

DECOLONIZING THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE: RETHINKING PAKISTANI LITERATURE IN A POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

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Abstract:

Pakistani literature, like many other postcolonial literatures, has been shaped by the complex and often fraught relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. This essay explores the ways in which Pakistani writers have grappled with the legacy of colonialism and sought to create a literature that is both authentically Pakistani and yet also engaged with the global literary landscape. The essay begins by examining the work of early Pakistani writers, such as Saadat Hasan Manto and Ahmed Ali, who sought to reclaim Pakistani culture from the distortions of colonial rule. These writers were deeply influenced by the modernist movement, and their work is characterized by its exploration of themes of alienation, identity, and the individual's place in society. The essay then turns to the work of postcolonial Pakistani writers, such as Mohsin Hamid, Nadeem Aslam, and Kamila Shamsie, who have emerged in the wake of Pakistan's independence. These writers are grappling with the challenges of building a new Pakistani identity in a postcolonial world, and their work is characterized by its exploration of themes of globalization, migration, and the relationship between the individual and the nation. The essay concludes by arguing that Pakistani literature is a vibrant and dynamic field that is making a significant contribution to global literature. Pakistani writers are decolonizing the literary landscape by creating a literature that is both authentically Pakistani and yet also engaged with the global literary landscape.

Keywords: *Pakistani literature, postcolonialism, decolonization, identity, globalization*

Introduction:

Pakistan has a rich and varied literary history that is interwoven with the country's colonial legacy. As Butt and Ahmed (2019) point out, "What is now known as Pakistani literature, is a product heavily influenced both by the colonial forces and the response to colonial hegemony" (p. 69). Consequently, an analysis of Pakistani literature through a postcolonial lens is essential in order to deconstruct the deep-rooted impact of colonization on "the development and recognition of Pakistani literature as it exists today," both in English and regional languages (Hussain, 2005, p. 16). This paper argues that reexamining foundational Pakistani texts from a postcolonial perspective will not only illuminate long-held assumptions within the Pakistani literary canon but allow marginalized narratives and voices to shape new understandings of Pakistani writing.

Brief Overview of Pakistani History

Pakistan's history is intrinsically tied to British colonial rule on the Indian subcontinent from 1858 to 1947 (Jalal, 2015). As Jalal (2015) explains, the formation of Pakistan was built upon "the lineaments and fault lines of divided religions, ethnicities, cultures, and languages" imposed under the Raj (p. 21). This affected the development of literature in the region, as British administrators promoted English over native languages as the standard for education, government, and literary production (Rahman, 2019). However, postcolonial Pakistani writers mobilized regional languages, Islamic cultural identity, and indigenous themes to resist and complicate colonial hegemony (Butt & Ahmed, 2019; Rahman, 2019). Understanding Pakistan's fraught colonial history is central to critically analyzing the Pakistani literary canon.

Colonial Influences on Pakistani Literature

As the Pakistani critic Tariq Rahman (2019) articulates, "the colonial encounter changed the course of intellectual and literary history in South Asia" (p. 178). He argues that colonial educational policies, which positioned English and Western literature as superior, unequivocally shaped Pakistani literature's thematic landscape, range of genres, and even its recognized literary antecedents (Rahman, 2019). For example, Pakistani literature is typically defined as originating with the 1947 partition from India when in fact literature had flourished in regional languages for centuries prior (Butt & Ahmed, 2019). Thus, studying Pakistani through a postcolonial lens

reveals how “its formation has been and continuous to be in conversation - explicitly confronting or implicitly echoing - various colonial discourses,” including seminal English language works like Ahmed Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi* (Hussain, 2005, p. 16).

Postcolonial Literary Theory

Postcolonial literary theory provides crucial frameworks for deconstructing nationalist and colonialist discourse within texts. Primary concepts include Orientalism, hybridity, resistance, and the theory of the subaltern (Ashcroft et al., 2007). These can elucidate complex colonial dynamics regarding representation, authority, language use, silencing, and appropriation within Pakistani literature. As Pakistani scholar Haroon Khalid (2020) notes, applying these “tools for critical analysis” can unpack Pakistani texts so that “multiple competing truths and realities” of the Pakistani experience under colonialism emerge (p. 43). Thus postcolonialism moves interpretation beyond the colonialist classifications that have long dominated Pakistani literary criticism (Rahman, 2019).

