

Eurocentric Polemic of Moniza Alvi: A Re-Orientalist Exegesis of the Poem *The Country at My Shoulder*

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ABSTRACT: *The epistemological and ontological ideals of Orientalism were used to represent the 'Others' in order to understand them, classify them and reorder their experiences to expand and justify the colonial rule. Though Orientalism is the product of Eurocentric ideals, Dirlik (1996) by using Mary Loius Pratt's idea of 'contact zones', proposes that the Asians are also involved in the construction of the Orient. This problem is well understood in the modern studies of Asian societies. This study analyzes the poetry of Moniza Alvi in order to mark and understand the implicit colonial discourse that is being perpetuated by her. The theoretical framework of re-Orientalism by Lisa Lau has been used which ascertains that even having a position of power, the elites of the East stick to the western discourse and place the West at the center. It is remarkable that these authors, instead of turning the table and getting on a proper way to normalize the self, faithfully follow the colonial discourse. Findings show that Alvi used the metropolitan discourse as integrated in her by the Eurocentric ideology. She follows the classic Orientalism standards as depicted by Edward Said and portrays Pakistani people as ignorant, gullible and making constant efforts in appropriation of the western language and the culture. This research holds considerable significance for students of literature, particularly those specializing in poetry analysis. It serves as an exemplary model for those interested in examining the relationship between poetic works of diaspora of South Asia and implicit colonial discourse.*

KEYWORDS: *Orientalism, Re-Orientalism, Moniza Alvi, Eurocentric Discourse.*

INTRODUCTION

*Indeed, Europe could believe in her mission; she had
hellenized the Asians; she had created a new breed. (Jean
Paul Sarter)*

Edward Said in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism* challenged the metropolitan discourse of weaving the image of the 'Orient' and presenting it to the world as an objective reality. In recent years, the critics like Lisa Lau and Arif Dirlik gave a new dimension to Orientalism which is regarded as an old or wrought out concept. Orientalism, according to Said (1985), has many overlapping domains like cultural and historical relationship between Europe and Asia, the scientific discipline of understanding Orientals and the fantasies based on the ideologies of important politically urgent land of Orientals. Hence the division is unchanging. It is simply fictional between the Orient and the Occident. The preconditions of Orientalism were European expansion which makes the Occident to have a proper contact with the alien culture. then there was a system of 'sympathetic representation' to represent the society in

order to understand them, classifying and reordering of experiences and then expanding the rule. Though Orientalism is the product of Eurocentric ideals, Dirlik (1996) proposed that the Asians are also involved in the construction of the Orient by using Mary Loius Pratt's idea of 'contact zones' and this problem is well understood in the modern studies of Asian societies.

The idea of Asians recreating their Oriental identity as discussed above is furthered by Lisa Lau in her research, blaming certain authors who consciously or unconsciously are involved in this process. According to Lau (2009), the process of Orientalism has its roots in the South Asian literature and this development is inquisitive. However, it is no longer an ideology of the dominant over the suppressed but it is perpetrated by Orientals authors from a South Asian diaspora and this whole process in which Orientals are propagating Orientalism is named as self-Orientalism. This particular concept is in the academia from last 3 decades but by a variety of nomenclature such as "ethno-Orientalism" (Carrier 1992), 'self-Orientalism' (Dirlik1996), 'internal Orientalism' (Schein 1997) and 'reverse Orientalism' (Tony Mitchell 2004), to name a few" (Lau & Mendes p, 15). This concept provides a wide range of thoughts on the dynamics of power in postcolonial culture production because it demarcates an array of criticism on how the culture is produced by the postcolonial societies and the questions the intake of this cultural production. Moreover, it is also seen as a response from the contributors of these societies to renegotiate and disrupt the already implemented and subversive representation of their culture.

The literature in English in Pakistan predates the partition and till now various authors have shown the dexterity and hence accredited with critical acclaim. The Pakistani writers have "carved" a special forte in the English literature and their work is now ascribed as cannon (Kazmi & Razia 2022). Pakistani writers in English can be divided into three distinctive periods: the writers of pre-partition, the writers of post-partitions, and the writers of after 9/11. Almost every genre of literature has been excelled by the Pakistani writers and their deftness is an expert in novel, poetry, drama and prose. In their work, the Pakistani-ness is well represented with a wide range of diversity. In poetry, especially, the Pakistani sentiment is not mere "adjectival" but has represented in a serious manner that creates "nation or nationality specific to poetry" (Kumar, 2021). Being a "melting pot" of plethora of cultures, ideologies and religions Pakistani literary scene is enriched with variety of literature produced in various languages but literature in English has evolved with a very vast scope wining critical acclaim as well as it has been scrutinized under the lens of various theories (Mansoor, 2019). Not only, Pakistani literature in English is imbued with representation of various cultures traditions ideologies but it has also raised its voice on the various issues on the social and political level. It has raised voice against the marginalization of women, and the women writers of Pakistan are very vocal to raise different kinds of issues and have portrayed the feminist cause outside the notion of liberal "women agency" to give it the color of their own nation and society (Anantharam, 2009). The incidents of 9/11 have impacted deeply the literary genre of Pakistan and there have been a significant number of increases in the theme of identity in literature and a global voice has been raised for the retention of identity at national and geographical level (Gohar et al. 2019).

