



PASHTUN IMAGES IN CONTEMPORARY PAKISTANI FICTION IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Living in an area that has long been a battlefield where various world powers have often been at loggerheads, Pashtuns have frequently drawn the attention of several works of fiction. Yet literary scholars have largely ignored the importance of these works of fiction looking into the lives of Pashtuns. This paper proposes that from the times of the Cold War to those of the War on Terror, Pashtun identities have been clouded by the hegemonic discourses of the contesting global powers, leading to gaps and silences in their depiction in literature. This paper argues that the Pashtun images in contemporary Pakistani fiction in English exhibit strong influences of the dominating narratives; simultaneously, however, they seem to offer various patterns of subversion of the prevailing power narratives. Despite the fact that Pashtuns are generally regarded as the most subversive people of South Asia and that their lands have been regarded significant strategically as well as geographically, yet they are portrayed as the Others of the mainstream cultural discourses. This paper aims to highlight the contours of the socio-cultural and political valuation of Pashtuns in contemporary Pakistani fiction in English.

Keywords: Pashtun Images, prevailing discourses, power narratives, contemporary Pakistani fiction in English, subversive.

(I)

From the Great Game between the British colonizers and Tsarist Russians, and from the Cold War between the Capitalist Americans and Stalinist Soviets down to the War on Terror between the West and various Afghan militant groups, the areas dominated by Pashtuns have often been used as battlegrounds where various powers and ideologies have competed for dominance. Within various disciplines of knowledge, there have been renewed concerns about the historical, political, and social conditions of Pashtuns in South Asia. Quite understandably in literature as well as in art, Pashtuns have attracted the attention of British, American and South Asian writers of various national backgrounds both from East and West.

Since literature is a human construct inclusive of intellectual, aesthetic, emotional, psychological, social, cultural, political and historical endeavors, it influences and is influenced by the currents and concepts of time and clime, i.e. when and where it is produced. Inevitably, it is often influenced by multiple discourses triggered by historical, cultural, social, political and economic factors.



History, as Gregory quotes Foucault, is both unstable, un-purposive and therefore is in a continuous flux keeping the shifts in power relations through power discourses shaping and interpreting the human experiences (129-34). Literary texts “are embedded in specific relations of power” and “systems of public signification” (Greenblatt, 5). This interaction of the literary text and history generates ‘tremendous social energy which circulates through the entire cultural space and makes the circumambient surrounding resonate with multiple echoes’

(Kar, 75-83). Thus a literary work is transformed ‘into a dynamic mode of cultural resonance’ (Kar, 75-83). Greenblatt considers great art ‘an extraordinarily sensitive register of complex struggles and harmonies of culture’ (6). But ‘a canonical author contains in his work the dominant ideology of his culture as well as subverts that ideology from within’ (Kar, 75-83). It is from this standpoint that this paper surveys the contemporary Pakistani fiction in English written between the end of the Cold War and the start of the War on Terror. It aims to trace the working of the prevailing discourses and ideology on their depiction of Pashtuns. This paper hypothesizes that the complex web of the global power discourses mainly prevailing between the aforementioned two Wars, the social, political, and cultural agendas of the contesting powers and the historical circumstances and dimensions have strongly influenced the Pashtun images in contemporary Pakistani fiction in English. It thus attempts to investigate how and to what extent contemporary Pakistani fiction in English substantially depicts the aforesaid patterns of Pashtun images.

(II)

Both obvious and subtle links exist between contemporary Pakistani English fiction and the prevailing socio-political milieu and the dominant ideological systems. Three distinct backgrounds have put a major impact on shaping Pashtun images: first, the British imperialist entanglements in South and Central Asia and the British Raj in India; second, the Cold War and Afghan Jihad; third, the so-called War on Terror. Consequently, Pashtun images are overshadowed by their specific socio-political milieus and further their depiction is maneuvered and manipulated by the power struggle in the Pashtun land since the very inception of the Great Game down to the so-called War on Terror.

