

The Empire Writing Back: Contemporary Pakistani Novel in English

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Abstract

The post-colonial nations through their writers are trying to forge and present their perspective to the world. In doing so they are using the language of their once colonial masters i.e. English, to produce literature which aims at portraying a variant and a distinct national viewpoint besides re-writing and re-imagining the history of their people and their nations. These 'others' previously did not have the liberty and privilege to speak but now when they do, they are not merely responding to the world audience including colonizers but are shouting and smashing. It is the Empire writing back. Today, the contemporary Pakistani English novel depicts no idealization or euphoria about the post-colonial world or the notions of patriotism but is a phase of self-realization. Novelists like Mohammed Hanif, a contemporary Pakistani writer, writing in English have given it a distinct Pakistani flavour and have moulded it to suit their purposes. In this context the aesthetics of Hanif's work are political and satirical.

Keywords: Postcolonial literature, Pakistani fiction, satire, Hanif, Zia ul Haq regime.

The starting point of critical evaluation is the consciousness of what one really is, and is knowing thyself as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. (Gramsci, 2010, p. 234) Frantz Fanon's work on African identity and the importance of national cultures recognizes and traces paths by which colonized intellectuals become involved in a series of responses and actions. These responses include cultural or armed resistance, and they move through three stages in their writing assimilation, uneasiness and outright rejection.

In his interpretation there are certain effects of these stages of writing. In the first stage works are produced which imitate or mimic European models, styles or genres thereby signifying a certain idealisation of these; the second phase involves personal, historical and cultural rediscovery, though often in a somewhat shallow and superficial way. While the third stage according to Fanon leads to the emergence of a 'literature of combat' which tends to be revolutionary and national. He talks about these three stages through which the writings of the intellectuals of colonized or post-colonial countries pass. It is witnessed that from the third stage described by Fanon these writings by the colonized and post colonials, today, have further entered into an advanced fourth stage; the critical evaluation of the liberty and freedom that was gained and sometimes wrested from the colonizer. This stage, where there is no idealization or euphoria about the post-colonial world or the notions of patriotism, is a phase of self-realization. These writers and intellectuals produce texts which put forward their perspective and their national stories.

This research paper focuses on a fictional text, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) by Mohammed Hanif, a contemporary Pakistani novelist writing in the English Language. The paper aims to highlight that Hanif, in his debut novel is re-writing and re-imagining an important part of the history of Pakistan. By doing so he is trying to exorcise its effects on the present of the country and attempting to heal invisible wounds on the personal and national consciousness of the people. The earlier colonized nations through their writers are trying to put forward their perspective to the world at large. In doing so they are borrowing a tool of their once masters and using it to create literary texts.

This tool is the English language which is providing them cultural, social, political and global dimensions. The postcolonial writers like Hanif are using English language as a means to liberate themselves. Hanif not only uses language as a strategy of liberation, but also as an ideological form that avoids historical crystallization. His work can also be viewed as an ideological strategy of liberation to help free his people and culture from the arbitrary strategies of *containment* which Fawzia Afzal Khan talks about in her book titled *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel* (1993). Hanif also employs various literary forms such as humour, the comic epic, satire and realism in his novel. His use of multiple genres aims also to reflect the state of confusion, chaos, alienation and mayhem that characterizes both post-colonial societies and its individuals

Contemporary Pakistani English novelists like Mohammed Hanif, in this context, are writing by re-visiting history and producing literary texts without the elation and the exaltation of the post-independence, post-colonial world. These writers writing in English language have given it a distinct Pakistani flavouring moulding it to suit their subjective purposes. Hanif's novel under discussion signifies his distinct use of language. The language Hanif uses in the novel is witty, crisp, pungent, peppery, acrid, sarcastic and lastly his own. He takes English; the language of his once masters and uses it to serve his own purpose. The opening lines of the first paragraph from the first chapter of *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) state:

There is something about these bloody squadron leaders that makes them think that if they lock you up in a cell, put their stinking mouth to your ear and shout something about your mother they can find all the answers. They are generally a sad lot, these leaders without any squadrons to lead... You can tell them from their belts, loose and low, straining under the weight of their paunches. (Hanif, 2008, p. 13)

The use of straight forward matter of fact tone highlights Hanif's subjective use of the language where lots of anger and sarcasm abound. Hanif's novel is an output of an input of more than sixty years of suffering at the hands of politicians, dictators and the bureaucracy. A lot of anger has been fed into the novel as Hanif himself acknowledged in an interview. The use of the words like *bloody* and *stinking* is a representation of the pent up anger that is being ventilated through the medium of language. So language here becomes a mask which hides the anger, while providing an outlet to it too. The postcolonial writers by donning the mask of English language are able to create texts which supply them with opportunities to ventilate their feelings and anger, to exercise their subjectivity and also to put forward their stories and narratives in front of the world audience. Hanif's language as a result is biting, satirical and bitter.

