

# Pakistani English Literature in Multicultural Context

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**ABSTRACT:** *Colonial discourse was based on binary opposition of “we” and “other” in which the “other” was recognized as a fixed, generalized image of the colonized. Postcolonial methodology represented a new look which aimed to show the political importance of culture in the formation and reflection of the above mentioned imperialist ideology and opposed the durability of it. By this way, as a part of culture literature has been viewed not only as aesthetic art but as one of the most effective medium to convey socio-political ideology. However, multiculturalism offers more liberal approach, free from mutual accusation, which is based on the recognition of cultural diversity. This is the only way to put an end to violence stemming from indignation of cultural differences for political ambitions. Pakistani English Literature sets an example of a multicultural milieu which reflects not only the possibility of living side by side in spite of our cultural multiplicity but also the possibility of acquiring a hybrid identity, which gives a unique chance to live beyond borders and develop our personality reflecting diversity of cultural heritage.*

**Keywords:** imperialism, colonialism, recognition, cultural diversity, multiculturalism, ideology, Pakistani English literature, Diaspora, identity.

## Introduction

Multiculturalism, as social philosophy, has emerged from the need to reconcile cultural value systems. Literature, as a form of culture, has a unique feature to be interpreted from different points of view and create a sense of living through diverse life experiences without been directly involved in the discussed issues. Multiculturalism finds its reflection in the ideological aspect, thematic features, and stylistic elements of literary composition. This study aims to discuss this opinion through the analysis of Pakistani English Literature.

The main theme in Pakistani English Literature is closely linked with an experience of immigration which is not simply geographical displacement but a displacement of culture, history and ideas and causes deep psychological crises and internal, moral conflict. This painful experience finds its brilliant depiction in the works of Nadim Aslam, Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie. They discuss the moral dilemma stemming from confusion between nativity and alienation that exists not only in society but also at home, between generations. At the same time, they represent the possibility of living as a cultural hybrid, thinking beyond migration concept.

We can observe a continuous development of novel as leading form in Pakistani English Literature. It is not accidental. When Georg Lukacs writes about a novel as an artistic form he notes that, the novel is “[...] the representative art-form of our age: because the structural categories of the novel constitutively coincide with the world as it is today” (93). He explains it with the idea that novel, more than any other form, has power to express an experience of “transcendental homelessness”. We may say that Pakistani English novel conveys this idea closely linked to immigration and displacement which in its turn is the reality of the world today.

On the other hand, novel is a developing form. Novel has heteroglot nature and symbolism. The chronotope in novel has a universal character. It enables the writers like Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie employ new innovative narration styles and structures leaving the discussed issues open to the readers. By this way, time and space specificity is replaced by a universal chronotope. In Pakistani English literature, chronotope is created in the environment where the narration takes place and in the characters’ inner world. The conflict between these

two is the main cause behind the emotional, psychological dilemma that causes identity crises. In this way, we observe confusion of abstract and concrete chronotope that results in dialogic chronotope where the author becomes at the same time both an outsider and an active participant of this process.

### **Literature as a medium of ideology**

Historical changes and political ideology have always affected the interpretation of reality through culture. That is why exclusively innocent literature does not exist because it cannot remain immune to political ambitions.

Charles Taylor starts the *Politics of Recognition* with these words: “Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.”(1). When we look at the imperialist, colonial and postcolonial discourse expressed through the literature of the time, we can easily observe that the main idea behind socio-political ideology is representation of difference. In this regard, literature plays a role of mirror which shows the ideological policy and its reflection on a particular society. For instance, we cannot but agree that, literature played a significant role in formulating stereotyped images by the help of which in colonial world, as a second part of the dualism “we” and “they”, the black turned into the symbol of ugliness and evil, the eastern became a type of irrational, deprived and immature creatures and Islam acquired an image of terrorism. Today, the English language has become a global language and when we speak about literature in English we no longer mean standard native born English writers, we mean to consider a substantial body of work created by the writers who put exclusive Englishness under question creating “cultural topography” (Said Edward 39-52) based on positions and feelings. But, in order to understand a particular work from this “topography” only the knowledge of the language is not sufficient, one needs a close familiarity with the environment in which these works are created. This is that exclusive feature which stands against Western universalism and proves the existence of cultural background as an inseparable part of identity, which definitely finds its reflection without depending on the language employed as a medium to express ideas. These writers also prove that