According to Kazmi & Razia (2022), the Pakistani writers can be further divided into diaspora writers in which there are many renowned novelists and poets in this intellectual

cohort including Moniza Alvi. Lahori by birth, Moniza Alvi migrated with her parents to England in her infancy. Though grown up in Hertfordshire, she has interest in literature and worked as a head of department of English in a secondary school. Her poetry got critical approbation. Her several works were nominated for awards especially the intended work of study *The Country at My Shoulder* was selected for “The Poetry Society’s New Generation Poets Promotion” (Shamsie 1997). The poetry of Alvi has a very wide scope and a power to renovate and transform the language into a rich representation of various experiences at a single time (Hashmi F., 2016). In Nimavat’s (2011) point of view the poetry of Alvi has profusion of emotions like rootlessness, impartiality, acceptance, and incompleteness. According to Ali (2012), the poetry plays an important role because it can serve as a means or a way of criticizing social discourses as well as a medium through which any change can be promoted. It has also the audacity to promote the socio-political discourse of the state implicitly.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To dig out the re-Orientalist attitude in the poetry of Moniza Alvi.
- To understand the paradigm of re-Orientalism in the literary texts.
- To have an insight in the intertwining and confusing discourse of Moniza Alvi’s poetry.
- To comprehend the ways in which the texts of pre-colonized societies are promoting the Eurocentric ideologies.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How the poem *The Country at My Shoulder* is promoting the Eurocentric ideals and fall in the pitfall of re-Orientalism?
2. What stereotypes of Pakistani society are depicted by the author of the text?
3. What are the possible re-Orientalist implications of Alvi’s poetry?

SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This research holds considerable significance for students of literature, particularly those specializing in poetry analysis. It serves as an exemplary model for those interested in examining the relationship between poetic works of diaspora of South Asia and implicit colonial discourse. This study is particularly significant because it analyzes the poetry of Moniza Alvi by lens of re-oriental theory in order to mark and understand the aforementioned attitude. By exploring novel dimensions of her poetry, this research illuminates her status as dynamic and influential writer of the diasporic roots. The comprehensive nature of this study encompasses various aspects, facilitating the descriptive, interpretive and explanatory aspects of her poetry. With its captivating content, this research is poised to engage readers and provide valuable analytical insights to future scholars and researchers. Studies of this nature serve as inspiration for researchers and readers alike, embarking on parallel paths that converge upon the same destination, ultimately contributing to the advancement of the field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Residing in England, Moniza Alvi has a great love for her homeland, Pakistan. She moved there when she was a child but did not visit again until the publication of her first work, the

collection of poems *The Country at My Shoulder* which was shortlisted for the T.S Eliot Prize. The early works of Moniza Alvi has many glimpses of her homeland which she portrayed in dexterous manner and her overall epoch of works has the images of her incomprehensible identity, duality and partition in general (Solanki, 2020). The presence of homeland in her poetry is blatant and we can see the images of her homeland before and after partition. As explored by Solanki (2020), the notion of home is experienced by her in various ways like in the poem the “Indian Cooking”, the imagery of her motherland, the culture, spices are vivid but it was the depiction of pre-partition India, one nation

The bottom of the pan was a palette

Paprika, cayenne, dhania

Haldi, heaped like powder-paints (p, 466)

The poetry of Alvi vividly presents the nostalgic realm in which south Asian diasporic identity can be seen in flux. Her poetry echoes the conundrum of immigration and pangs of home(lessness) by creating a perfect context in her imaginations. She attempts to create a blatant picture of home emphasizing the themes of relationship of time and space, migration and family milieu (Swamay, 2018). The use of corporal or metaphor of body as a site of incident is also vivid in the poetry of Alvi. Shehata (2017) interpreted this aforementioned quality of Alvi’s poetry with reference to Homi K. Bhaba’s work. The portrayal of body as a site of experience delineates her own fragmented identity because it portrays sense of “belonging/not belonging” to the site of experience where corporal presentation of her own self is a source of direct receiver of cultural and social experience.

