
Understanding Social and Political Unrest through Fiction: A Study of Selected Novels from Contemporary South Asia

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Abstract

Along with many of its definitions, literature can also be defined as an art of storytelling. And, as writers like Chinua Achebe and Olive Senior have inferred, “Storytelling, is essentially a threat [through which] storytellers, poets, writers, have always found ways of confronting tyranny, especially in spaces where such actions are dangerous and deadly.” Aristotle was of the view that Poetry [Literature] is more reliable than the historical method. For Aristotle, Poetry [Literature], in more than one way, orders history in abstract ways, conveying deep truths rather than mere descriptive accounts. The poet's function is to “speak not of events which have occurred, but of the kind of events which could occur, and are possible by the standards of probability and necessity.” In this spirit, Lionel Trilling observes that literature is the human activity that takes “the fullest and most precise account of viciousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.”

In the contemporary times, Indian subcontinent/South Asia is beset with social and political unrest/s of various kind and nature even long after the decolonization in the form of armed conflicts professing sub nationalism, religious conflicts, class conflicts, caste conflicts, gender oppression, imperial domination, inter-country wars, etal. In fact, the genesis of many of these conflicts dates back to the historical eras of colonization and decolonization. However, historical and political evolution in South Asia has also given rise to these conflicts and unrest/s or it could be argued that these have been reinforced. This has resulted in a discourse which partakes of a whole spectrum of writing - literary and non - literary. Owing to many contending discourses, most of these writings have come up with their own subjective perspectives regarding these conflicts, especially in terms of experience and reality. Written from various positions, both hegemonic and participatory, these writings are preoccupied with rhetoric that results in the non-rendering of many significant aspects of lived experience. However, any site of conflict or resistance does inevitably shape the imaginations and experiences of its people and leads to expression of their situation.

Keywords- *Colonization, Decolonization, Gender Oppression, Unrest, Resistance, Hegemony*

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Introduction

In the recent years, the South-Asian literary scene has seen an emergence of many important voices which endeavored to portray the many shades of experience of these conflicts. Prominent among these voices/writers are Mohsin Hamid (Pakistan), Khaled Hosseini (Afghanistan), Shyam Selvadurai (Sri Lanka), and Imam Neamat (Bangladesh). By no way, this rendering attempts to establish these writers as the representative voices of their respective countries or region as a whole given the enormous range and diversity of languages and literatures within South Asia. It is only in this respect that these writers come close to depicting the turbulent socio-political experience that this topic aims to look at. Novels like Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*, and Imam Neamat's *The Black Coat*. In significant ways, these novels fall within the ambit of political fiction or more precisely "resistance literature" as they foreground many complex issues like identity, justice, struggle, and oppression which are usually absent in the mainstream fiction on/of South Asia. In doing so, these novels give an alternative and heterogeneous account of a reality that seems to counter the view of the "other" hegemonic discourses that neglect very basic and yet very important facets of contemporary South Asia's reality and experience.

However, the attempt is to compare and contrast these different voices that reflect the contemporary south Asia's political and social conflicts. Their ways of representation, however, might differ in their perspectives on the same situation of conflict. The common thread that can be perceived in their works is the predicament of human suffering and tragedy which appears perpetuating all the time and their contestation of the dominant power structures which reflect in different political and social institutions.

To begin with "*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*" it asks us to consider the cost of pursuing one's dreams wholeheartedly. Changez's arrival in America on a scholarship to Princeton, even though he's used to enjoying elite status in Lahore, where his family retain their social status despite their declining wealth, America proposes him the chance not to have to agonize about money again. For all intents, Changez is living the American Dream. After 9/11, however, this dream crumbles almost instantly. Nonetheless traces of his disturbances were evident long before the attacks actually commenced, when Changez smiles at the sight of the twin towers being destroyed it marks a major change within the young man who left Lahore with an aspiration to succeed in the privileged business world of America. Changez becomes a man who sees America as a selfish, devilish and soulless entity, crushing weaker and more impoverished nations. After the attacks, Changez begins the long road to self-realization, culminating in his discovery that he would rather choose a life of honesty and sacrifice back in Lahore than to continue chasing the American Dream. After returning from Chile,

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Changez can see just how class-conscious America still is, how divided the people are and just how much money controls the actions of what America does and doesn't do in relation to the rest of the world.

Changez says, "Moreover I knew from my experience as Pakistani-of alternating periods of American aid and sanctions-that finance was a primary means by which the American empire exercised its power" (p. 94). Juan-Bautista tells Changez the story of janissaries who were Christian boys 'captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in a Muslim army' to which Changez measured about himself, "I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it invades a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the danger of war" (p. 91). The results of such economic policies are catastrophic.

