

Negotiating Conflict: Regional and National Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction in English¹

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Abstract

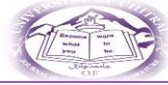
Pakistan has frequently been viewed as a stronghold of Islamic radicals, often being overlooked that various trends of both dormant and obvious conflicts exist between the politics of religion and region. Whereas the former is mainly controlled by the state, the latter is generally influenced by language and ethnicity. The state's monolithic notion of national identity, from the country's birth in 1947 to the present, has overshadowed the regional identities mainly the Pashtuns, Baluchis, and Sindhis, and disregarded the minority credos such as Shias, Parsis, Ahmadis, Hindus and Christians. This article aims to overview how contemporary Pakistani fiction in English spotlights images of a fragmented national-self, underlining plights of the aforementioned marginalised groups exhibiting a strong resistance to hidebound national identity. Reviewing the selected fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa, Sara Suleri, Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam, Bina Shah, and Jamil Ahmad, this paper attempts to foreground the socio-cultural and political valuation of the regional identities.

Keywords: regional identities, fragmented national-self, prevailing power discourses, contemporary Pakistani fiction in English (CPFE), subversive

1. Introduction

Politics of religion backed by the separatist Muslim identity has often been glorified by the official historiography in Pakistan. On the contrary, politics of region emerging from the region's diversified indigenous identities have usually been marginalized and disregarded by Pakistan's state narrative (Chambers, 2011, p. 123). However, contemporary Pakistani fiction in English (henceforth called CPFE), in line with South Asian fiction in general, has substantially been

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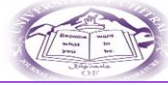


marked as an attempt to rewrite the Muslim identity based on creed (Rasool & Khalis, 2019, p. 62). In many of the oppressed societies such as that of Pakistan, fiction seems to be an influential channel through which a ‘genuine historical event’ is documented (Waterman, 2015, p. 156). CPFE manages to create what Waterman calls ‘historical fiction’ (2015, p. 156). Arguably, CPFE fills the gap created by the state historiography hinging on the politics of religion and thereby marginalizing the local and regional identities, gender equality, and class struggle in the country.

Literature is generally considered as a fine product of the time and place in which it is written. At the same time, it is an influential tool that leaves imprints on both time and clime. The socio-cultural and political issues of the time are negotiated in a literary text to evaluate them in the light of various contemporary influences and discursive practices. Literary depiction reciprocates social and political activities of the time in which the text is produced. Similarly, freedom, resistance, deviance, and defiance essentially develop a broader understanding of the culture and society in which the text is produced. Montrose calls this reciprocity ‘historicity of text’ and ‘textuality of history’ (Barry, 2009, p. 165-181). The interplay of multiple discourses in a literary text defies the notion of a universal spirit of an age working in a literary text. The text is studied in the light of co-text constituted varied aspects and artefacts shaped by and in turn shape the culture in which they emerge.

Arts and literature, besides their aesthetics, are vulnerable to the influences of history, material conditions and socio-cultural dynamics. It can be argued that ‘aesthetic forms are highly sensitive sites of social, political, and even economic conflicts; as such, they can reveal contradictions in social conditions and foster a standpoint for a materialist critique of them’ (Gregory, 2007, pp. 130-34).

Scholarly criticism of CPFE usually displays nationalist or elitist narratives of Pakistani society. For example, critiques of Pakistani fiction by scholars such as Ali Ahmad Kharal, Munnawar Iqbal Ahmad, Nighat Sultana while discussing CPFE maintain a Muslim nationalist narrative by overlooking politics of region and minority. Contrary to the critical scholarship, this article underscores how CPFE recounts perception of Pakistani society by rehierarchying the regional identities.



2. Identities in Conflict: A Pakistan Case

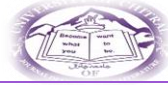
Pakistan has frequently been viewed as a stronghold of Islam, *Islam Ka Qilla* (fort of Islam) in the state narrative. However, parallel to this notion, there have been various trends, symbolising both explicit and implicit conflicts, existing between the perspectives of religion and region. Whereas the former are mainly controlled by the state, the latter are influenced by language, literature, and class. The socio-political ethos of Pakistani society, being deeply rooted in pluralistic and eclectic values, represents a broad humanistic outlook of history, reflected in the secular aspects of the contemporary art and literature (Cilano, 2013, p. 1-2).