In his debut novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), Hanif makes an effort to encompass and re-write one of the darkest eras of the national history of Pakistan. The novel's narratives run alternatively on two levels. At one level of the narrative the personal story of Air Force Junior under Officer Ali Shigri advances where he tries to unravel a past i.e. suicide of his renowned father whom he thinks was murdered. Simultaneously, at the other level, the national plot moves with General Zia's regime as its nucleus, with very close and significant ties with the United States of America. The novel also highlights the aspect of neo-colonialism that has played a very important role in the post-independence Pakistan.

This novel is a contribution of the writer in terms of language usage and global history. He makes distinct use of a borrowed language to tell his story to the world audience. And apart from this he brings one of the most talked about and significant national pasts i.e. the Zia regime in Pakistan, to the fore front. The alternate narrative of *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) focuses on the national and a collective past, in contrast to the personal past of Ali Shigri. This national past in Hanif's novel portrays the last phase of General Zia's regime. The novelist has taken reality -the Zia era- and clothed it with his own insight and distinctly inventive style. The result of which is a narrative that is an amalgamation of reality and fiction with a heavy dose of black humour, surrealism and satire. The Zia reign in Pakistan has been remembered in many ways; a troubling time in a dictatorship, a radically Islamized era, the time of Soviet-Afghan War and the dawn of jihadism. All these are significant in one way or the other. Zia regime in the 1980s was a perturbing past for a third world country like Pakistan. It is a past which is highly significant, symbolic and far reaching in its effects on the present and future of a country in the process of decolonisation. This particular national past is revisited and re-imagined by Hanif in the novel and he presents a time with a wide range of variety. From the ISI headquarters to its interrogation centers, from the interior of General Zia's bedroom to the exterior of the Army House, from the US ambassador's residence in Islamabad to a church in Bahawalpur, the national past encompassed by the novelist covers a lot of geographical space in its expanse besides visiting various time frames.

Homi K. Bhabha in the introduction to *Nation and Narration* (1990) talks about ambivalence in the idea of a nation, he says, “what I want to emphasize ... is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 1). Bhabha further emphasizes the ambivalent nature of “the idea of the nation, (as) the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 1). He seeks to refine our understanding of the relation between the emergence of the nation and the role of narrative. He notes that the emergence of what he calls the political rationality of the nation can be depicted as a form of narrative—that is, through its use of textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub-texts and figurative stratagems—which leads to a more subtle understanding of the indeterminate nature of nation building that is always in formation rather than the rigid structures one encounters in traditional, authoritative sources.

Conceiving the nation in narrative terms, allows us to speak of it in a more tentative and less totalizing manner. It allows us to remember that the nation (or nation building) is always an un-finished, in-completed task. Structured in such a way, it remains ready always to absorb the varied and ambivalent cultural strands which, in the process, are always re-forming and re-formulating the nation. This is one reason why there can never be a fixed narrative of the nation. Hanif’s *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) is a novel centering on a significant past of a postcolonial country, Pakistan. Hanif re-imagines that significant past. In trying to narrate the nation, particularly in a postcolonial society, one needs to rely on creative texts. Hanif’s novel gives a glimpse of the time when a lot happened which has had far reaching influence on the country’s present and future.

The parallel narrative to that of Shigri is the national narrative with General Zia in the centre and the rest revolving around him. The prologue of the novel delineates the clip taken just before General Zia and his entourage board Pak One which later explodes midway. The very introduction of Zia’s character in the novel is very symbolic and significant. The prologue introduces him as a man whose, “... middle parting in his hair glints under the sun, his unnaturally white teeth flash, his moustache does its customary little dance for the camera” (Hanif, 2008, p. 1). The three most distinctive facial aspects of the General are caricatured for the readers. The introduction of a dictator, who in actuality ruled the country with an iron fist for eleven long years, is clearly humorous and comical. Later the addition of, “but as the camera pulls out you can tell that he is not smiling. If you watch closely you can probably tell that he is in some discomfort. He is walking the walk of a constipated man” (Hanif, 2008, p.1) is out rightly provocative. The novelist gives Zia's character an inventive tinge of humour thus making his satire digestible. The most striking thing, that one comes across while reading *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), is the character portrayal of the General.

