

## **Resisting the Elitist Narrative: Representation of the Subalterns in Pakistani Novel in English**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper hypothesizes that both the colonialist and state historiographies of South Asian societies have tended to foreground the issues of the elites and have marginalised those of the subalterns. South Asian post-colonial fiction on the contrary rehierarchizes this centre-margin order by giving a central place to the lives of the laymen. In line with the South Asian fiction in general, Pakistani novel in English (henceforth called PNE) has largely been marked by an attempt to rewrite the official elitist discourse. The paper contends that PNE since partition has displayed a strong tendency to subvert the elitist discourse by representing and centralizing an alternative discourse from the viewpoint of the subalterns. Surveying how and to what extent the select Pakistani novels in English attempt to rewrite Pakistan's official elitist narrative, the paper explores that through their representations of the Pakistani marginalised classes (women, children, minorities, working class, and peasantry etc.), PNE is regarded as progressive and revolutionary.*

**Keywords:** Pakistani Novel in English (PNE), elitist narrative, subaltern representation, colonialist and state historiographies,

### **Introduction**

Both the colonialist and nationalist histories of South Asian societies are the histories of exploits of the elites. The concerns of the elites have been prioritized, whereas those of the Subalterns have been marginalized. Contrary to this pattern of historiography, post-colonial fiction rehierarchizes this center-margin order by bringing the lives of laity to the centre. South Asian English fiction, during freedom movement and after the Independence, exhibits a strong tendency of resisting the elitist state narratives of South Asian societies. For example, both the Indian and Pakistani official narratives of 1947 partition and independence celebrate their elite national leadership, ignoring the traumas and tragedies of the millions of the subalterns including women and children across the subcontinent that suffered as result of migration, killing, mutilation, abduction, and rape at the time of partition. On the contrary, the state historiographies of both the countries celebrate their

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national leadership and glorify their political elites (Panday, 2011, p. 1)

Whereas there has been a recent boom in various aspects of South Asian literature and academics from all over the world have started substantial research projects on the most pertinent themes mainly focusing on Indian literature, literary scholars have generally ignored Pakistani (Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan) literatures. This paper intends to fill some of these gaps.

### *Hypothesis*

Following the same aforementioned South Asian colonialist and nationalist patterns of historiography, the Pakistani historiography since Independence has been glorifying the elites but silencing the voices of the Subalterns. Arguably, in line with South Asian fiction, PNE has transcended the limiting constraints of the country's state historiography and it can be regarded as an attempt to rewrite the state myopic discourses. PNE since partition, it is argued in this study, has exhibited a substantial tendency towards resisting the elitist discourse by representing the margin and by bringing the alternative discourse of the subalterns to the fore.

### *Research Question*

Grounding on the aforementioned hypothesis, the paper attempts to answer the following question:

How and to what extent the select Pakistani novels in English attempt to rewrite Pakistan's official elitist narrative by representing and centralizing an alternative discourse from the standpoint of the laymen?

### **Literature Review**

Colonialism reached its highest point with the so called "scramble for Africa". The vast edifice of colonialism started crumbling after the WW II when European colonial nations were devastated by the War and could not maintain their control over their colonies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As a result, struggle for political freedom intensified. This political struggle was followed by cultural and aesthetic struggle giving birth to a kind of writing called post-colonial literature, a sub-genre of literature produced by the (post) colonial subject that resists colonial subjugation.

Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* lays stress upon the subverting colonialism with violent resistance. In his earlier *Black Skin, White Masks*, he explores "the psychological structures of race and colonialism" (Huddart, 2005, p. 26). Fanon, extremely influential

between 60s and 70s, gave profound philosophical analyses of the psychological as well as the socioeconomic factors inherent in colonialism, seeing racism as a consequence of political oppression.

Following in the footsteps of Fanon, Edward Said carried out his own critique of colonialism in his *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* which have become foundational texts of Post-Colonial Studies. Edward Said, according to Huddart, has most significantly “bequeathed many difficult problems to writers following his lead, particularly around the question of representation, and what could ever be an adequate representation of another culture” (Huddart, 2005, pp. 26-36).