Since Pakistan movement was predominantly guided by a separatist Muslim identity, the state intelligentsia subsequently engineered a paradigm of national identity based on Islam, Urdu, and the Ideology of Pakistan. Regional identities, on the other hand, are generally rooted in the languages other than Urdu and the marginalized creeds other than the majoritarian Sunni sect. Contrary to the state's monolithic identity, these regional/indigenous identities have been frequently perceived as threats to the mainstream state ideology. Evidently, the narrative of national identity forms a fragmented national-self failing to fit well into the socio-cultural ethos of Pakistani society. The state narrative has traditionally tended to silence regional identities, regional languages and regional literatures, minorities, women, and laity.

3. Images of a Fragmented National Self in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction in English (CPFE)

Whereas Pakistan's overemphasized notions of national identity and nationhood have generally overshadowed the country's regional and marginal dynamics, regional identities such as those of Pashtuns, Sindhis, and Baluchis, and minorities such as Parsis, Shias, Ahmadis, Christians, and Hindus have been marginalized and otherized. Notwithstanding the state's Islamist nationalist narrative projected by the country's oligarchy, Pakistan's regional identities have drawn the attention of several works of CPFE. Howbeit, literary scholars have largely ignored the importance of those fiction that explore issues of the marginalized regional identities.

It can be argued that from Partition to the present, regional identities have been clouded by the prevailing national Identity. Nevertheless, contemporary Pakistani fiction in English attempts

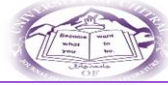


to fill some of this gap. Regional images are quite obvious in CPFE, as they exhibit strong resistance to an imaginary monolithic Islamist national identity. The present study aims to bring critical attention of the scholars to the socio-cultural and political valuation of the regional identities through a broad survey of contemporary Pakistani fiction in English with a particular focus on the writings of Bapsi Sidhwa, Sara Suleri, Nadeem Aslam, Kamila Shamsie, Bina Shah, and Jamil Ahmad.

Circumnavigating the CPFE, one immediately observes that Bapsi Sidhwa stands preeminent as ‘the first Pakistan-Resident’ English novelist who received international literary fame and acclaim (Shamsie, 2017). She writes about the margin and has remarkably unmuted the silences of the regional and peripheral voices. Her fiction is marked by the cultural impact of Islam rather than by Muslim identity. She is regarded as a ‘secular’ and ‘agnostic’ person, but at the same time she carries ‘a Muslim civilizational heritage’ (Claire, 2011, p. 124). Explicating further, Claire quotes Malak (2011) that ‘Islam constitutes not only a cardinal component of Muslims’ identity but also becomes a prominent feature in the identity of the non-Muslims (be they Hindus, Zoroastrians, Jews, or Christians) who happen to live in Muslim communities’ (p. 124).

Muneeza Shamsie (2017) considers Sidhwa as ‘the first to give the ‘homegrown’ Pakistani-English novel a clear, contemporary voice’ (p. 195). Being a part of the Parsi/Zoroastrian community, Sidhwa is particularly interested in ‘the history and changing social and political structures of her community’ in her novels (Shamsie, 2017, p. 195). Her novels *The Crow Eater* (1979), *The Bride* (1982) *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988) (published in US as *Cracking India*), *An American Brat* (1993) and *Water* (2006) – that Sidhwa developed into a novel from Deepa Mehta’s famous screenplay, *Water* – vividly underscores the plights of regional ethnicities, minority identities, marginalized poor classes, tribal communities, and particularly women.

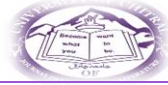
Sidhwa gets literary fame during Zia’s restraining regime characterized by the so-called Islamisation, disregarding every regional identity in favour of *Umma*, relegating Pakistan’s cultural, political and religious minorities and sects. She captures this oppressive regime in *An American Brat* (Shamsie, 2017).



