcon* (2011); borders as utopic domains. Since borders are constructions of the colonial era to create differences among people all over the world, borders have also become the imaginative boundaries of the colonial land for every person, which man struggles to avoid or trespass but ultimately fails in his efforts because one is afraid of crossing over the line and stepping across the borderland. They have instinctive fear of losing identity attached with ones own land, which restrain them to free themselves of psychological constructions.

“The beyond signifies distance, marks progress, promises the future, but our intimations of exceeding the barrier or boundary- the very act of going beyond- are unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the present which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunct and displaced”(McLeod 9).

Not every frontier of a nation is constructed into a border, and one such liminal zone is the boundary of Balochistan, a province of Pakistan, adjoining with Iran and Afghanistan. There are small openings from where border people cross the frontiers for transport of goods as well as nomadic settling according to seasonal changes but with time nation-states are reinforcing laws in these areas because with the regulation of people and goods, there had also been transportation of narcotics and crimes taking place which had in turn exploited the liminal zones. With the exploitation, newer and stricter authorities started settling in the borderlands creating new borders for the people. The tribes, which resided at the frontiers, were being turned into colonies by the nation through their army that patrolled the boundaries. This was another border being constructed between the tribes, because on the borderlands, there is no concept of nationalism or siding with any state, so the different tribes have the same culture and customs to follow. They usually have conflicts with each other but they also understand one another in terms of lifestyle, trade, traditions and most important by law of right and wrong.

So the restricting authorities have a dividing effect on the psyche of the border people that they don't belong to a land but to a politically constructed nation or only one side of the border.

In a similar context Gloria Anzaldua, a Mexican-American author, defines border theory as, "... a guide to the inner self of a colonized person to confront his fears of liberation and struggle to decolonize himself to achieve freedom" (136). Although borders were created by the British, but if we look at the present time, every nation develops boundaries to impose laws and nationalities on their citizens. Within a nation, there are several other boundaries of different domains restraining humans from psychological liberation and freedom to co-exist. Such people become the 'in-betweens' as said by Bhabha because they belong nowhere but the border and they relate to the zone as their identity. The border becomes a reflective tool for the tribal people to recognize their existence amidst the clash of nation-states. So the border metaphorically becomes the no-man's land because the people residing there do not have any identity. They are considered as nomads who keep shifting across borders but once their shifting is also restricted by the state orders, then their only sense of existence is also taken away leaving them in the sphere of no place.

The idea of displacement within ones place is also important because when a person is forced to choose between two sides of the same border, then he feels divided from within because border people have no dividing lines of prominence. Ahmad portrays the tribal people of Balochistan in the same circumstances and their struggle in confronting the authorities of nation-states with their own tribal laws. Even Basharat Peer states in his article, *The Wandering Falcon by Jamil Ahmad*, "*The Wandering Falcon* is also a blistering critique of the ruthless ways of nation states, as they seek to impose artificially constructed borders on older, more fluid worlds" (The Guardian).

The concept of borders as boundaries to separate humans and nations from one another to create difference and segregation started during the time of British colonization. They created boundaries to exclude the subjugated ones from the colonizers. It was also created to impose and identify domination over the colonized people so that there would always remain separatism between the subjugator and the

subjugated. For the British, the borders were always a physical fence creating distance, but the impact of those fences were affecting in every manner on the individuals of the territory.

Homi Bhabha, in his book *Location of Culture* says, “A boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greeks recognized it, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing” (8). It means that after every new border starts a new culture, civilization and a nation. But the question arises that does the start of something new ends the on-goings which were present behind the boundary? No, it does not end but it actually merges with the start of something new. In this manner, we can state that boundaries are the ‘locus of hope’ because they signify hybridity, creativity and ethical prospects. It is a place of assimilation of cultures, nations, thoughts and even individuals because the physical fences only remain as societal, political and visible constructions but not psychological barriers.

According to Olivia Cadaval, “Borders are artifacts of history and are subject to change over time” (24). So wherever two or more cultures and civilizations meet, there is a possibility of change. This change makes frontiers an ambiguous area for the onlooker as well as the resident because anything can happen at any time. It is the ‘interstitial perspective’ which makes borders as places of resistance because boundaries are owned by two nation-states and when the laws of any state changes, it applies most strongly on borderlands, creating opportunities for exploitation and stimulating people to revolt against the authority. There is confrontation and struggle in these parts because people cannot side with any one nation or state but the governments impose laws and shifting borders on them.