Following Fanon and Said, several scholars have attempted to rewrite and rethink history of the people subordinated under imperialism, developing new branches of post-colonialism. One of the off shots of post-colonialism is the Subaltern Studies.

The Subaltern Studies (henceforth called SS) is an emerging branch within the Post-colonial discourse. The term “Subaltern Studies” was originally used by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist philosopher, in his widely known book *Prison Notebooks*. He used the term for his studies of the rural peasantry. The term was later taken by Indian scholars called the Subaltern Studies Collective (henceforth called SSC). The SSC is also called Subaltern Studies Group comprising Indian historian who challenged elite colonial historiography (Huddart, 2005, p. 145). According to SSC, the term “Subaltern” can mean any individual or group that belongs to the laity of a society. Opposite to the subaltern is the elite which consist of those groups that dominate a society.

In 1970s some historians from England and India, while discussing various subaltern themes developed the idea of founding a Journal for the SS. Subsequently a collection of essays on the subaltern themes titled *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* was published. The first three volumes which appeared annually were so warmly welcomed in academia that three more were published in the next half decade. The prominent most figure of the founder of the Subaltern Studies was Ranjit Guha who not only managed with the help of the other collaborators of the group, to write almost two-third of the essays published in the entire collection of these volumes but also wrote some fifteen books on the subject. The SS grew in importance and popularity and by 1993 gained international repute when the project spread to South America where Latin American Subaltern Studies Group was founded, gaining its inspiration from Ranjit Guha (Ryan, 2011, pp. 171-173)

The SSC in 1980s substantially opposed the elitist narratives of

Indian history and society and further attempted to bring to the centre the narratives of laity. The elitist discourse further extended to various themes. The most prevailing of them was silencing the voice of people in history and social sciences. The subaltern theorists mainly argue that the national freedom movements in South Asia culminating in the two sovereign states of India and Pakistan in 1947 had proved to be fatally flawed because they followed their colonial predecessors in their elitist patterns of state and citizenship ignoring the socio-political ground realities in India and Pakistan. To use the Marxist term, 'the native bourgeoisie' look to freedom movement in their own way', following 'the course of their previous colonial masters to whom they were 'citizen subjects' (MacCabe, 2005). But these new citizen subjects, modeled on British politics, ruled the subaltern classes with as little attention to their experience as the former masters of the days of the Raj' (MacCabe, 2005). Thus, the SSC shifts the focus from the aforementioned elitist understanding of history and society towards the issues of Subaltern classes of South Asian societies. Consequently, a new approach emerges that opens fresh ideas and encourages a new understanding of various issues particularly related to class, gender, and minorities.

There have been renewed interest, from both regional and global perspectives, in Pakistan's role in the global conflict between the West and the Soviet Union and the on-going War on Terror but little scholarly research has been carried out to understand the lives of Pakistani Subalterns through fiction. Scholarly criticism of Pakistani fiction in English usually displays national or elitist narratives of society. For example, Critiques of Pakistani fiction by scholars like Ali Ahmad Kharral, Munnawar Iqbal Ahmad, Nighat Sultana maintain the traditional narrative while discussing PNE.

Apart from the aforementioned scholarship, Tariq Rahman's *A History of English Literature in Pakistan* gives brief plot summaries and general evaluation of the mainstream Pakistani novels in English and that too about the works published between 1947 and 1988 (Rahman, 1991). Another book *Pakistani Fiction in English: Idea, Nation, State* by Cara Cilano is an attempt to continue Rahman's work. Both studies give short critiques of various novels but do not explore Pakistani fiction from the prism of the SS. Unlike Indian scholars, Pakistani scholars have ignored an organized study of the Subaltern issues in Pakistan. By applying the theoretical framework of Subaltern Study project to PNE some part of this gap in literary scholarship will be filled.