Sidhwa's first novel *The Crow Eaters* (1978) is mainly about her own marginalized community. The novel asserts Sidhwa's 'strong sense' of marginalized community (Shamsie, 2017). In her interview to Bilal Mushtaq, she regards *The Crow Eaters* as the ever first novel on the Parsi community. She says that at first even the Parsis did not accept it because of her realistic depiction of incorrigible character of Faredoon Junglewalla (2005, p. 25-27). Similarly, Sidhwa's characterization of Putli (which means 'puppet' in Urdu) brings forth her concerns for the marginalised women in Pakistani society.

The predicament of Pakistani women, shackled to patriarchal traditions and male-oriented norms, and "treated as chattels" is daringly articulated in three of her novels: *The Bride* (also published as *The Pakistani Bride*), *Cracking India*, and *An American Brat* (Jussawalla, 2003, p. 261). Images of regional identities appear much affectionately in *The Bride* which depicts yet another marginalized community, the Kohistani tribe, which is split in the lands between Pakistan and Afghanistan. *The Bride* approaches another important theme of migration and displacement which is otherwise side-lined in the official state narrative of the country in the interests of the nationhood. Migration at the time of Partition, for instance, witnessed the worst kinds of brutality, atrocities, killing, mutilations, and rapes the human race would ever have come across in modern history. Sidhwa provides her keen insight into several displacements and movements, including the rural subalterns moving to the cities for labour. Both in her *The Bride* and *Water*, Sidhwa lashes out, though much vigorously in *Water*, at 'the social hypocrisy' of Pakistani society, particularly related to women folk (Shamsie, 2017). The issues of 'institutionalized prostitution', 'child bride/child widow' and women's plight and pains are consolidated in both *Ice Candy Man/Cracking India* and *Water* (Shamsie, 2017, pp. 202-207).

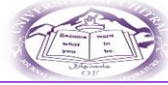
Hailing from Karachi and having grown up in Lahore, Sara Suleri belongs to a family which migrated from India. With *Meatless Days* (1989), she pioneered 'life writings' or what Shamsie calls 'creative memoir' in CPFE (2017, p. 243). The narrative art and creative subtleties of Sara Suleri, according to Ambreen Hai, repudiate "chronological or teleological sequence, eschewing the formal conventions of official national historiography" and thus pointing at the history of common and seemingly disregarded people (2003, p. 273). Muneeza Shamsie views *Meatless Days* as a memoir of a personal loss that gradually configures and entwines with national



and political tragedies; the personal is woven in nine autobiographical sketches and the political ranges from the independence to the ‘fall of Bhutto government and the imposition of a fanatical religious ethos by Zia’s dictatorial regime’ which transformed the liberal and secular face of Pakistan (2017, p. 244).

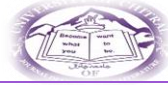
Meatless Days opens many windows on the enclosure of history in Pakistan. Sara brings several images of fragmented national- self before us and the pictures are vivid and candidly portrayed. Sara is preoccupied with ‘the questions of what gets concealed by the official historical discourse and by individual recollections of the past’ (Julietta Singh, quoted in Shamsie, 2017, p. 244). She entwines her households with the socio-political drama of the country. The images of women of her households appear in a unique domestic milieu that is different from the concept of women in the West. Suleri’s text is inundated with commonalities of life and certainties of living and she widens her fictional range from home to humanity. The commingling of her family memories to the bitter national memories aggrandizes the scope of her lively prose. It is what Shamsie sees in her text which is ‘played out against a quiet, disruptive undertone of violence and death, where the act of writing, of translating memories into words, become an act of defiance’ (2017, p. 248) Shamsie adds that the metaphor of translating memories is further ‘specifically’ addressed in her *Boys will be Boys* (2004) (2017, p. 248).