There has been a generally hostile attitude towards Pashtuns in both Western and South Asian historiography. However, contemporary Pakistani fiction in English tackles to fill this gap to a certain extent. In the post 9/11 literary scenario, several Pakistani fiction writers have attempted to explore and understand the issues of Pashtuns and the conditions which prevail in their lands. Likewise, there has been a general stereotyping about the subversive behaviour of Pashtun both in Western and South Asian English fiction which mainly subscribes to the prevailing discourses. However, contemporary Pakistani fiction in English explores new meanings and contours in their subversive role.



Western English fiction, betraying a hegemonic mindset, approaches Pashtun regions and Pashtun character with an orientalist perspective and generally produces stereotyped Pashtun images. Fiction on Pashtuns is either set in Pashtun-majority areas like FATA, Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Afghanistan constructing wishful Pashtun images and characters. Generally, English fiction explores the lives of Pashtuns making two broad categories; first, novels authored by western writers like Rudyard Kipling, Andrea Busfield, James A. Michener, Robert Warburton, Kay Hamilton, and Joseph Kessel; second, novels written by South Asian writers like Riaz Hassan, Khalid Hosseini, Kamila Shamsie, Fatima Bhutto, Shahi Sadat,

AtiqRahimi, SiamaWahab, Latifa, Nadia Hashmi, AtiyaAbawi, Saira Shah, Yasmin Khadra, TimeriMurari, Jamil Ahmad, Ghulam Qader Khan, and Nadeem Aslam. The western writers envision Pashtuns through a typical orientalist romantic approach. This approach is sometimes copied by a few South Asian novelist like Khalid Hosseini.

The earliest mention of a Pashtun in English literature seems to have been made by Rudyard

Kipling's 'The Man Who Would Be King' (1891) wherein the main character Dravot addresses a Pashtun in these words: 'You're white people - sons of Alexander - and not like common, black

Mohammedans'(1914). Kipling compares an Afridi Pashtun and an English soldier, for their gallantry and chivalry, in a famous poem 'The Ballad of East and West' in which he says:

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
Though they come from the ends of the earth! (245)

Since Kipling's writing till the Cold War, novelists rarely attempted to investigate Pashtun images. However, in the 1980s, during the Afghan Jihad and later during the War on Terror, the literary world has seen a remarkable boom in both fictional and non-fictional memoirs on Pashtun regions and Pashtun identity. In the post 9/11 contemporary Pakistani English fiction, authors have betrayed an even greater interest in depicting Pashtun images and character. Despite the fact that non-literary works exploring Pashtun territories and people are abundant and varied, there is a dearth of literary explorations and research of Pashtuns' lives and their struggles in English literature. Quite understandably, academic investigations of the issues of Pashtun representations in both Western and South Asian English literature is rare. Keeping in mind this gap in Pashtun studies, it is significant that the available creative writings on Pashtuns in English should be explored from various perspectives.



(III)

The present study analyses Pashtun images in the following novels dealing with Pashtun characters and locales; Riaz Hassan's *The Unchosen* (1988), Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon* (2011), Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013), Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* (2014), Ghulam Qadar Khan's *Cheegha, The Call* (2014) and Khalid Muhammad's *Agency Rules* (2014).

Riaz Hassan's *The Unchosen* (2003) is perhaps the first novel set entirely in the Pashtun tribal belt between Pakistan and Afghanistan. As has been pointed out by a renowned Pakistani scholar and literary critic Sajjad Haider Malik, Pashtuns have been 'threatened by war and extinction' for the last three decades (Malik). Interestingly, the novel attempts to explore the theme of existence from the standpoint of history and sort it in the story of 'a defeated but unbowed' Pashtun who dared to refuse' to accept the predicament as judgment of history in the closing years of the 19th century (Malik). The novel discloses some layers of the covert moves on the chessboard of the Great Game between the Tsarist Russians and the British colonists in the mid -19th century. The plot delineates the armed struggle of Pashtuns against the British Raj. Although quite neglected by literary critics so far, *The Unchosen* investigates a significant theme of Pashtun character and territory during the British Raj. Highlighting the traditional subversive role of Pashtuns, Hassan refutes the British romantic representation of Pashtuns of the North West Frontier of India by telling a realistic tale of both Pashtun characters caught between the bonds of tribal domesticity and anti-British resistance. However, despite being realistic, Hassan portrays the stereotype image of a miserable Pashtun woman considered a commodity and a human being with sensibility and emotions. Overall, the novel realistically depicts the oppressed conditions of Pashtun tribal women as doubly marginalized as any other woman in rural Pakistan.

Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* explores the plights of the common people whose lives were plagued by the Cold War and the War on Terror. Aslam explicates not only both the Wars have brutally affected the lives of the innocent human beings but also they have brought an unprecedented damage to the historical and cultural treasures of the Pashtun regions. Set in the age of war and terror, *The Vigil* unfolds the tales of love in a village in Afghanistan named Usha suggesting a Pashto word *ushkai*.e. a teardrop. Negotiating between love and war, the novel investigates the contrasting aspects of human endeavors through the characters belonging to the contesting global powers i.e. the US and the USSR fighting their wars in Afghanistan, corrupting the history and culture of Pashtuns. *The Vigil* depicts how these alien warfare has demonised the Pashtuns and have turned their territory in shambles. Taking the explosive realities of both the

Wars, the novel navigates the war-torn Afghanistan bringing the devastation and unflinching miseries of Pashtuns, revealing the pain and anguish in words, Aslam paints deadly images in the following words;



The explosion has created static and a spark leaps from his thumb towards a smoking fragment of metal flying past him. Then he is on the ground. Beside him has landed a child's wooden leg, in flames, the leather straps burning with a different intensity than the wood, than the bright blood –seeping flesh of the severed thigh that is still attached. A woman in a burka on fire crosses his vision. He hears nothing and then slowly, as he gets to his feet in the midst of this war of the end of the world, scream soldered onto scream. He thinks the silence was the result of momentary deafness but the survivors had in all probability needed time to comprehend fully what had just taken place. (72)

Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon* (2011) is set in the tribal belt of Balochistan and FATA.

It paints some of the most unforgettable pictures from the lives of the tribal Pashtuns and Baluchis. The novel investigates the meaning of traditional social code of conduct called Pashtunwali. Human images are as vividly drawn as those of the landscape. The novel dovetails a realistic depiction of the people and places with a poetic form of prose. It unearths the subtleties of the tribal culture its harshness and hardship. No matter how inhospitable the lands and territories of Pashtun and Baloch tribes may appear in the novel, the emotions and feelings of these miserable tribes are delicately hospitable and obviously humble. Depicting the tribal landscape, Jamil uses vivid imagery of people and their conditions. Ahmad's tales revolve around Tor Baz, a young boy who according to the author lives like a wandering falcon. He calls him *Tor Baz* meaning 'black falcon'(68). Orphaned and homeless at the age of five, Tor Baz is 'cared for by different people' and yet 'he has no desire to reclaim his family or history'(M. Shamsie 510-11). The very first sentence of the novel combines vivid imagery with poetic prose that suits that freedom loving spirit of the tribal people and their land: 'In the tangle of crumbling, weather-beaten and broken hills, where the borders of Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan meet, is a military outpost manned by about two score soldiers' (Ahmad 1). The harsh life of tribal Tor Baz parallels the hard landscape which bears 'no habitation' and 'no vegetation' and 'no water' and 'nature has not remained content merely at this' because she has also created 'the dreaded' wind that blows 'clouds of alkali-laden dust and sand so thick that men can merely breathe or open their eyes when they happen to get caught in it' (Ahmad 1).

Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013) is also set in the tribal belt of Waziristan, the mountains inhabited by some of the most warring independent Pashtun tribes. It narrates the story of three brothers desirous to live ordinary lives against the winds of extraordinary conditions. Curiously enough, Bhutto depicts the domestic lives of Wazir tribes in a rather non-tribal way. In her novel the tribal characters seem to be like pictures taken from an urban background and pasted against a tribal landscape. Although the novel presents a somewhat imaginary domestic life of a family hardly representing the tribal realities of Waziristan, yet it portrays war actualities substantially. Caught between personal love and tribal warfare, the three brothers want to explore the meaning of their tribal lives. They are faced with a big question of survival and existence in



the mercury world of Waziristan where life frequently meets unpredictable and unexpected situations and tragedies. Waziristan has turned into a quagmire in which they are destined to sink deeper and deeper. Their routine lives are swept by the devastating circumstances dictated by glocal¹ hegemonic power discourses. These discourses have changed the role of religion in Mir Ali, a nexus of all such machinations the tribal region. ‘Religion crept into the town’s rocky terrain like the wild flowers that grew quietly where no grass ought to have grown, you chose your mosque carefully’ (Bhutto 2).

Kamila Shamsie in *A God in Every Stone* (2014) spans over vast periods of time, in one of which she portrays some aspects of Pashtun identity and region, reinforcing the historical the importance of Pashtun as a race. Setting some parts of her novel in the historical city of Peshawar. She foregrounds the importance of Pathan resistance under the banner of the Red Shirts or *Khudai Khidmatgars* (The Servants of God). Led by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, lovingly called by his people Bacha Khan, the Red Shirts movement played a significant role in giving a non-violent character to the Pashtun struggle against the British Raj. The novel places Pashtuns against the backdrop of a wider scenario dominated by the global powers during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The story dovetails its themes at two layers: on the surface floats friendship, love, and betrayal, but under the surface rules huge messy historical chaos entailing tension between the British Empire and the Pashtuns.

Swinging back and forth in time, Shamsie’s narrative unearths subtleties of life from history. With an exquisite eloquence, she explores Pashtun region against the vast geopolitical conflicts of our contemporary world. In one of her interviews about *A God in Every Stone*, Shamsie highlights how and why she chose to excavate Pashtuns identity and region. She says she was shocked to discover that for mainstream Pakistani imagination, Peshawar and its people were as alien as the two had been for Kipling who had called Peshawar ‘The Frontier Town’. It was to deconstruct this mainstream Pakistani imagination that she decided to begin the novel in Peshawar. She shuttles across time and place to evoke subtle Pashtun images of friendship, freedom, and war. Through her fictional world, Shamsie brings forth the non-violent image of Pashtuns and shows the world a novel face of the unarmed Pashtun who were butchered by the

British in 1930s in the historic Qissa Khwani Bazaar right in the heart of Peshawar. It was then when the British Empire washed the streets of Peshawar with the blood of Pashtun Khudai Khidmatgars.

Peshawar itself surfaces as a character in *A God in Every Stone*. Conscious of Peshawar’s place as ‘the City’ and not ‘a city’ in Pashtuns’ imagination, Shamsie plaits with great finesse the city’s story with history and archeology. She traces the history of Caspatyrus (today’s Peshawar) in the land of Paktyike (today’s Pakteeka) as ‘the edge of Darius ‘empire, edge of the known world . . . the doorway to glory’ (Shamsie 8). Shamsie weaves these historical references to the Peshawar of the British Raj in the First World War and furthermore specifically connects the city’s role to



unarmed resistance of Khudai Khidmatgars in the streets of Peshawar in 1930s. Interrelating some mysterious aspects from the Classical Persian and Greek eras down to the beginning of the twentieth century. Shamsie bridges Europe and Peshawar through the troika of a western woman and two Pashtun brothers from Peshawar: Vivian Spencer, Najeeb Gul and Qayum Gul. The fictional narrative is skillfully peppered with factual data such as letters, documents, reports, diaries and artifacts to excavate the subversive role of Pashtuns against the British Empire.

