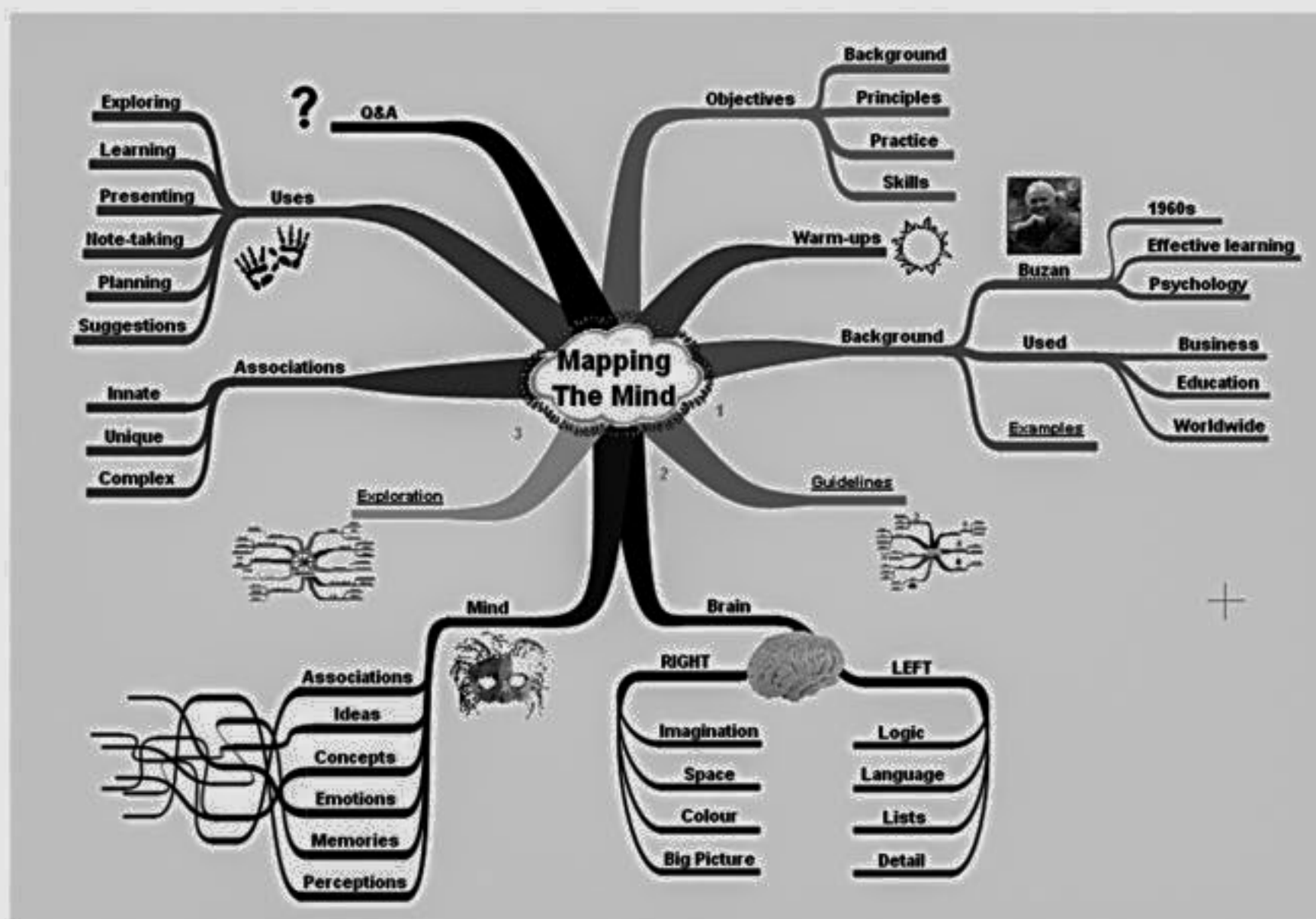


Deconstructing Genre in Writing

MOHAMMAD SHAMSUZZAMAN

Does a piece of writing have a sex? Not really! It perhaps has a gender, which in French is *genre*. When it comes to distinguishing one category of writing from another, however, genre seems to demarcate it absolutely and permanently as if writing had a sex. That's a little brash. Scholarship in the discipline of writing considers genre as a convenient construct, which is contingent, controversial, and experimental. Steven Pinker in his book, *Sense of Style*, claims that different prose styles are not sharply demarcated. If any piece of writing is authentic, original, and graceful, it embodies both creative abandon and rational control. Those so called creative writers are not creative until they create critically. Neither are those so called critical writers critical until they critique creatively. Writing is



mathematics is intuition. So is writing. He documents that Hemingway also believes that the law of prose writing is as immutable as that of mathematics. When science marries art in writing, how do so called creative and critical genre divorce them? They don't. They can't. Genre is a strategic device to construct as well as to taxonomize writing. Writing, however, is not strategic. Writing, instead, is meta-strategic. Original writers do—and have to—bend and break genre specific strategies to transcribe their thoughts. Genre perhaps adds to the technical excellence of a piece of writing. It adds no substance.