It is revealed from *Meatless Days* that Suleri’s father wanted to write an autobiography, with a title ‘Boys will be Boys’ which he could not write; later, after the death of her father in 2004, Suleri used this phrase as a title for her second creative memoir, *Boys will be Boys: A Daughter’s Elegy* (2014, p. 250). Sprinkling the events and memories of her father’s journalism, his projects, and his life, Suleri opens some covert episodes of our national tragi-comedy. Referring to Pakistan’s enthusiastic immersion in the politics of the Cold War in 1980s, Suleri, while accompanying her father Z. A. Suleri with General Zia during the latter’s visit to the US, recalls President Carter commenting on General Zia as ‘a very religious man’ (Shamsie Muneeza, 2017, p. 250). Suleri foregrounds Pakistan’s involvement in Afghanistan as a devoted ally of the US against the Soviet Union. This illegitimate involvement brought scores of evil to Pakistan including violence, sectarianism, terrorism, and proliferation of millions of refugees, drugs and guns into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (then NWFP), FATA, Baluchistan, and Karachi in particular and



the entire country in general. Alluding to the region's tolerant past when religion symbolised harmony, peace and respect for the other's opinion, Suleri highlights how Pakistan's deliberate engagement in the West's baked Afghan Jihad during General Zia's regime entwined the country in the quagmire of others' war and manufactured intolerant and retrogressive approach towards the region's conventional cultural diversity and religious variance. To Suleri, all this was done in the name of religion, Islamisation, Muslim identity, and 'godliness' (Shamsie, 2017, p. 250).

During the Cold War followed by Afghan Jihad, or more precisely, during the last two decades of the twentieth century, CPFE gradually received an international critical acclaim, focusing on the themes of wars, migration, minorities, and global political issues. A new breed of writers emerged, following the footprints of the pioneers of Pakistani fiction in English: like Zulfiqar Ghose, Bapsi Sidhwa, Tariq Ali, and Hanif Kureishi. Adam Zameenzad, Nadeem Aslam, Kamila Shamsie, Bina Shah and Jamil Ahmad belong to this young generation of CPFE. In 1993 Nadeem Aslam emerged on the literary scene with a political debut titled *Season of Rainbirds* (henceforth called *Season*). The novel is set against the background of political oppression of General Zia regime. Aslam approached a different reality that emphasizes political assertion and a strong temperament of dissent. Being son of a leftist socialist political worker, progressive poet and filmmaker Mian Muhammad Aslam, Nadeem Aslam imbibed progressive literary traits from home. Thanks to this socio-political zeal and different perception of reality, he explores 'the rise of religious extremism, bigotry, and marginalization of minorities.' Aslam establishes a debate between the liberal, humane, and tolerant values of Islam and the politically motivated Jihadi Muslim ideology (Shamsie, 2017, p. 360). In *Season*, Aslam looks at power violating people's fundamental rights and affecting the laity's lives. Delineating the contours of power in Zia's regime surging the politics of religious extremism, Aslam recounts the conflict between a tolerant and an extremist Islam depicted in the novel by two clerics: the traditional and old fashioned Maulana Hafeez and the power hungry, conflict monger, fire breathing politicized Maulana Dawood (Rasool & Khalis 2019, p. 69). Foregrounding the retrogressive nexus of the politicized clerics and landlords, Aslam spotlights the plights of Pakistan's laity. Commenting on Aslam's depiction of the oppressive regime of General Zia, Muneeza Shamsie writes; 'Aslam highlights the treatment of women and minorities by Zia ul Haq's regime and the manner in which Zia used

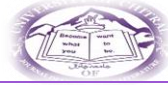


religious extremism as a lever of political oppression, in the name of piety, across Pakistan's glaring class divide (2017, p. 363).