## **Discussion**

Since its emergence till present, PNE is predominantly socio-

political in nature. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, the dominant themes in PNE have mainly been woven in the social and political drama of the national life in Pakistan. A brief overview of PNE from Attia Hussain to Kamila Shamsie reveals that the socio-political concerns of the common man overwhelm the novel. The following Pakistani novels in English are considered to explore the subaltern concerns: Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961); Zulfiqar Ghose's *The Murder of Aziz Khan* (1967); Bapsi Sidwa's *The [Pakistani] Bride* (1981); Adam Zameenzad's *The Thirteenth House* (1987); Mehr Nigar Masroor's *Shadow of Time* by (1987); Riaz Hassan's *The Unchosen* (2002); Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon* (2011); Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2015); and Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* (2015).

*Sunlight on a Broken Column* (henceforth called *Broken Column*) is Attia Hosain's only novel. *Broken Column* is generally regarded as one of the first Pakistan novels written in English, dealing with the suppressed life of the *zenana* (the part of house exclusively reserved for the family's women). The novel presents realistic depiction of the rapid changes bearing substantial impacts on lives of the women who are mainly enclosed in the *zenana*. 'These changes unleash new trends in which the old inner worlds of women were swept aside by the tide of history' (Baharucha, 2011, p. 104). Referring to the hardships faced by the womenfolk of the Muslim middle-class families, *Broken Column* spotlights the strict and closed environment of the womenfolk in which an orphaned female child Laila, caught in circumstances controlled by men, is apparently brought up under very strict patriarchy and authoritative check but, suffers emotionally. The life of such women and their entire affairs are extremely reductive, and they are always under the authoritative control mainly of men (Hosain, 1988, pp. 310-312). "It is an extremely restricted world in which women are supposed to be protected by the enclosures of the *zenana*, but to which several powerful male relatives had easy access and could sexually exploit the women" (Baharucha, 2011, p. 105). *Broken Column* shows us how Laila breaks the imposed social construct of *zenana* code which forces the couple even as husbands and wives not to openly communicate to one another and where the very idea of love between a man and a woman is simply "associated with sex, and sex is sin" ((Baharucha, 2011, p. 105).

Khwaja Zulfikar Ahmad generally known in the literary circles as Zulfikar Ghose was originally from Sialkot. Born in 1935 to Kashmiri parents, Ghose's family moved to Bombay in 1942. It was here at Bombay that Khwaja Zulfikar Ahmad became Zulfikar Ghose. After the Partition, Ghose's family moved to England in 1955. Ghose writes

poetry, prose, short stories and novels. His first novel is *The Contradictions* and it was published in 1966. His second novel, *The Murder of Aziz Khan* (henceforth called *Murder*) was published in 1967. Ghose 'presents a conflicted perception of identity and location in his writings' (Sanga, 2003, p. 73). *Murder* represents the destructive face of early 'capitalism in Pakistan in the nineteen sixties' (Rahman, 1991, p. 102). The novel shows how early industrial elites in Pakistan heralded sufferings for not only owners of land in the rural areas but also for the landless peasantry that depended on the landed gentry. *Murder* further elaborates how fates of the female subalterns are helplessly dependent upon the men of their family. The novel exposes "Pakistan's social realities in the nineteen sixties" (Rahman, 1991, p. 89). According to Rahman Ghose's main achievement in *Murder* is his critique of the rising capitalism in Pakistan. The apparent capitalistic progress is due to the emerging industry mainly textile. The industrialists have grabbed the land between Faisalabad and Lahore. This "capitalist industrialist progress is based on ruthless exploitation" (Rahman, 1991, p. 103). *Murder* foregrounds exploitation of the poor and the middle-class people, showing how the brothers Akram and Ayub deceive the middle and lower middle-class people to give him money for the establishment of factory. Ayub exploits them by creating a sort of rift among the workers so that they cannot fight for their rights from the platform of the trade union. Another type of exploitation is done by Afaq. He uses money to exploit women. These brothers exploit for their personal ego. According to Rahman, Ghose predicts the future of Pakistan, presenting these capitalists as exemplar, who are 'shaping the values of the Pakistani society in the making' (Rahman, 1991, p. 114).