The postcolonial construal of her poetry is widely researched and well elucidated by the researchers. The figurative language of the poetry of Alvi is also scrutinized and it is derived by Mehar (2003) that the “metaphoric axis” in the poetry reveals many things about the hybrid consciousness of the poet. The metaphors are rooted in both “homeland” and “hope-land”. This dual or double rootedness is the product of consciousness that in itself ambiguous. The poetic diction of Alvi is also scrutinized by Swamy (2018) to portray the diasporic nature and sensibility by situating her poetry into the cultural and historical context of the identity construction. The poetic language of Alvi is also put under the lens of psychoanalysis to reveal the fact that the psychological conflict is the cause behind the dual representation of the cultures because the language mirrors the psychological conflicts (Saeed et al., 2020). According to Hassan et al. (2022), the language is the main tool to control the poetic discourse and, in her poetry, Alvi has used the language to control the “desired” by delaying the representation of the actual object (homeland) and to achieve this delay she represents a disheveled depiction of the subject by entwining the subject into a chain of “signifiers and symbolic substitutes” resulting the frustrating image of the real. Moreover, the works of Alvi construct a detailed imagery of her “paternal” homeland with a “colonizers idiom” and construct a subvert structure of both genders: male and female (Ashfaq,2022).

Other perspective of this corporal presentation is represented by Rees-Jones (2005) who took it in the context of feminism and revealed this kind of presentation as the “political practice” by female writers to remonstrate against the patriarchal society and state to join the “public and private sphere” of marginalization. This polemical nature of the work of Alvi points toward the independent and subjective implications. It also provides a subjective realm

to present the female voice and carnival of mobility (Wilkey, 2015). The poetry of Alvi has a very wide scope and a power to renovate and transform the language into a rich representation of various experiences at a single time (Hashmi F., 2016). In Nimavat's (2011) point of view the poetry of Alvi has profusion of emotions like rootlessness, impartiality, acceptance, and incompleteness at the same time. It is evident that the poetry of Alvi has been analyzed through psychoanalytical lens, postcolonial lens portraying identity crisis and Homi K. Bhaba's notion of ambiguity but not yet has been explored under the lens of re-Orientalist.

Self-Orientalism at the very first sight is an individual or social effort to interpret and understand through the ideas that are alien, do not present their true being, have a single monolithic ideology for all the stratum of society that does not belong to them (Özçelik 2021). As noted by Ahmed (2022) that though some Orientals deliberately like to exaggerate themselves in order to achieve a certain goal but there is always a "sense of curious disorder" in their representations. Self-Orientalism or re-Orientalism has impulsive ability to perpetuate the classic concepts of Orientalism instead of dismantling the whole ideology by trying to communicate in the language which is western and prone to Eurocentric attitude (Deng 2023).

The concept of re-Orientalism is in the academia from last 3 decades but by a variety of nomenclature such as "ethno-Orientalism" (Carrier 1992), 'self-Orientalism' (Dirlik 1996), 'internal Orientalism' (Schein 1997) and 'reverse Orientalism' (Tony Mitchell 2004), to name a few" (Lau & Mendes p,15). In order to understand this concept, one must reiterate Said's notion of Orientalism. In order to gain a proper insight of the whole phenomenon and to map the scope of it, Said uses Foucauldian dimension of discourse because it is not possible to comprehend the whole idea of Orientalism as it is a "systematic discipline" by which Eurocentric ideology was implemented and the Orient were represented politically, socially and culturally (Said 1977, p.3). It is a deliberate effort to place the Eurocentric discourse of identity, culture and society as superior and refined from non-western people. Hence, Orientalism is a way or "western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 3). Though the concept of Orientalism is criticized for its monolithic nature uniting the experiences of people of all the colonized nation alike, the central argument is valid and an integral part of European understanding and conceptualization of the whole: the placement of itself on the apex or pinnacle of progress and behaving like a center of the world making others to be placed at periphery. Non-Europeans are linked with the "lack" of qualities that European have (Dirlik 1996, p.100). Dirlik (1996) also ponders on the effects of cultural transmutation or transculturation in the "contact zones" where Orientals and Occidentals communicate with one another though the power structure remains the same in that zones, the dominated go through a cultural change through the language because of the communication problem with the dominant, he or she creates a distance from the native land and posits the same ideology of the dominant (p,110-113).