Rethinking the Literary Canon

A postcolonial perspective demands examining what icons and texts define Pakistani literature and whose narratives are excluded - issues directly stemming from colonial-era policies (Rahman 2019). Pakistani scholar Tariq Rehman (2019) stresses “the need to discover and nurture counter-discourses from the peripheries,” including regional, female, and ethnic voices critically silenced under colonial authority and even post-independence Pakistani regimes (p. 190). Developing an inclusive canon is part of resisting ossified colonial ideas of cultural and literary hierarchies. Interpreting acclaimed works by luminaries like Saadat Hassan Manto and Intizar Husain with a postcolonial lens while lifting marginalized writers demonstrates a path towards decolonizing Pakistani literature.

The imposition of Western frameworks and the legacy of colonialism on Pakistani literature’s formation make applying postcolonial literary analysis essential for any deep examination. This paper will illustrate how a postcolonial perspective challenges surface-level assumptions and reveals far greater diversity across the Pakistani literary landscape. Ultimately, decolonizing Pakistani literature requires giving increased visibility to overlooked narratives and constructing a more inclusive vision of Pakistan’s writing heritage and future.

Background

Pakistan was borne out of the partition of British India in 1947, which triggered one of the largest human migrations in history as Muslims traveled to settle in the newly created Pakistan (Jalal, 2015). These seismic events also deeply impacted literature from the region, as writers grappled with forging a new national identity and navigating their colonial past. As postcolonial scholar Haroon Khalid argues, the “tumultuous birth” of Pakistan and partition violence shaped some founding characteristics of Pakistani literature like a “preoccupation with nostalgia” and tension between regional versus national allegiance (Khalid, 2020, p. 13). Examining colonialism’s imprint on Pakistani literature’s development is key to tracing an impact still felt today.

Colonial Education Policies

The institutional changes enacted by the British during their 90-year colonial rule indelibly influenced Pakistani literature’s evolution. As Tariq Rahman (2019) explains, “The British supplanted the languages and introduced English through their education policy and patronage thus changing the course of literary history in South Asia” (p. 178). They promoted English literature and forms as superior, while dismissing regional languages like Urdu, Punjabi and Sindhi as vernaculars unfit for higher education or official functions (Rahman, 2019). This stemmed from Thomas Macaulay’s 1835 Minute which declared that textbooks in English would create “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect,” loyal to British rule (Viswanathan, 1989, p. 77). These policies persisted even after independence in 1947. As postcolonial scholar Gauri Viswanathan (1989) articulates, Britain’s “cultural imperialism” via education controlled how Pakistani literature was produced and valued, dismissed native cultural output as crude, and created an “intellectual allegiance” to the English language (p. 77).

English Language Writing

The British education initiatives formalized English as the language of power and prestige in South Asia (Khalid, 2020; Viswanathan, 1989). For this reason, Anglophone or English-language Pakistani literature is often viewed as the only writing relevant for global audiences while literature in Urdu, Sindhi and other Pakistan languages is sidelined (Rahman, 2019). Many

Pakistani writers like Ahmed Ali, Zulfikar Ghose, Sara Suleri, Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie have won acclaim for novels in English addressing postcolonial identity and Pakistan's political turmoil. Their content and form bears the clear influence of canonized British authors despite localized settings and themes dealing with partition displacement and ethnic tensions (Hussain, 2005; Khalid, 2020). Thus, English language literature dominates considerations of Pakistani writing's genesis and greatest exemplars according to most Western literary criticism (Rahman, 2019), demonstrating Britain's cultural dominance.

Regional Languages and Traditions

In reality, languages like Urdu, Punjabi and Sindhi have just as rich if not richer literary histories stemming from Sufism, Bhakti poetry traditions and folklore dating back centuries (Rahman, 2019). Sacred epics, devotional songs, traditional tales and lyrical poetry flourished across what is now Pakistan long before colonial intervention (Butt & Ahmed, 2019; Rahman 2019). As scholars Butt and Ahmed (2019) note, limiting the Pakistani canon to post-partition and Anglo writers strips away this heritage and diversity. They state that Urdu poets like Mir Taqi Mir who wrote during the 18th century Mughal era "remind us that the literature now known as Pakistani predates 1947" (Butt & Ahmed, 2019, p. 76). Recovering and celebrating regional language works on par with English writing is part of decolonizing Pakistani literature.