Bapsi Sidwa's novels bring to the fore two distinct voices: the voice of the South Asian women that has long been muffled by religion and tradition; and the voice of the Parsee community whose culture and identity have been marginalized. Her fiction illustrates how her women, mainly from the Parsee community, confront threats from the male dominated society. Sidwa is always at 'pains to describe the Parsee culture, which is most certainly marginalized in Pakistan' (Ibraim, 2001, p. 38). The women of Sidwa 'inhabit their male-dictated enclosures and in the face of all odds, create their own spaces' (Baharucha, 2001, p. 95).

Sidwa's *The Bride*, also published as *The Pakistani Bride*, though 'poorly structured and deliberately sensationalist novel' has a deep historical concern (Ibraim, 2001, p. 39). It is a portrayal of gender subalterns whose lives were first conditioned by migration as a result of partition and then by the patriarchal culture in an alien land where these female migrant subalterns were forced and fated to live. Life and

marriage for Sidwa's women are grim drudgeries. It is hard and full of oppression. Her women merely live on maize, rice and water. They do not have any idea of fashion, clothes, jewelry, entertainment and so forth. For them life is the name of misery and tyranny. *The Bride* brings the differences between "the cultural mores of the plains as opposed to those of the peoples who live in the mountains" (Ibraim, 2001, p. 39). For Sidwa's bride, marriage is a prosaic relation which does not have any romance. The novel draws an interesting parallel between Zaitoon and Carol, an American. Zaitoon is a segregated and fragmented entity who could hardly be called an individual. Her parents were killed during the Partition riots and she was adopted by a Kohistani tribesman working as a watchman in the plains. 'Carol too comes from a culture where, at that time, marriage was considered a woman's ultimate goal' (Shamsie, M. 2017, p. 202). Carol marries a rich Pakistani elite who is 'possessive and changeable' (Shamsie, M. 2017, 202) Both Zaitoon and Carol, 'despite differences in income, education, and background, are regarded as mere possessions', 'subject of desire and suspicion', a true representation of a subaltern women (Shamsie, M. 2017, p.202). In *The Bride*, Sidwa explores the suffering and pain of Pakistani woman. Zaitoon 'has no clue about her social or sexual status or identity and belongs to a working-class family' but Carol enjoys 'a degree of sexual freedom to which her social and national status entitle [s] her' (Ibraim, 2001, p. 39).

Mehr Nigar Masroor's *Shadows of Time* (henceforth called *Shadows*) depicts a broad picture of the Partition of India. The novel investigates how the lives of the subalterns remain unchanged despite the changes of time and climate. Whereas change never comes to the lives of the elites and the upper strata of society, the novel presents the social, political, cultural, and racial conflicts of the Hindus and the Muslims. *Shadows* is microcosm of the cultural inheritance of the Subcontinent. The story spans a century, and it comes from 1883 of the British India to the Zia regime of Pakistan (Masroor, 1987).

*Shadows* gives voice to the non-communalist argument that has been first marginalized by the colonialist history, then by the Pakistani nationalist historiography. Sarla, a character in the novel, considers the Partition of India an absurdity even if it be viewed exclusively from a Muslim angle. She does not understand such an ideology due to which almost half of the Muslim population and that also mainly subalterns and poor classes were left at the mercy of a Hindu majority in India after the Partition. Adding to farcicality of the Partition, Sarla highlights the drastic implications of the event 'where half the Muslims become a sacrificial cow for the other half who anyway feel secure enough not to desire partition. The scheme sounds irrational . . . almost as illogical as

many other Muslim notions' (Singh, 1991, pp. 253-266).

*Shadow* spreads over its vast fictional canvas the socio-political critique of the sub-continental subalterns' subjugation by the elite first by the colonialist British and then by Pakistani capitalists, feudal lords, and military dictators.