Ghulam Qadar Khan's *Cheegha, The Call* (2014) is a story about Waziristan. The novel quests for sustainable peace in a region ruled and ruined by militancy and terrorism since the days of the Afghan Jihad. *Cheegha* offers a window on the realities of a land still greatly romanticized in mainstream and national imagination. In the wake of 9/11, the world has generally associated the land with violence and brutality. Khan delineates the story of common tribal folks whose love, betrayal, happiness, misery, romance, ideals are the same as those of the developed and civilized world. *Cheegha* reveals the unexplored impressions and images of the marginalised tribal Pashtuns and their untrodden lands. According to Merisi Angelina, the region is overwhelmingly seen through orientalist and hegemonic discourses manufactured primarily in the powerhouses of Western academia. Narratives subscribing to the global power players overshadow and bypass 'the true nature, cultural and traditional norms practiced and developed in these lands over thousands of years' (*The Pashtun Times*). According to her, the Pashtun tribes and their lands have suffered an unending militancy, aerial bombardment, devastation of infrastructure, deaths and displacement of thousands of people. Ironically enough, the 'blatant abandonment of the people by state powers' and the ban on the 'scholars and journalists attempting to unravel the truth or verify accounts concerning ground realities' further leave 'the world with a one-sided, largely misinformed version of accounts' (*The Pashtun Times*).

Angeline further maintains *Cheegha*'s 'firsthand account' of the region offering a sharp glimpse into 'the mysterious lands of Waziristan' (*The Pashtun Times*). The novel presents us a 'comprehensive analysis of traditional socio-cultural norms and intrinsic features of tribal society, set within the context of recent historical events culminating in the factors which led to the current volatile state of affairs in the region' (*The Pashtun Times*). There is an undercurrent seriousness that moves alongside the story of the novel. The straightforwardness of the narrative and the description of author's experiences and his opinions turn the novel into a memoir.

Nevertheless, the novel bears 'an overwhelming sense of injustice, hardship and betrayal that echoes through the pages, imposed on the people of Waziristan by State and non-State actors supported by figures the author categorizes as "faceless people"' (*The Pashtun Times*).

For the Western world, Waziristan represents a conundrum associated generally with violence and terror. Drone attacks, suicide bombers, Jihadis, and the army play their games, yet locals are unable



to understand the nexus of this nasty game. *Cheegha* confronts the readers with the real conditions of Waziristan which are generally harsh and unbearable. It connects us to the beating heart of the Pashtun tribal society. Of all the other novels written on/about Waziristan and tribal areas, *Cheegha* is unusual in that it is written by the author who himself belongs to the area. Thus *Cheegha* is a unique amalgam of experience and art and gives a fictional voice to the tribal Pashtuns.

Muhammad Khalid's *Agency Rules* is a spy thriller. Perhaps the first contribution by a Pakistani author to this subgenre of fiction and although not exclusively set in the Pashtun lands, a large part of the story relates to the Pashtuns. Deeply soaked in the most recent political history of Pakistan, *Agency Rules* attempts to voice Pakistan's popular counter perspective on War on Terror. Speaking to Faizan Hussain in an interview, Muhammad Khalid said that the story of the novel was unearthed from the recent strategic and political history of the country (*The Nation*). *Agency Rules* gives quite convincing answers to some of the most important and difficult questions about the Afghan Jihad and War on Terror, excavating the meaning of militant sanctuaries across the entire belt of Bajaur, Khyber, Mohmand and Waziristan.

(IV)

Although lying at the centre of an area jealously sought for control by rival global powers, Pashtuns have suffered long periods of wars and exploitations. Their histories and politics have been explored by various scholars. Several creative authors have also attempted to investigate Pashtun lives and territories in various novels. However, literary scholars have rarely attempted to explore fictional representations more importantly their sufferings and miseries reflected in fiction have generally been overlooked by critics of literature. This study has attempted to fill some of this gap by investigating various forms of fictional representations of Pashtuns and their landscape. Whereas some novelists like Khalid Hosseini subscribe to the West's hegemonic perspectives on Pashtun culture and identity, many Pakistani novelists in English largely subvert the Western narrative by reimagining Pashtuns and their territory. The novels authored by Riaz Hassan, Nadeem Aslam, Jamil Ahmad, Fatima Bhutto, Kamila Shamsie, Ghulam Qader Khan, and Muhammad Khalid attempt to give more realistic depictions of Pashtuns.

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