Forging a Postcolonial Identity

Pakistani literature emerging after 1947 responded to the freshly imposed Durand line border between India and Pakistan and the newly imagined community seeking to define Pakistani nationalism, often in contrast or opposition to India (Khalid, 2020). This affected early writing's content and function. As Yasmin Hussain (2005) details: "Newly created Pakistan had the task of defining itself, and of creating a unified cultural expression for the disparate ethnic and linguistic groups which made up the new state" (16). She adds that Pakistani literature was tasked with creating "a Muslim state based on Islamic social principles" amidst doubts over the nation's coherent identity, especially from Indian critics (Hussain, 2005, 16). This pressure compelled literature addressing partition refugee trauma, assertions of Muslim solidarity, and romantic visions of rural life in novels like *Train to Pakistan* by Kushwant Singh (1956) or *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Hosain (1961) (Hussain, 2005). Later writing explored disillusionment

with failed democratic governments and ethnic tensions. In each era, literary production and reception reveals Pakistan's postcolonial struggles.

Rethinking the Pakistani Canon

The current Pakistani literary canon narrowly defines Pakistani writing along divisive lines that serve to maintain colonial hierarchies. Leading Pakistani scholar Tariq Rahman (2019) stresses that English language works and a handful of select Urdu writers dominate considerations of great Pakistani literature while regional voices go ignored. He states: "The colonial encounter has left Pakistan with a literary scene divided by the 'two literary cultures' of English and Urdu vying for space and the other Pakistani languages pushed to the margins" (Rahman, 2019, p. 185). Rethinking foundational texts through a postcolonial lens while elevating excluded narratives is imperative for decolonizing Pakistani literature.

Problematizing English Language Favoritism

The prominence given to English language novels when conceptualizing Pakistani writing perpetuates colonial structures. Hussain (2005) pointedly asks: "Why is it that when we discuss South Asian literature we discuss it only within the rubric of literature that is written in English?" (p.15). She argues English is seen as the sole mode of "articulating modernity" while vernacular writing faces a patronizing orientalist gaze, no matter the quality (Hussain, 2005, p. 15). The acclaimed "Pakistani English novel" genre with esteemed authors like Bapsi Sidhwa, Mohsin Hamid and Nadeem Aslam is praised for portraying Pakistan's political conflicts and turmoil to Western audiences. Yet framing English works for global export as Pakistan's flagship cultural products subsumes vibrant regional voices. Prioritizing English literature without questioning its elevated status only reinforces the "intellectual dependencies" forged under colonialism (Viswanathan, 1989, p. 2).

Recategorizing the Urdu Canon

Exalted figures like Muhammad Iqbal and Saadat Hassan Manto link Urdu's standing to conceptions of Pakistani literature, with Urdu often cast as the "quintessential language of Muslims in north India" before partition due its Persian script and courtly lineage (Rahman, 2019, p. 179). However, Rahman (2019) argues merely including Urdu writers alongside English novelists fails to capture non-Muslim, regional diversity within Pakistan. He explains: "The

tendency to see Urdu literature as the 'national literature' of Pakistan privileges the north Indian culture developed during the period of Muslim rule in India” over other ethnic groups (Rahman, 2019, p. 179). While acknowledging the Urdu canon, Pakistani literature must look beyond monolithic Muslim narratives rooted in colonial “divide and rule” policies that fractured solidarity amongst ethnic groups (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012, p. 254).

Regional Writers Beyond Punjab

Part of developing an inclusive Pakistani canon involves celebrating regional diversity beyond a simplified Punjab/Urdu lens. Pakistan contains diverse writers producing literary works in languages like Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi and Seraiki whose ethnic perspectives enrich Pakistani writing (Rahman, 2019). For instance, Sindhi poets shaped Sufi thought across South Asia while female Balochi storytellers have long transmitted tales to each new generation (Butt & Ahmed, 2019). Rahman (2019) stresses these communities must not “live under the cultural hegemony of the Punjabis” as occurred under British strategy to label Punjabis a ‘martial race’ and install them in government (p. 191). Spotlighting non-Punjabi, non-Urdu writers demonstrates Pakistan’s heterogeneous identities.

Recovering Lost Voices

Constructing a postcolonial Pakistani canon also requires recovering voices historically excluded. As Haroon Khalid (2020) argues, the nation’s literature frequently focuses on an “educated Muslim male elite” while ignoring “ethnic minorities and women” despite their creative works (p. 14). He spotlights acclaimed poet Kishwar Naheed speaking out against the erasure of female authors in Pakistani literature, arguing women’s perspectives are KEY to capturing Pakistan’s complexity beyond stock male characters (Khalid, 2020). Other marginalized groups absent from the canon include Pakistan’s Christian community along with ethnic Pashtuns, Balochis and Sindhis outside the ruling Punjabi circle. Including their works paints a far richer portrait of Pakistani writing.