The readers come face to face with the military dictator of Pakistan portrayed as a profoundly religious person who is trying hard -very hard- to locate his legacy through religion. Therefore, a lot of religious symbolism abides in the narrative concerning him. Hanif has heterogeneously amalgamated humour and religion to portray the character of General Zia for his readers. The outcome is amusingly creative yet it stems from the factual rooting. General Zia is portrayed as a man who seeks his legacy at all the wrong places. Hanif depicts him as a man with limited or mean understanding who is too sure of himself and his ways. This eventually leads to his undoing. The narrative is a collection of conspiracy theories to overthrow Zia’s reign. The novel outlines plenty of people who want the General dead. General Akhtar is one of them, and then there is Ali Shigri who wants revenge for his father’s murder.

There are also other conspirators like the mango eating crow, the curses of blind Zainab and the army of tapeworms in the general’s rectum. The rest are in the background running their conspiracies behind different screens. The CIA, the ISI, RAW to name the few. The novelist with a deftness of creativity leaves the ending open. It is for the readers to decide and decipher who achieves success in the end. It is a story that leaves the readers speechless and awestruck because of the shocking revelations it makes in a very skilful manner.

Another very significant aspect discussed in the novel is the role of ISI. The Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) with all its paraphernalia and infrastructure comes to life in the pages of the novel. It gained a lot of power and leverage during General Zia’s regime and whatever the nation is going through in the present is linked to a great degree to what happened then. Hanif very minutely and graphically portrays the spy agency for his readers. This seems a very fertile land for fiction but yet very few have dared to indulge in writing about it. Hanif also comes up with a definition of intelligence work in chapter 23 of the novel, “Intelligence work is a bit like ... sorting out the faces from their reflections. And then reflections of the reflections” (Hanif, 2008, p. 200). The role, activities and contribution of the agency during the Zia reign are highlighted in detail evoking the element of conspiracy in the narrative.

The agency is famed to “deal(s) with national security and spies” (Hanif, 2008, p. 22) and it is primarily a combination of stealthy furtive spies, state of the art equipment, safe houses, interrogation centres and unrestricted powers. Hanif portrays the chief of the agency with his unchecked and unbridled powers holding a firm sway over all things from the president in the Army House to all governmental matters. Although Zia is apparently the most powerful man of the country but the Chief of ISI is the one who knows all and controls all but behind a screen.

Another very important feature of the national past which Hanif highlights in the novel is neo-colonialism. The novel is a political satire involving the dynamics of America’s imperialism evident in Pakistan during the Zia era. The fate of Pakistan has been somehow decided by the neo-colonialists in the US either directly or indirectly since its inception in 1947. The Zia reign in Pakistan was a key time in this regard and the US became more directly involved in the politics and strategic affairs of the country. The presence of CIA and its officials, and American bureaucracy widely involved in the governmental matters of Pakistan in the 1980s was the dawn of America’s firm footing in and on the geopolitical and national matters of the state of Pakistan. Hanif in the novel talks about the time period when the US had successfully penetrated the executive of the country through its so called powerful establishment. All this was carried out under the camouflage of the Soviet Afghan war.

Edward Said very aptly signifies the role of the postcolonial writers and their work in the postcolonial context in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1994). By writing his novel in English, Hanif has brought this very important national past to the fore front both on national as well as international levels. He wants to make it clear that the disjointed, patched up, episodic narrative of his debut novel can only be a true representation of a society which has been ripped apart firstly by colonialism and then patched up haphazardly living the de-colonization process. The writers in such a society generally reflect the effects of all this ripping apart and then haphazard patching up on their works. National, personal and political history and consciousness is reflected through the use of language, choice of words and the expression in their writings. Every word has layers of meaning and hidden tales.

Fictional forms, such as *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), also allow people to imagine their national past in different ways and thereby participate in the understanding of their nation’s past which has had very dire impacts on its present. In this regard language plays a very significant role. The logical incoherence, which traumatizes the lives of many third world countries today, is reflected through the use of language and the episodic fragmentary narrative of the novel.

Hanif, through the dual narrative of his novel, tries to re-live a national as well as a personal past to exorcise its haunting influence and to give meaning to a discordant present so that it positively affects the future. The novel, layer after layer unravels one of the subcontinent’s enduring mysteries and out if it spins a tale rich, colourful, and utterly provocative. Through both pasts, one individual and the other collective, the novel aims at finding new perspectives and prospects for the present and the future.