Gloria Anzaldua, a Mexican-American author, in her preface to *Boderlands* says, “I am a border woman” suggesting that she is in a state of ambiguity and alteration. (1) She cannot side with any country or comply by any law. In a positive manner she is free of the constraints of institutions and in a negative manner she does not belong anywhere. Not belonging to any particular place gives a sense of loss and displacement to the individual because when we talk about the existence of a person, he is recognized by his essence among the surroundings and when a person does not belong anywhere then how can he possibly exist? From this question onwards, the border theory becomes a metaphor of individual psychology and a region of ‘utopic’, signifying a displaced self. Michaelson and Johnson, in

their book *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics* say, “On either side of the border, on both sides of the border, there is one cultural identity; however it is defined, in whatever terms it is disclosed, it is nevertheless *one* – it is *our* identity” (133-34). In other words, the identity of a person becomes individual rather than political and the boundaries surrounding him become ‘imaginative borders of the nation’ which only appear visually but cannot restrain a person from choosing between one culture and another. (Bhabha 43)

Although this theory initiated as an argument to contemplate on the US-Mexico border issue, but concerns of border theory can also be seen in Jamil Ahmad’s book *The Wandering Falcon* (2011) where he talks about the political and geo-statistical borders of Balochistan, a province of Pakistan, adjoining those of Iran and Afghanistan. The book brings forth the cultures of the indigenous people of tribal areas for whom the borderlands and its laws are imposed and outlawed by themselves only. The author looks at the utopic areas as the realm of true human identity and existence where a person does not need documents to prove his belonging to any place or tribe.

Ahmad’s book *The Wandering Falcon* is a collection of short stories, with each story only connected by a wandering boy called Tor Baz – the black falcon. The work can be placed under the context of border theory because it portrays human life, customs, traditions and human psychology being affected by the creation and strengthening of borders. Since borders are social, geographical and political constructions, the book also begins on a geo-statistical setting, “In the tangle of crumbling, weather-beaten and broken hills, where the borders of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan meet, is a military outpost manned by about two score soldiers” (Ahmad 1). The setting is essential to the book because today boundaries are not only considered barriers separating nation-states, but it becomes the zones of liminality of cultures where negotiations, communications and movements are traced. It is also called the point of hope by a few border theorists because the zone where two cultures, jurisdictions and nations meet, there is always “...hybridity, intellectual creativity and moral possibility”. (Johnson and Michaelson 2)

The book can also be called as a Bildungsroman because it traces the maturity years of Tor Baz from childhood to adulthood. Although we are not told of his age after 5 years old, but his physical description allows the readers to estimate the passing of time by the end of the novel, when he is referred to as a young man rather than a small boy. The name is apt for the boy – the black falcon – because he embodies all the characteristics of the falcon specie. Being very strong for his age and circumstances in which he survived, Tor Baz is a nomad, wandering from land to land and from tribe to tribe. He hunts down people of his own kind either by being in the disguise of a “Guide” or of “a young man” who wanted to buy Shah Zarina for marriage. He is familiar with the ways and minds of the border people and he knows well how to make people fall in the old tricks of trade. Being a wanderer himself, Tor Baz becomes the finest example of borderlands where negotiations, articulations and expressions of belonging occur. He represents the border people and their significance in our society. He witnesses all the changes which take place, he stands in a place of ambiguity, he sides with no particular tribe, he represents movement between borders and he himself becomes a symbol of historical artifact because he is the only one witnessing the passing moments becoming history and through whom the readers can recall history.

Having no identity or borrowed knowledge attached with any tribe or land, Tor Baz is the only character who raises the question of belonging to the Afridi, “...what makes a man like you, who has lived in a foreign land, seek out and visit this place and these people?... This land should have meant nothing to you as you have not seen or lived in it” (Ahmad 119). The man inherited his Afridi identity from his father but he never lived in the land of Afridi tribe himself and now he wants to reside in the place of his inherited belonging. Ahmad says on the previous page, “The boundary between the tribes was not marked in any way”, signifying that even though there are no visible frontiers, but there still are borders within borders (118). Every tribe has an unmarked boundary and when any kind of border is crossed over, whether physical or psychological, the self is displaced and divided into the self and the other. The displacement occurs because the person feels detached from his roots of belonging. This is the moment when he enters the utopic domain of ambiguity, where all cultures, borders, laws and

identities meet. This 'locus of hope' allows one to gain knowledge of his self because according to Johnson, '...the act of crossing serves the psychic function of reflection. The border itself becomes a mirror exacting knowledge of the self and the other' (Madsen 185). So we can say that the Afridi man wanted to cross the boundary of the tribe because he wanted to know his inner self which was attached to the Afridi inheritance because he had borrowed knowledge of the tribe from his father. His journey also marks the act of wandering during which one gains knowledge through experience and exposure of other people like when he meets Mehboob Khan and Ghairat Khan who tell him about his father's occupation as an agent of Germany working during World War I. (Ahmad 126-30)

Through the re-telling of past events, Ahmad brings in a reflection to the colonial era when the entire world was divided and confined to borders, creating nation-states. Since these people were already colonized by the British, they had crossed borders and had gained knowledge about their inner self, these people were aware of their existence in the society as "...marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the present" (Bhabha 19). These people were divided into two groups, one siding with the British while the other siding with Germany, but they did not raise flags against one another, rather when the dispute of raising flags was taken into knowledge, both the groups elaborated on the strategies of communal selfhood and raised each other's status as an Afridi, "Ghairat Gul did not wish that I (Mehboob Khan) be destroyed. His value to the British would have lasted only as long as I existed as a danger to them. Without me, even Ghairat Gul would have been reduced to an ordinary poor Afridi" (Ahmad 130).