Aslam's second novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) comes after a gap of almost a decade. Continuing with the themes of cruelty, injustice, bigotry, and ignorance, Aslam sets the novel in an imaginary English town *Dasht-e- Tanhaeii* (the dessert of loneliness), mapping the socio-cultural oppression faced by the weak and marginalized segments of the society. Aslam's third novel, *The Wasted Vigil* (henceforth called *Vigil*), published in 2008, was set in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In *Vigil*, Aslam looks at the aftermath of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the rise of Taliban, the post 9/11 scenario in the region, and War on Terror and the ensuing atrocities and oppression. Muneeza Shamsie claims that *Vigil* is 'the only Pakistani English novel to explore the chilling world view of a religious extremist and the manner in which 'terror cells' proliferate (2017, p. 370). Skilfully, opening the nexus between the warlords, religious extremists, and major players of the game of war in the region, *Vigil* highlights the plight of women unjustly identified with sin and temptation under the oppressive rule of the religious extremists.

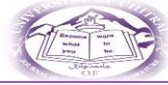
Aslam's fifth novel *The Golden Legend* continues highlighting predicaments of the educated middleclass protagonists oppressed and threatened by the religious fanatics and Pakistan's deep state. Set in a fictitious Pakistani city of "Zamana" (time), *Legend* recounts multiple layers of tragedies: accidental killing of an architect Massud by some American when the latter was being followed by the armed motorbike riders; the grief of Massud's widow Nargis who is forced by the state's security agencies not to demand a trial and to accept the American's offer of blood money; and the innocent killing of Grace, the Christian maid of Massud and Nargis by a fanatic; the murder of an upright judge who condemned Grace's killer; and the ensuing senseless violence, terror and trauma faced by Nargis and Grace's daughter Helen. Whereas "Nargis and Massud's home echoes their dream of a just multi-faith and multi-cultural society", the laity suffers due to the state's entanglement in the alien wars causing the growth of politicised religious extremism in Pakistan (Shamsie, 2020, p.667).

Like Nadeem Aslam, Kamila Shamsie also inherits certain very obvious literary sensibilities from her family. Born in Karachi in a family of writers, Shamsie weaves her fiction



in politics and place. Deeply preoccupied with Karachi, her fiction is caught in the web of socio-political issues faced by the country from the first partition in 1947 to the second partition in 1971 and the aftermaths of both. Her characters are mainly elites but her themes and motifs emphasis issues and concerns of Pakistan's margins. Debuting in 1998 with *In the City by the Sea* (henceforth called *Sea*), Kamila Shamsie recounts how Karachi, once called a city of light, has turned into a place triumphed by death and violence. The city that once used to home the homeless Pakistanis is now 'a place' where in the streets death prevails and air is heavy with blood and gunpowder (Shamsie, K. 2004, p. 38). Occupied with the notions war and displacement, Shamsie regards Zia's oppressive and disastrous regime, lethal to diversity and tolerance, keeping vigil on every subversive act and move of the socio-political groups of Pakistan's margin. In the novel, even an eleven-year-old Hasan knows why his uncle is under house arrest. Highlighting the country's political unrest, Shamsie relates how Zia's preoccupation with the monolithic concept of nationhood disregarded the country's regional socio-cultural and ethnic sensitivities. Contrary to the pre-Zia Karachi generally characterized as a mini Pakistan, Shamsie underlines the Karachi during Zia regime exemplifying the fragmented national-self splitting into ethnic communities and sects clashing against each other. In *Sea*, the city is divided by the politics of religion and politics solidified national identity. Extending the argument of the aforementioned split, Shamsie in her next novel *Salt and Saffron* (2000) looks at the miseries of Partition and the pain of broken and fragmented identities. Epitomizing the contest of identities in her *Kartography* (2002), Shamsie reimagines the ethnic conflicts that resulted in the second Partition in 1971. After that, in *Broken Verses* (2005), she brings a comprehensive survey of the class struggle during the regimes of Ayyub, Bhutto, Zia and Musharraf, recounting the long struggle of Pakistan's progressive intellectual minority against the state's oppression.