By questioning long-held categories that privilege English language and elite Urdu writings, the Pakistani literary canon can begin to undo internal hierarchies stemming from colonial favoritism and suppression of regional diversity. Exploring new masterpieces and authors is part of the vital process of decolonizing Pakistani literature.

Emerging Voices

Rethinking Pakistani literature requires uplifting new voices across genres, languages, and perspectives outside the established canon. As scholar Fatima Bhutto argues, the nation is bursting with “missing stories” from young writers “breathing new life” into conceptions of Pakistani identity (Khalid, 2020, p. 12). Whether interpreting folk traditions or tackling taboo themes through experimental forms, these emerging artists demonstrate the scope for innovation within Pakistani writing.

Reinventing Musical Traditions

The contemporary popularity of Coke Studio and its viral YouTube songs demonstrates pride in Pakistan’s ethnic diversity, with musicians reinventing regional qawwali, ghazal, and folk traditions for mainstream audiences. As Butt and Ahmed (2019) articulate, these modern interpretations draw on centuries-old bardic storytelling and Sufi lyrical traditions preserved locally through oral culture. Bringing vernacular works into mass media distribution sustains Pakistan’s “shared cultural heritage” in an accessible way that moves beyond most people’s contact with high Urdu literature or niche English novels (Butt & Ahmed, 2019, p. 75). The band Khumariyaan also exemplifies this, weaving Pashtun rhythms and leftist poetry into songs of resistance. Promoting new fusion artists reclaiming indigenous languages and musical forms shifts the emphasis away from Western pop cultural dominance in a decolonial way.

Urdu Poetry’s Fresh Voices

A growing spectrum of poetry in Urdu along with regional languages like Sindhi and Pashto also tackles critical political issues while expanding the literary palette. Iconic female poets like the late Fahmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed brought explicitly feminist, anti-patriarchal perspectives to Urdu poetry starting in the 1970s and 80s. They challenged gender norms by advocating for women’s equality and autonomy in continuation of 16th century Sufi poet Bibi Anarkali who protested taboos (Butt & Ahmed, 2019; Khalid 2020). A new generation is furthering this discourse, with Karachi-based writer Bismah Malik weaving lower-middle class struggles, gender roles and motherhood into relatable free verse built for social media sharing. Such hands-on writing diffused digitally democratizes Pakistan’s iconic poetic tradition.

New Novels in Regional Languages

Novels, short stories, and plays in regional languages also confront provocative themes through speculative or surreal aesthetics unseen in realist heritage writing in English or Urdu. Words Without Borders editor Sabahat Zakariya highlights rising literary stars like Lurkish Baloch whose award-winning story uses magic realist elements to depict violence against the Hazara minority. She also cites Rukhsana Ahmad's feminist short fiction and Aziz Rai's absurdist Baluchi plays (Khalid, 2020, p.41). While the English Book Awards laud Anglo writing, vernacular language authors stretch creative boundaries in their works without chasing Western tastes or postcolonial identity crises. Accessing such inventive texts presents entirely fresh outlooks.

Edgy Trends in English Writing

Notably, shifts in English language writing also demonstrate Pakistani literature's widening scope with space for ambitious genre fiction, graphic novels and expansive literary hybridity. Younger Anglophone authors like Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie now seem almost establishment figures themselves compared to the absolutely contemporary voices. Speculative, dystopic and New Weird aesthetics mark novels by edgier writers like Usman Malik, Monica Byrne, Bina Shah or fantasy tales from the Apex Book of World SF anthologies (Khalid, 2020). Such stylists engage Pakistan's multifaceted social problems through genres beyond realism, whether exploring gender pluralism or hacking subcultures with an eye to global readership. Boosting their visibility ensures Pakistani Anglo writing avoids stagnation.

Redefining Activist Literature

Spaces are also opening up for explicitly activist writing addressing injustice and marginalization for political impact besides pure artistry. Groups like the feminist poetry collective Girls at Dhabas provide platforms for women writers tackling experiences with misogyny and violence through open mic events and social media designed for awareness-raising (Khalid, 2020). Such feminist networks continue 1970s-era poet Fehmida Riaz's legacy. Meanwhile outspoken poets like Goraya Chohan from the Mazdoor Kissan Party draw on oral Punjabi verse traditions when reciting socialist critiques of state oppression at local gatherings. Their raw, vernacular styles brings urgency while showing literature's power to mobilize.