The prose is layered and subtle as well as indirect and philosophical. Prose in academic or pragmatic genre, on the other hand, is reader-based. The writer must not expect her readers to read between the lines, for there's no line between the lines. It's all flatly stated. It's lean and direct as well as linear and top-down. Most importantly, academic prose is meant to be consumed by a specific discourse community, and every discourse community has its own principles and prejudices of writing. Writing in this genre is stubbornly convention-driven. These apparent distinctions between so called creative and critical genres are rather facile as Naipaul claims in the same essay that all literary forms are artificial and that they constantly change to match the tone and mood of the culture. Writers across genres deny to be stuck in a time warp that expects conformity.

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thinking regardless the genre it falls in. Composition scholars propose that what we call critical or creative thinking is just plain thinking. And the rest is a stylistic option of transcription. Sometimes the styles of transcription so remarkably vary across genres that they reinforce the assumption that genre is an immutable construct in writing. It's not.

Apparently, though, writing in general falls under two categories: aesthetic/creative (PDF: poetry, fiction, and drama) and pragmatic/critical (EDNA: expository, descriptive, narrative, and argumentative). While these categories have distinctive forms and features, they are hardly different. Good writing at once transcends and transgresses genre. It falls in a hybrid

genre, and it embodies critical intelligence and creative flair. This perspective considered, poetry and essays are identical entities with two different modes of transcription. They look different, but writing is no visual. Writing is a complex cognitive endeavor carried in an emotional environment. Peter Elbow, a leading composition theorist, claims in his essay "Teaching Thinking by Teaching Writing" that any writing initiates a synergy between first order (i.e., intuitive and creative) and second order (i.e., conscious, controlled, and directed) thinking. If genre is considered sacrosanct, then it leads to the assumption that a poet is only intuitive and creative whereas an essayist is only conscious, controlled, and directed. That's being a reductive lens to appreciate the vast and varied landscape of writing. Writers are writers. They are not genre sticklers. Readers and critics are. The concept of genre in writing, then, is rather moot than substantial.

Writers across genres seem to have flouted the concept of genre. Oscar Wilde, for example, in his essay written in the form of a dialogue, "The Critic as Artist," claims that there is critical element in all creative work. The mere critical instinct doesn't innovate unless it is cultivated through our rational faculty. Even important, he debunks the flimsy façade of genre as he contends that Robert Browning is the most supreme fiction writer ever lived, who used poetry for writing in prose. Any prose is androgynous, as is any writer. As well, any original writer has a peculiar angle of vision along with a

highly individualistic way of thinking and languaging. A convenient cachet like genre doesn't define who she is as a writer. She both meshes and bashes genre. Suresh Canagarajah, for example, has been a scholar in the disciplines of Applied Linguistics and Composition Studies from Pennsylvania State University. He is a top-notch researcher and a prolific writer. While the content in his writing is cognitively challenging, his prose is exceedingly engaging. It's unlike stilted prose of academic interaction. It's vivid and concrete. But the text and tenor of his composition never slide off the hallowed premise of academe. The way he writes is not an accident. It's, instead, a conscious choice. In one of our personal correspondences, he informed that he considers himself as an engaging, creative writer. His writing is critically nuanced, always. He doesn't fit in the mold of genre.

Neither did T. S. Eliot. He manifested critical artistry in his poetry and astute creativity in his essays. He proposes in his landmark 1921 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that a writer (in his case, a poet) is an artist. He indicated that art doesn't come from someone possessed. It, instead, comes from a craftsman. There's nothing magical or mysterious about an artist. An artist is a scientist. Her mind is a crucible, where a chemical reaction takes place, and that's how art approaches the condition of science. Alexander Nazaryan in his essay, "Why Writer Should Learn Math," in *The New Yorker* urges writers to learn math, for at the highest level

And what do those creative writers create? V. S. Naipaul implies in his essay, "On Being a Writer" in *The New York Review of Books* that they falsify experience to fit in the grand form of creative narrative. Prose in so called creative genre is experience-based, as such. A writer parlays that personal experience into something universal that touches and stirs any sensitive soul who savors the narrative. And a writer in this genre is a loner, who writes for himself. Prose in this genre is writer-based. The writer is free to write her prose her way; she sets her own constraints and parameters of writing; and she should not have to customize her prose to the expectations of an audience, for the audience is never