Said in *Orientalism* (1979) argues that Orientalism stands forth and away from the Orient. He further delineates that orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, “there” in discourse about it (Said, 1979, p.22). Ali Shigri is that *Orient* who is in the discourse without any reference to Western thought, and unsettles the orientalist dynamics of knowledge and power. His knowledge of the past which has furnished him with power has given him the subjectivity which has been denied to him, whether he uses that power for good or bad is another debate.

The story of Under Officer Ali Shigri is very integral to the plot of the novel. The whole action of the novel revolves around the tragic and mysterious death of his legendry father, Colonel Quli Shigri. Ali Shigri revisits this tragic personal past of his life through the narrative of the novel in order to exorcise its effects and to reshape his present and future. His private life is a web against which the whole plot of the novel is set.

At different levels of the narrative, past assumes various shapes and meaning for Shigri. By examining and exploring multifarious layers of his life and its experiences, the role of the past and its significance change perpetually. His father’s sudden demise which is made up to look like a suicide is the past where all his sensitivity converges. This incident also triggers a new spirit of revenge within the protagonist. The novel’s narrative focuses on Shigri’s present but this present is linked very closely and tightly to his past. The past hovers in the background and so, Shigri although living in the present is fixated by a very significant past which is the murder of his reputable father. In order to live a life full of opportunities and possibilities Shigri feels a dire need to exorcise the traumatic effects of his past.

This past assumes demonic stature in his life and revenge is the ritual through which he tries to cast out the demon that seems to be playing havoc with his emotions and psyche. At the macrocosm level the same revisiting of the past occurs but in Mohammed Hanif's case it is a national past which he revisits because this past is also a reason of torment and trauma in the collective historical consciousness of his nation.

Ali Shigri's character as developed by Hanif is very symbolically significant. His capability to out maneuver his opponents can also be reflective of the way Hanif sees the previously colonized people breaking free of the hegemonic *strategies of containment* and forging their own lives with the help of their own understanding. Stretching the yardstick further Shigri at another level also symbolizes the writers, novelists and poets of the earlier colonized nations like Pakistan, who revisit past and history to spin out of them clearer, wider and deeper understanding of what is and what will be, on both personal and national levels. Moreover history as a complex order of events, temporalities, and meanings cannot be reduced to one single vision. Mohammed Hanif himself can be looked on as a Shigri who revisits a past (national and collective past) to help deal effectively with post-colonial and post-independence trauma for both himself and his people. Hanif's intention is to understand, control, manipulate, and even to incorporate, what is manifestly different.

Conclusion

Language is a medium for the projection and representation of ideas and the contemporary Pakistani novelists such as Hanif are using English language to create fictional texts with a Pakistani perspective. *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) is a gripping re-telling and re-imagining of a national history of Pakistan i.e. the Zia era with all its conspiracies, incidents and co-incidences. Hanif re-visits this national past through the perspective of a common man, Ali Shigri, to exorcise, understand, highlight and signify its effects in the present. His knowledge of the past which has furnished him with power has given him the subjectivity which was denied to him, but which he now exercises. The result is a subaltern text in the form of *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), where the orient gets a chance to re-write history using his subjective English from his viewpoint, and not from that of the occident or the elite bourgeoisie which had seized all channels of expression previously.

The novel brings the tumultuous Zia era to the forefront which in the history of Pakistan is remembered often as a troublesome one. Hanif by using his talent of storytelling and inventiveness brings it to the scores of readers who are delighted and perhaps awed by its scope. The narrative features a dual narrative; one is the first person narrative of Ali Shigri, a raw, rakish junior under officer who sets out to avenge the murder of his father. The other is the omniscient narration of General Zia's military dictatorship in its last phase. Towards the last chapters of the novel, the two strands of the narrative conjoin in a single ending. It is a variant history and a variant past which is trying to determine the influence of it on the present, besides giving some dignity and hope to the people of Pakistan.

The national history that Hanif re-creates is a radically Islamized era where Zia is trying very hard to locate his legacy at all the wrong places. The involvement of the USA in the political, economic and internal matters of Pakistan highlights the relatively newer face of imperialism i.e. neo-colonialism in its most pervasive and potent aspects.

Novelists like Hanif are reaching out to a large audience at the global level through the lingua franca, English. This is their way of creating space and claiming recognition as intellectuals, writers and nationals.

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