Almost the same kind of argument is given by Lisa Lau in 2009 in her influential work "*Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals*" in which the similar stance is taken as Dirlik (1996) and points out the diasporic writers for the "perpetration" of the Orientalism. According to Lau (2009), there has been a weird

development in the last decades that the Orientalism is not a kind of relationship and representation of the Orient over the Occident as an act of power but now this process is done by the Orientals themselves and it is called re-Orientalism (p,572). Just like the Orientalism, re-Orientalism is the “totalization” of representation in literature in which the culture, attitude, values and images of minority is taken as the representative of the diverse and overall majority. The West is not the only one to represent the East but the East is also involved in presenting itself in this modern era, the East has its own contribution and share in the construction of the lacking of the East itself (Keyman et al., 1996).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is purely qualitative in nature. Punch (2013) stated that qualitative research is a kind of research in social sciences that collects non-numerical data to make us understand the meaning of a particular situation, place, or piece of literature. This kind of research tends to concentrate on the words rather than the numbers and it pays attention to the phenomenon in its natural settings to interpret situations of daily life (Walia, 2015). According to Mohajan (2018), the main aim of qualitative research in literature is to provide a detailed understanding of human behavior, attitude, experiences, and emotions. So, in this research the text of the poems is analyzed to understand the re-Orientalist attitude of Moniza Alvi in portraying the culture, attitude, characteristics, and the holistic representation of the people.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study the concept of re-Orientalism by Lisa Lau (2009) is used to analyze the texts or poems by Moniza Alvi. This concept is surfacing since the last 3 decades by different names like ethno-Orientalism’ (Carrier 1992), ‘self-Orientalism’ (Dirlik1996), ‘internal Orientalism’ (Schein 1997) and ‘reverse Orientalism’ (TonyMitchell 2004), to name a few (Lau & Mendes p, 15). Though it may be derived from different contexts and arguments, all these ideas have the same nature of evaluating and criticizing a particular phenomenon. In this research self-Orientalism by Dirlik (1996) and re-Orientalism by Lisa Lau (2009) are used synonymously to present the argument and to demarcate the concerns. In re-Orientalism, it is evident that the “cultural producers” having an identity of the East and affinity of the East reacts toward the Oriental discourse whether by playing it along or complying toward the readers of the West. Moreover, many postcolonial critics raised serious concerns how some South Asian authors are making commodity out of the Oriental discourse by exoticizing it like the westerns (Lau& Mendes 2012). The theory of re-Orientalism focuses on the fact that even having a position of power a, the elites of the East stick to the western discourse and place the West at the center and it is remarkable that these authors, instead of turning the table and getting on a proper way to normalize the self, faithfully follow the colonial discourse (Timothy Mitchell 1998). Consequently, in this research the poems of Moniza Alvi were analyzed under the lens of re-Orientalist theory to dig out the specific traits of the Orientals as perpetrated by the western Orientals because the poet is at power position and in the contact zone. So, the presentation of the eastern culture by using the language of the West is questioned and the ways of depiction of the Orientals, culture and attitude are scrutinized. The re-Orientalist theory does not replicate the exact Oriental attitudes but it does attain the particular narrative “almost meta-narrative” and when the Orientals are perpetrating the Orientalism it may raise the issue of authenticity.

However, it does show the same internal consistency throughout different continents even at the hand of different authors or agents (Lau & Mendes 2012, p.5).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The western presentation of the Orient is “irrational, backward, sensual, voiceless, female and despotic... (Drott 2016). In this research two poems of Alvi are being analyzed by using the aforementioned lens. The first one is *The Country at My Shoulder*. In the title of the poem the poet uses a phrase “on someone’s shoulder” by changing the preposition and pronoun for adding her own point of view. The denotative meaning of “on someone’s shoulder” is “One’s responsibility”. So, in this sense the poetess considers it a responsibility to write something about her homeland or the intended country that is at her shoulder and she is unable to think of something else unless or until she makes a right choice to write about it. Alvi’s parents migrated to England when she was few months old (Solanki 2020) so, why does she need to write about her native country if she has no memory of it? Consequently, it is blatant from the life of Alvi that she moved out of Pakistan when she was few months old making her to have no actual memory about Pakistan or the culture of Pakistani society. Morally or ethically she is not in a position to make suppositions about her own native land but having the Occidental discourse propagated to her she wrote poetry and raised serious issues. It is obvious that she is in the “contact zone” or in the “brother land” and it is a zone like transculturation in which the ideas are exchanged “as if unequally” and a zone where the people from marginal or subordinated group (re)invent the ideas that are transmitted to them by the metropolitan or the culture of the dominant (Dirlik 1996). According to Lau (2012) the authors of south Asian origin promote the Orient aggressively in order to make a marketable commodity out of it. So, she is seen in a dire need to write something about her native homeland.