Mark Edmundson in this book, *Why Write*, claims that all real writers at least in some measure are outcasts. They're non-believers in the constant forms and purposes of writing. They think thoughts; they feel feelings; and they experience impulses. When they get down to writing, however, they assume the role of cold executives. They hire some thoughts, some feelings, and some impulses and fire the rest. What guides them along the process is their intuition, their sense of judgment. They discover and decide about their semantic, syntactic, mechanical, and rhetorical options and restrictions of transcription. If this version of writing slants toward so called creative writing, Helen Sword in her book, *Stylish Academic Writing*, has compelling explanation gleaned out of a rigorous research project to blur the boundary between critical and creative writing. She claims that in every academic discipline there's a handful minority of writers who know and care about the conventions of critical prose, but when they are faced with unique rhetorical contexts where those conventions don't work, they come up with their own rules of transcription. They are at once creative and critical. They are the real writers, who don't fit in the peephole of genre. Genre in writing is protean and essentializing it is problematic, therefore.

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REVIEWS

Patna Blues: Travails of a Minority Community

Abdullah Khan. ISBN: 9789386228833 New Delhi: Juggernaut Books, 2018.

REVIEWED BY FAKRUL ALAM

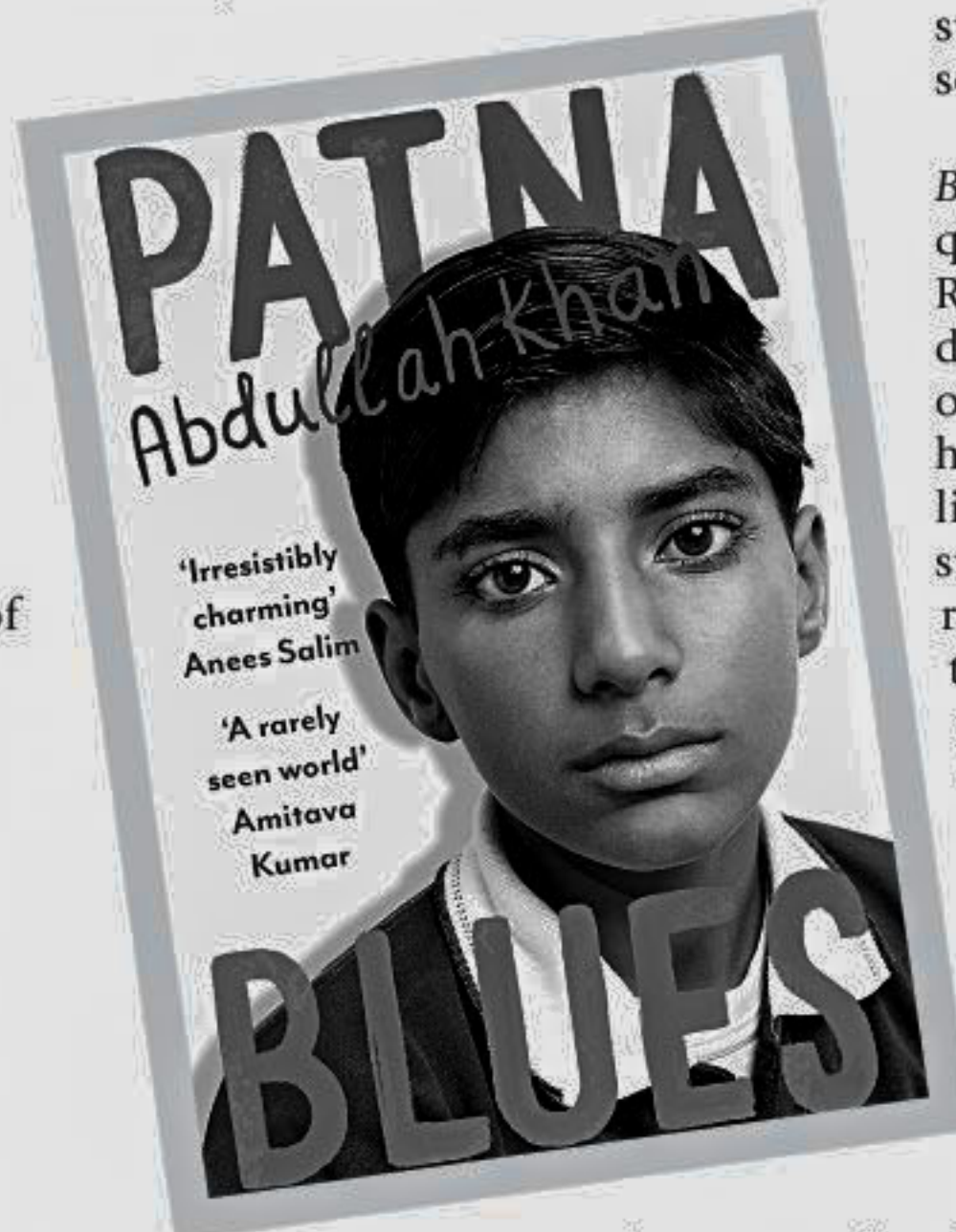
An enjoyable read, Abdullah Khan's debut novel, *Patna Blues* is a thought-provoking and moving work as well. It is a book mostly based in Patna, the capital of the Indian state of Bihar, and focuses on the life of Arif, a Muslim from a relatively depressed part of the country whose family has eventually settled in that city. The novel, however, has truths about the travails of people of a minority community struggling to establish themselves against seemingly endless odds presented in a manner that will strike sympathetic chords in readers everywhere.