New Diaspora Perspectives

The sizable Pakistani diaspora with generational roots across the West contributes evolving dimensions from a hybrid lens. British-Pakistani graphic novelists like Sarwat Chadda meld Islamic identity with superhero tropes just as novelists Kamila Shamsie, Mohsin Hamid and Nadeem Aslam overlay multiple cultural reference points with code-switching prose. Meanwhile partition refugee family sagas continue gaining resonance across borders, like S.K Ali's cross-generational fictions. Paying attention to how diaspora communities (re)shape Pakistani writing for both global audiences and the homeland itself keeps conceptions of this literature dynamic (Hussain, 2005).

By uplifting today's experimentation from post-modern multimedia poets to regional language fiction challenging norms, Pakistani literature can showcase boundless innovation still unfolding 74 years after partition. The multitude of new voices resist ossification.

Conclusion

This extensive analysis makes clear the urgent need to reexamine the entirety of Pakistani literature through a postcolonial lens in order to deconstruct lingering imperial hierarchies that constrain conceptions of "great" writing. Assessing cornerstone texts of the canon, elevating excluded voices, and disestablishing ethnic favoritism provides pathways to disrupt internal prejudices that echo British "divide and rule" governance imposed during the colonial era. Rethinking the literary landscape this way constitutes an ethical imperative as well as an immense, complex process requiring participation across class and regional divides. However, unpacking complex colonial legacies while constructing a more inclusive Pakistani canon invites wider creativity on national terms.

The Indelible Imprint of British Rule

Firstly, applying postcolonial perspectives to seminal Pakistani texts illuminates how British educational and social engineering policies indelibly shaped literary production. Analyzing beloved novels and poems for traces of colonial ideology reveals ethnic biases, cultural assumptions and the privileging of English language mastery. Such critical examination unpacks how the 90-year Raj sought to foster an elite class of "interpreters" loyal to the British Empire through literature studies, thereby changing South Asian writing's entire trajectory. This complex

dynamic extended even after partition independence in 1947. Postcolonial tools expose how policies first enacted by colonial administrators continued influencing Pakistani literature's thematic scope, recognized antecedents, genres and linguistic mediums. Tracing such enduring imperial sway constitutes the first step towards liberation.

From Disillusion to Diversity

Secondly, reforming the Pakistani literary canon to showcase diversity resists cultural homogenization and misrepresentation. Constructively assessing why certain voices dominate while others remain excluded asks difficult questions of nationalist cohesion. However, opening dialogues around identities beyond elite North Indian Muslim cultures allows more citizens to see themselves in Pakistan's varied literary output. Embracing multiplicity releases writers to engage regional realities with experimental spirit instead of facing pressure to project singular ethnic symbols satisfying reductive assumptions. Granting disputed visions of Pakistani nationhood by authors across genders, religions and languages remains slow. Yet even tentative moves towards inclusion communicate commitment to self-definition beyond colonial parameters.

Unbound Potential Through Artistic Solidarity

Finally, sustaining regional diversity paired with artistic solidarity promotes creative sovereignty freed from external cultural authority. Younger generation writers like lyricist Anamta Raqs modernizing Balochi poetry for resistance anthems and British-Pakistani graphic novelist Sarwat Chadda embedding Islamic identity within adventure plots embody this spirit. By decentralizing ethnic favoritism, the Pakistani literary landscape can organically showcase boundless innovation beyond convention without needing international validation. Bringing multidimensional interpretations of identity to the forefront through fresh multimedia experiments and genres helps convey Pakistan's richness. Although concrete publishing and curriculum reforms proceed gradually, individual writers and scholars play a pivotal role in questioning ossified bias.

When narrow perceptions of Pakistani literature fixate on post-1947 English language novels, urgent disruption is required to spur reimagination. Assessing cornerstone texts through postcolonial thought provides necessary tools. Combined with artistic camaraderie amplifying overlooked voices, paths emerge towards equitably decolonizing this vibrant landscape still

hindered by colonial stratification. Dismantling enduring imperial structures by exposing their imprints and omissions allows more citizens to access Pakistan's literary heritage. Though provoking tensions, such open critiques plant seeds for a thriving cultural future harvested on national terms. By inspiring participation rooted in ethnic pluralism, Pakistani literature's next transformation unfolds.

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