Changez says to Englishman, "It seems to me then and to be honest, sir, seems to me still-that America was engaged only in posturing. As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated in the myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted your beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums, not least my family, now facing war thousand miles away. Such an America had to be stopped in the interests not only of the rest of humanity, but also in your own (p.101)"

Similarly, on the other hand, Mohsin Hamid designs his political ideology through the discourse of the novel in post-cold war scenario. He establishes the global politics paradigm, in which he envisages the dichotomy of relationship between neo-colonizer and the neo-colonized communities of the world. He depicts the colonizers divine figure and developing countries as their creation. Though the text of the novel comprises the local politics of Pakistan but Mohsin Hamid, in roundabout way, construes the socio-political scenario of the world. The extracts from the novel reflect a discourse largely political in nature. Fictional world is engrossed with a politically charged world and individual characters cannot think but in political terms. This shows that postcolonial fictional world is political in nature, and Mohsin Hamid's fiction is a typical example of it. In post-cold war world, both facts and fiction are political and the fictional discourse is also a political discourse.

Hosseini makes only a few rambling efforts to portray the present social and political reality. For example, in the first years of the US-installed Karzai regime, we are told that Laila is infuriated by the fact that "the warlords have been allowed back to Kabul. That her parents' murderers live in posh homes with walled gardens, that they have been appointed minister[s]...that they ride with impunity in shiny bulletproof SUVs through neighborhoods that they have demolished."

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In the very next line, we hear the author's refrain through Laila's pointed response: she has "decided that she will not be crippled by resentment.... *What's the sense?*... Laila has resigned herself to moving on."

The indecision over their future, under US occupation, is determined by Laila and Tarik concluding that there is really nothing they can do to affect the future of Afghanistan, other than build an orphanage. To which the reader could be forgiven for asking: "Is that all one can draw from this tragic history?"

Characteristic aspect about Hosseini's narratives, is the fact that they "are written alongside a history that has not been told in fiction before", defining the cultural richness and grandeur of a country heading towards destruction (4). Hence, by mirroring his life-like characters' experiences -- being ensnared in the persistent socio-political struggles -- Hosseini draws the human face of the country that has rarely been depicted before. Put differently, the novelist confers on his characters the prerogative of voicing stories that deceitfully translate his countrymen's real journeys. Therefore, his characters are prototypes that typify and illustrate the life of ordinary Afghans.

In the same vein, *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* are set against the backdrop of wars that played mayhem with a country suffering under the heavy toll of damage to Afghanistan. The author infuses his stories with a voice/voices that articulate(s) the unutterable experiences of a nation unsettled by decades of penetrating commotion, societal unrest, political turbulence and sectarian feuds. In fact, Hosseini's novels unveil what lies behind closed portals, thereby "[throwing] the doors of his country wide open so that the world could see firsthand the real Afghanistan and the great Afghan people who are suffering for being Afghans". Being an indigenous writer, Hosseini feels it obligation upon him to bridge the gap between his country and the rest of the world (qtd.in Stuhr, 6).

To make readers cognizant of the fact "that the Afghan people existed before there was a war with the Soviets and before there was a Taliban" can be perceived as one of the premises upon which Khaled Hosseini based his works (qtd.in Bloom, 12). Thus, his novels provide an aperture through which readers can (re)discover Afghanistan prior to its infamous identification as the cradle and sanctuary of terrorists (Bloom 9). In this context, what Hosseini aspires to achieve through his fictional texts is to challenge and subvert this blinkered and narrow outlook towards his native country.

Hosseini has become renowned for his faithful representation of his homeland, basing his aesthetic premise upon stories that are set against and representative of Afghanistan's recent history, ethnic diversity, rich culture and traditions. His works, however, transcend with their universal themes the confines of one country, culture, or experience, as they encapsulate struggles, hardships, and

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journeys that are worldwide and common between diverse countries and cultures. Yet, his novels maintain an unprecedented fictional rigor credit to their informative role about Afghanistan and their literary merit as the first Afghan-American novels received by a worldwide commendation.

Bangladesh has an interesting history too. Their freedom struggle is something that the world had witnessed far and wide. Post independence, Bangladesh had to deal with what every nation has to go through. Government is shaping itself up, people are migrating across the border & the people flocking its capital (Dhaka) post independence and the chaos, deaths, disorder, confusion and turmoil that followed.

Amidst all this, there were opportunists who tried to walk over people to make their mark in the society and there were some who really wanted to contribute towards the betterment of the society. The Black Coat by Neamat Imam deals with all this. It is an exceptionally intense tale of Nur Hussain, a villager who comes to the capital city of Dhaka and Khaleque Biswas, a journalist, who recently lost his job. Khaleque Biswas strongly felt that Sheikh Mujib is unable to live up to the promises he made when he sworn in as the Prime Minister of the newly formed Bangladesh.