Arif is the son of an honest police sergeant who has to manage a family on a limited income. Conscientious and a reasonably good student, Arif does what quite a few young men in Bangladesh with similar (lower) middle class backgrounds tend to do as well—hope infinitely and study hard to be a part of the civil service by passing one competitive examination or the other, or rather, one competitive examination after another, while working in any number of coaching centers. One strand of the plot traces his travails in seeking a secure footing in society, as he flunks such exams repeatedly, lowering his sight repeatedly too in seeking a

government job, and getting more and more desperate as Arif's father is forced to retire—hence the "blues" of the title. In the course of the novel, his family finds itself in increasingly dire straits financially, for there is the added pressure of having to marry off the girls of the family with suitable dowry for the grooms. His only brother also disappears for a long, long time while chasing his dream of being a Bollywood star. In the end, working in a coaching centre all day long seems to be the only option left to Arif, even though he finds some satisfaction in being chosen as a "junior" Urdu translator of the "Bihar State Subordinate Service," and in getting his brother back from the dark hole in which he seemed to have disappeared.

If this strand of the plot will be believable to anyone even with the slightest of acquaintance with the job market for those who come from economically disadvantaged provincial backgrounds and/or religious or ethnic minorities in the Indian subcontinent, the other strand is very much in the romance mode. Early in the plot Arif falls in love improbably with the much older married Hindu woman Sumitra,

whose father has had a heart attack when he is accidentally around. He assists her then and is able to help her take the old man to a hospital. This unlikely romance is



interspersed with his pursuit of a career. Both strands of the plot appear to land him in a position that is quite impossible as one ends the novel. Readers will no

doubt feel for him at the end, forgiving his and her adulterous impulses, and thinking sympathetically about them and even the translator's position he has succeeded in getting—"so near and yet so far"!

But one is bound to admire *Patna Blues* for Khan's straightforward but quite deft handling of the narrative. Realistic details of life in economically depressed and politically restive Patna, of the prejudices Muslims of Bihar have to contend with in their daily lives, fleeting accounts of the follies of state politicians, effective evocation of rural superstitions and lawlessness that persist to this day in too many parts of the subcontinent, and realistic reports of periodic outbreaks of riots and political unrest make the story quite believable. The references to the joys of cricket, the ever-present possibilities of romancing even in the most adverse conditions and across societal barriers and the pleasures of poetry for those naturally inclined to it also flavor the book. It provides the kind of relief that life provides even for those struggling to cope with adversities, go past the thorns of life and even bleed from the wounds

created thereby. In addition, of course is the spice provided by the socially forbidden affair of the heart! Aptly, the novel is interspersed with ghazals (both Arif and Sumitra pen them) and there is even an apt reference to Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

The only problem one has with *Patna Blues* is that it is too crammed with incidents. It is as if Khan is bent on dazzling us with a surfeit of details. No doubt there are a lot of people like Arif and Sumitra whose lives abound in unending occurrences, but the 291 pages of the printed work appear not enough for them. Seemingly, Khan is bent on presenting the whole gamut of human emotions in his first novel. One will surely feel at the end that the narrative blurs too easily in one's memory after one is done reading it.

Nevertheless, *Patna Blues* is an impressive novel and readers in Bangladesh and elsewhere will surely get much pleasure in reading it. One looks forward to Abdullah Khan's next book; for sure, this novel suggests that he will have more enjoyable works on offer for them in the future.

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