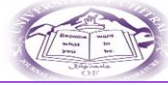
In her next novel, *A God in Every Stone* (2014), Shamsie brings images from Peshawar, a city on the margin, a city that has traditionally been considered a city of the others when the contours of mainstream Muslim nationalist narrative are shaped and foregrounded. Exploring the grandeur and splendour of Peshawar with deep historical and archaeological insight, Shamsie uses the city as a metaphor of resistance to and defiance of the oppressive regimes. She highlights the 1930 massacre of the Qissa Khani Bazar when the unarmed Red Shirts were brutally massacred



by the British forces. This event like another massacre of the Red Shirts at Babarha, Charsadda, in August 1948, has been not only marginalised but also silenced in the mainstream discourses of the state. Shamsie subverts the separatist Muslim narrative espoused by the Muslim League foregrounding the miseries of the Red Shirts who have traditionally been viewed as anti-centre.

Engaged with the malignant issues of Karachi like Shamsie, Bina Shah revolves around what Muneeza Shamsie calls ‘the tales of power and powerlessness’ (2017, p. 428). All her three novels are set in a multi-ethnic cosmopolitan Karachi. Her debut novel, *While They Dream in Blue* (2001), brings the workings of multi-ethnic conflict to the fore. Shah touches upon the class struggle and economic realities of the poverty-ridden city of Karachi. She continues to find her tales in the socio-cultural and multi-ethnic quagmire of Karachi in her second novel, *The 786 Cybercafe* (2004). The Islamic numerology of 786 for the most frequently uttered devotional prayer of initiation *Bismillah* (in the name of God) gives in words of Shah a ‘scientific and religious’ touch to the cybercafe (2004, p. 33). From degradation of the beggar boy of *While They Dream in Blue*, Bina Shah describes the burgeoning poverty of Karachi in her third novel *Slum Child* (2010). Here Shah also touches upon the plights of minorities in Pakistan (Shamsie, M. 2017, p. 430). Her last novel, *A Season for Martyrs* (2014), came after several editing of her earlier version which was published as an Italian translation in 2010. Shah steps into the rural Sindh. Here some very important events of Pakistani history like the execution of Pir of Pagaro by the British during the World War II, the execution of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in 1979, and the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in 2007 “are brought to life by small anecdotes and details” (Shamsie, M. 2017, p. 431).

Jamil Ahmad’s sole debut *The Wandering Falcon* (2011) is set in the margin of the tribal frontiers of Baluchistan and FATA. The story unfolds the plights of tribal Baluch and Pashtun communities. Jamil opens a usual insight into the closures of these Baluch and Pashtun tribes fragmented on the borders spread among Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. The description of the miserable tribes waves between the subtleties and sensitivities of Jamil’s narrative approach. Although the lands and spaces of Pashtun and Baluch regions appear inhospitable in the novel, the emotions and feelings of these tribes on the margins are delicately hospitable. Mapping the rugged landscape, Jamil uses a vivid imagery that leaves a lasting impact and that gives life to the



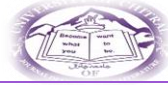
sufferings of the people. Jamil opens the story of ‘a wandering tribal falcon’ Tor Baz, which means ‘black falcon’ in Pashto. The very first sentence of the novel takes us into the region hardly ever mentioned in the mainstream narratives. ‘In the tangle of crumbling, weather-beaten and broken hills, where the borders of Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan meet, is a military outpost manned by about two score soldiers’ (2011, p. 1). The landscape is so deadly that it 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, 2011, p. 1). Jamil further moves on to the often neglected, disregarded, unvoiced, war-ruined Pashtuns and Baluch of the most neglected and barren region of Pakistan.

4. Conclusion

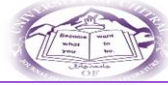
The aforementioned survey has attempted to underscore how CPFE has given expression to the muffled regional and marginalized voices. CPFE has thus maintained an alternative and subversive version of the socio-political realities of Pakistan offering a contrast to the mainstream Muslim nationalist narratives. It has been argued that whereas the centrist state imposes an ideology which foregrounds a political separatist shade of religion, CPFE brings into the limelight politics of region, language, and class. CPFE also brings to the fore the fragmented national self which frequently comes into conflict with the politics of region, language and class. Whereas the state’s monolithic and fossilized version of nationhood has overruled the socio-cultural continuity of the region, CPFE has emphasized the realities of region, language and class viewing them as more substantive components of the socio-cultural ethos of Pakistani society.

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