Adam Zameenzad's *The Thirteenth House*, has a deep political concern. The novel represents the workings of the malicious political powers crushing the miserable people of Pakistan. The novel represents the fact that hegemony maintained by Pakistani elite works out its ways of subjugating the subaltern classes (Rahman, 1991, p. 114).

Riaz Hassan's *The Unchosen* describes the lives of the 19th century Pashtun tribal subalterns caught in their armed struggle against the British colonialism. The novel gives voice to the nineteenth century Pashtun tribal subalterns who were treated as 'Others' in the British colonial discourse based in the romantic views of the Frontier and its people. As the conditions of the tribal society portrayed in the novel persist down to the present, the novel explores various possibilities of the representations of the marginalized tribal belt of Pakistan. The novel is a critique of the politics of colonialism and its imperialist legacy. The novel also provides a subalternists understanding of the struggle against Western onslaught that continues down to our age (Hassan, 2002).

Since *The Unchosen* is also a story of withering Pashtun pride who despite his defeat remained unbowed to the Empire during the last quarter of the 19th century. The British perceptions of the Pathans are generally ambivalent and ambiguous; they wish to tame them as their any other colonized but at the same time are spelled by their sense of pride and their dare to challenge. The novel also gives voice to the tribal women who do not have any identity and are treated like a household commodity.

Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon* also explores the lives of the tribal people in FATA in the present. By following the journeys of Tor Baaz who wanders like a falcon in the length and breadth of the Pashtun and Baluch tribal areas, the novel speaks for the tribal subalterns whose soft aspects of life are usually marginalized by post 9/11 media discourses that give central position to tribal militancy, terrorism, and violence. The novel reveals violence in the tribal region as a product of global and regional politics imposed upon the tribal subalterns (Ahmad, 2012).

Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* is set in the tribal belt of Waziristan, the mountains inhabited by some of the most warring of the Pashtun tribes. Foreign wars and conflicts have been imposed on the people and the land of the tribal belt in Pakistan since the



Great Game. The novel explores the love of the common people in the land which has been on fire for the last one century. The novel explores how the tribal subalterns survive despite the odd and devastating circumstances. How these people face the consequences of the wars of ideologies and contemporary power discourses (Bhutto, 2013).

Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* is set in the backdrop of the Peshawar of British Raj in the early 1900s. Apparently the novel relates the time of the First World War to more specifically the revolt and resistance of the Frontier-based Pashtun of the 'Khudae Khidmat Gaars' (The Servants of God) in 1930 in the Qissa Khwani Bazaar. Both the colonialist and the Pakistani state historiographies have marginalized the role and actions of the resistance movements and the freedom fighters in the Subcontinent. Shamsie has explored the famous Qissa Khwani Bazaar massacre of 1930. Shamsie has a taste for intermeshing the mysterious aspects of the Classical era down to the start of the twentieth century plot interwoven between Europe and the Frontier and the city of Pathan in the guise of her famous troika in the novel: Vivian Spencer, and two Pathan brothers, Najeeb Gul and Qayum. The plot delineates the daring struggle of some of South Asia's proudest people against the fading British Raj. Shamsie has woven the factual details of the 1930s British firing on the unarmed procession in the plot of the novel. She has filled the important gaps in the history of freedom struggle in the North West Frontiers. (Shamsie, 2015, pp. 235-392)

### **Conclusion**

From the above discussion it is possible to determine that PNE has foregrounded the issues of the oppressed and poor classes. Whereas the concerns of the subalterns have been silenced in the nationalist historiography, PNE has highlighted them. The pains and cries of the subalterns, their miseries and traumas, their exploitation have been realistically written by the Pakistani novelists in English since the Partition till the present time. Since the subalterns and the less privileged people in Pakistan have been treated as the Others of the mainstream cultural discourses, PNE has generally given voice to them and has foregrounded the issues and concerns of the margin; particularly the peasantry, working classes, middle class, women, tribal people and minorities. In the Pakistani state historiography, there has been very little attention to the socio-cultural and political valuation of these marginalized classes of society. PNE attempts to explore the significance of such voices and gives them fictional representations.

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