Just like Bhabha says, "there are imaginative borders of the nation" the Afridi tribe presented it through their acts of siding with a superpower at the time of war (28). The borders are 'imaginative' because the people who are upholding the flags do not belong to any of the flag-state, so the nations become imaginary. Similarly, the border people do not belong to any nation; rather they belong to their tribes or clans because they do not have any state identity to uphold. The tribes also have imaginary borders which are unmarked due to which these border people do not have any documents as a proof of

their identity. As new laws impose over their act of movement across borders, they find it difficult to register themselves as belonging to any side of the boundary.

Ahmad says about nomadic tribes, “There was no way for them to obtain travel documents for thousands of their tribesmen; they had no birth certificates, no identity papers or health documents. They could not document their animals. The new system would certainly mean the death of a centuries-old way of life” (54). Here comes the clash of civilization due to colonization. When I say colonization, it is in reference to the strengthening of borders by nation-states, for which the tribal people are subjected to different laws leading to conditions of hardship and exploitation. When the nomad tribes had attempted to cross the border to enter Pakistan, they were warned to stop and turn back. Since it was necessary for them to move to plain areas in winter season, and because it was important for the animals to have water, some of the nomads moved forward and were killed in the indiscriminate firing. People, their animals and their beliefs were all killed in genocide and the place later stanchd so terribly due to dead men and animals that the soldiers had to depart from the post. This scenario reflects the situation of Germany during holocaust when the smell of burned bodies curtailed the air all around.

The exploitation of border people by state authority is also portrayed through the act of replacing sardars of tribes because every tribe have their own set of laws which apply only on the local people and not any foreign body. The authority of changing the laws also rest with the tribal community but in one of the story, *A Point of Honour*, the state authority killed seven sardars of different tribes, signifying the replacing of power and the diminishing of tribunal laws. Jangu Khan said, “The officers of the district chose to remove the chief of our brother tribe. We allow the right to make and unmake chiefs only to ourselves. We cannot accept the power of anyone else to decide who our chief shall be and shall not be. This is the cause and we cannot help but fight for such a cause” (Ahmad 27). Changes in national laws allow tribal communities to revolt against the government because they are being forced to leave their ways of living and condemn themselves to political strategies.

The strengthening of borders is seen as a ‘process’ by Newman, who says, “The process through which borders are demarcated and managed are centered to the notions of borders as process and borders

as institution”. So the process of demarcating borders to make them as institutions for the border people is relevant to the concept of colonization because people are forced to condemn their own customs and laws and take on laws stated by the nations. This is another perspective to look at colonization in the modern era where humanity is being challenged in the name of national security. When Walter D. Mignolo talks about borders as dividing lines, “On the one side of frontiers was civilization; on the other; nothing, just barbarism or emptiness”, he refers to the Western Europe as civilized and South Asia as barbaric.

In Ahmad’s book, *The Wandering Falcon*, we can take the indigenous or tribal people living on borderlands as civilized and the foreign authorities and nation states as barbaric. I say barbaric because these authorities are the ones which involve mankind into war and violence. When Mehboob Khan recalls his story of being an agent during WWI, Ahmad points to the idea that these border people were not at war with any country but being the subjugators, they had to side with any one superpower in order to survive. They were given standard flags to uphold which had “... verses from the Holy Koran inscribed upon them and they could not be disgraced” (Ahmad 130). The this particular idea of inscribing verse from a tribe’s holy book is very manipulative because through the people’s culture and religion foreign states force tribes to enter war and today these tribal people are called as terrorists. We should first think who the real criminal is the terrorist or the creator of the terrorist and who is then the barbaric and the civilized? Ahmad in an interview to Steve Inskeep says about the educated ways of the tribal people, “...they didn’t know how to read or write, but they do know, the basics of what, you know, human values are” (NPR News).

When we talk about endurance in borderlands, Ahmad clearly tells his readers the choices for survival that these people have. He says, “If a camel got lost, one man – if not two – would have to drop out. In such circumstances, a camel was not merely valuable, it was life itself”, and in such conditions protection of animals is equally important (20). Similarly, crossing the borders is also a condition for survival because borders then become conjunction of national laws and customs, where movement of people and goods are standardized. With the borders being such conjunctions, theorists today believe

that the significance of border being the periphery of a nation should be changed to the axis of the state because being an ambiguous area, change takes place at borderlands. With change knowledge of social, geographical and political upheaval and even order is gained. Being the zones of cultural originality, possibilities for a better world and hopeful tomorrow are also initiated at the borderlands.

Ahmad has portrayed an essential picture of 'utopic borders' suggesting to his readers that these areas are undergoing tremendous changes due to its positioning and being a zone of liminality. Instead of making them centers for war time, they should be centers of cultural assimilation and creativity from where changes for a better world should begin like Tor Baz, who represents change in himself by giving hope to the readers that he may settle down and get married. "I could settle down... Who but God knows what the future holds for me and for this land? Maybe it is time now to end my wanderings" (180).

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