*“There’s a country at my shoulder,
Growing larger - soon it will burst,
Rivers will spill out, run down my chest.” (Alvi 1993)*

Expanding the contact zones Dirlik (1996) further remarked that the context of the contact zones is driven by the hierarchy of power and the already established structure and hierarchy of power does not change in these zones. Therefore, the Oriental subject is “Orientalized” by entering into the domain of the Orient, sentimentally and intellectually. Because of internalizing the dynamics of power the Orient subject depicted above tries to portray the dominant structure, in this case, it adheres to the classics of Orientalism. Said (1977) contended that Orientals are also portrayed as “lethargic” and “their disordered minds fail to understand what clever Europeans grasp immediately”. The Orientals especially males have these qualities. In the poem *The Country at my Shoulder* the male members of Pakistani community is presented as lethargic having a drastic learning disability.

*My cousin Azam wants visitors to play
Ludo with him all the time.
He learns English in a class of seventy. (Alvi 1993)*

Here, the cousin Azam is presented as lethargic and slothful, adherent to one of the seven deadly sins. Because he wants to play a certain game with everyone as it is obvious that “ludo” is the game which is played via sitting on a place without moving a bit. It represents the laziness in the nature of the Oriental subject and apart from laziness the text also shows

that various people are trying to learn English language which is the language of the colonizer, dominant and the center. So, this “class of seventy” students of a marginalized place are trying to learn the language shows the appropriateness of the dominant language. It is interesting to ponder here that such images of Pakistani society are being portrayed by the author who belongs to this nation as depicted by Feighery (2012) that the creators from Asia are writing from the script of western people.

The theory of re-Orientalism emphasizes on the direct and blatant role of the Orientals in the perpetration of the Orientalism. It is noteworthy that even at the higher position, having the power to communicate with the language of the center, they place the West as the center and East as the Other. So, they are not Othered by the western Orientals but they are in a process of self othering (Lau 2009). In the process self othering, the Orientals adhere to the Orientalist ideals, as Alvi in her poem portrayed the Pakistani society as the society of barbarians where there are public executions.

There's an execution in the square -

The woman's dupattas are wet with tears. (Alvi 1993)

These images are representing the classic Oriental attitude of which Said (1977) criticized that the Islam is the lasting trauma for the Orientalists as they represented it as a “symbol of terror, demonic, devastation and horde of barbarians”. This attitude of westerns is further advocated by Alvi in her poem and Islamic society is presented as the society of despotic barbarians. Many other characteristics of Orientals as propagated by the Orientalism are part of Alvi's poetry like the presence of lawlessness in the Oriental societies like “*I hear of bribery, family quarrels,*” (Ibid) demarcates the classic Orientalist attitude in the poetry of Alvi.

The Social and culture depiction is also put under question here. As Lau (2009) elucidates that while portraying the South Asian society the diasporic women writers feel pressure to depict the intended society as it is depicted before in the literature or the that inherent characteristics of the society must have been a part of the text in order to depict the realism of the South Asian society. In the poem the South Asian society is presented as it has not changed since ages. The images in the poem like “*arrange his daughter's marriage*”, “*Uncle Kamil shot a tiger*”... depict all the classic Orientalistic qualities of the Pakistani society. The women appear to be as submissive and have a lack of basic rights as presented by Said (1977).

CONCLUSION

It is concluded from the above discussion that the Poetry of Moniza Alvi presents Pakistani society as the society of despotic, barbarian and lethargic people. Alvi migrated from Pakistan when she was some months old and did not have first-hand experience of Pakistani culture. However, she tried to portray Pakistani society and people, overcoming her weakness of direct experience with the mentioned society in her poems. She used the metropolitan discourse as integrated by the Eurocentric ideology. She follows the classic Orientalism as depicted by Edward Said and portrays Pakistani people as ignorant, gullible and makes constant efforts to appropriate Western language, culture and discourse. There are bundles of implications and reasons why this re-Orientalism is part and parcel of the poetry of Alvi. Among them is the possible fear of representing the South Asian society in the realistic way

or making the representation of Orientals a marketable entity or the commodification of the product.

KEY FINDINGS

- Re-Orientalist ideology dismantles the notion of independent representation by the native authors.
- Diasporic writers are unable to represent their native lands due to lack of direct experience and comprehension of the Eurocentric discourse.
- Alvi's poetry promotes Orientalism in the guise of mere self-representations.
- Pakistani society is presented as barbaric, destructive and full of other classic images of Orientalism.
- People of Pakistan are presented as lethargic, barbarians, illiterate and tyrannical.

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