He wanted to speak this through the newspaper he was working for but the editor; Lutfuzzaman Babul did not permit him to do so, as going against Sheikh Mujib wouldn't have done any good to his newspaper. He terminates Biswas citing financial limitations as the reason.

In the novel, Imam deals with one of the most chaotic and controversial phases of independent Bangladesh's history (1972–75) when the country, barely improving from the effects of a brutal war of independence, faced a crippling famine, poor governance and law and order problems under the tarnished Rakkhi Bahini, climaxing in the elimination of multi-party democracy and an escorting in of the infamous Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) dictatorship. That period is politically a taboo subject in Bangladesh and this book presents Sheikh Mujib as an autocrat instead of what he is popularly known as: Father of the Bengali Nation. In Chapter 16 of Book 2, "His Monster Speech," Nur Hussain says: "This is the mistake of one person and one person alone. I have struggled with myself hard but today I can tell you the truth: Sheikh Mujib has become a monster, and as I speak of my emptiness here, he is coming for you." In a blog post on his site, Imam writes that Bangladeshis "should remove Sheikh Mujib's pictures from all schools and public places, so that we can protect our children from mastering wrong values and from making a wrong meaning of politics."

The novel's back flap reads: "Intense yet chilling, this brilliant first novel is a meditation on power, greed and the human cost of politics." In book 1 Chapter 6, "My Valued Companion," Imam writes: "The person who goes against the government is not an enemy of the people. Those who accept their government's limitations in silence are the real enemies." In Chapter 17 of Book 2, "A

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Conversation and a Warning," Khaleque Biswas says: "One cannot expect a smart government in a country which does not have smart citizens. Citizens have to know clearly what they want. Our people are shameless. How many directions do we have on earth? Ten. But they will move in any direction they want without bothering about decency and meaning. Seventy million people will talk about seventy million solutions to the same problem."

Likewise, "The Hungry Ghosts" is a disturbing novel. There is barely a glimmer of happiness to sustain each character and Shivam's efforts to turn away from his former life, to escape his mother by moving from Toronto to Vancouver, to put aside the specter of his grandmother, prove troubling. Even the landscape of Srilanka seems to flounce as Selvadurai describes the violence between the Sinhalese and the Tamils that Shivan witnesses during his time there. His new home in Toronto is shown as an emotionally grey place where he must occupy a basement bedroom, sleeping on a bed with a "scratch, synthetic brown-and-white comforter."

The novel centres around Shivan Rassiah, the beloved grandson of mixed Tamil and Sinhalese lineage, and who also grows from beautiful boy to striking gay man. As the novel opens in the present day, Shivan, now living in Canada, is preparing to travel back to Colombo, Sri Lanka, to liberate his elderly and ailing grandmother, to remove her from the home—now fallen into disrepair—that is her pride, and bring her to Toronto to live her final days. But right through the night and into the early morning hours of his departure, Shivan struggles with his own unquenchable hunger and is obsessed by unrelenting ghosts of his own creation. *The Hungry Ghosts* is a beautifully written, dazzling story of family, wealth and the long reach of the past. It shows how racial, political and sexual differences can tear apart both a country and the human heart—not just once, but many times, until the ghosts are fed and freed.

To put it succinctly, Much of the contemporary narratives on/of South Asia's socio-political turbulence/ conflict have been mostly influenced by the respective rhetoric of their "insider" and "outsider" positions. These narratives often tend to overlook the fact that many important facets of experience are integral to any troubled time or space. As a result, many vital aspects of the experience are neglected or ignored. This has led to either narrowing down of the area of research or lead to a patronizing outlook which is usually at the cost of the other perspective. However these novels portray and probe the facets of South Asia's socio-politically turbulent landscape by challenging previously constructed views of dominant narratives. They offer a refreshing new perspective on the reality by foregrounding the complex questions of identity, justice and human emancipation. Moreover, the fixed notions and beliefs which the west has defined for South Asian states regarding their culture, identity, politics and history has been brought into surface by these fictional narratives. In other words, through these novels an absolute image of colonizer is debunked and simultaneously a

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clear understanding is supplied to the colonized. Thus, the novels' narrative lines are inextricably structured and molded against the background of these "periods of both remarkable stability and violent turbulence, which have succeeded one another in a seemingly haphazard manner" (Saikal 1). However, it seems that we are no longer satisfied with saying that a novel criticizes or analyzes colonialism. Rather, we must say that it "disrupts" the economy of colonialism, or "undermines" hegemony, or "empowers" colonized peoples. In other words, we cannot simply describe the political implications or purposes of a particular literary work. Rather, we must posit an effect--and, indeed, an effect that is vast, revolutionary, transformative, as if the very fact of a story's publication was socially equivalent to a decade of systematic land reform or the establishment of an independent government.

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