literature as an art of dialogue has a special place in understanding wide range of cross-cultural communication. It can be easily observed in the description of the “heart of black continent” by Conrad and by Achebe or in the description of historical events at the time of partition by Khushwant Singh and by Bapsi Sidhwa. Very often this literature has been analyzed from the canonical point of view that views things only one sided- as answers to colonial discourse. For example, Hellen Tiffin, referring to Spvak claims that, “ Just as Jean Rhys writes back to Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargossa Sea*, so Samuel Selvon in *Moses Ascending* and J.M.Coetzee in *Foe* (and indeed throughout his works) writes back to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* ” (Ashcroft Bill et al. 98). She sees these texts as answers to whole form of colonial ideology. But, we think this approach limits literature in a type of enclosure which is closed in never ending dualism of “we” and ”they”, which proves that this binary opposition is repeated now in opposite direction. Multicultural approach to this issue, however, displays that this is simply a different perspective on the same events, artistic dialogue between variety of cultural environments feeding from the political ideologies who share the same history and experience and in this way we can regard this literature not as a battlefield but as a medium which is able to express variety of views regarding common historical experience. By this way, literature which was used by imperial policy to create fixed, stereotyped ideas, especially in the English language, due to its global reach, can be seen as one of the most appropriate means to create liberal, democratic environment in multicultural societies. Pakistani English literature stands as a living example of this pioneering a new ideology based on the values of multiculturalism.

### **Pakistani English Literature as a multicultural milieu.**

When we look at Pakistani English literature developed by the writers living within geographical borders of Pakistan and by Pakistani Diaspora writers we observe a multicultural milieu not only due to the fact that the writers represent different cultural background or because there is no other way of reflecting pluralist society like in Pakistan, but because in their works these writers reach beyond ethno linguistic, historical, religious, geographical confines.

We observe that the dilemma of identity is the main problem in society today. Generally speaking, the concept of belonging has a special historical importance for Pakistan as for this country this notion has been

defined through the struggle for independence. Cara N. Cilano writes, “[...] idea, nation and state. In the Pakistani context these three terms interrelate; the boundaries between them blur” (Cilano 2). Cilano grounds this thought on the “two nations” theory, which guarded the idea of independent Muslim state in the subcontinent. This was the idea which led the Muslim community from community to nation and finally to the formation of a country defining its political national identity.

The notion of nationhood stems from an idea and as we have mentioned, in the case of Pakistani nationhood this idea was born in the process of struggle for an independent country. As a cultural process literature has been an integral part of this struggle. Asma Mansoor draws our attention to the fact that Muslims had been the rulers of the sub-continent before the consolidation of the British rule in India, after colonization they were naturally eyed with suspicion and disfavor. She goes on saying that, in order to dilute this scepticism and distrust that was visible in the hearts and minds of the British, “the Muslim writers had to adjust and modify their styles of writing to carve a niche within the newly established system” (Mansoor 15). Munezza Shamsie also mentions that, the concept behind Pakistani identity is “transgeographical and began as a discourse, in response to the Muslim demand for political rights in an undivided India” (Shamsie xv). Hence, we may say that Pakistani English literature stemmed from the Muslims’ need for self-assertion and acted as a medium through which national belonging found reflection. But, we have to take into account that Islamic philosophy did not serve to enclose the literature in limited mythical outlook, it rather presented wider ideological base than that of colonialism, free of space and time which was largely discussed in Muhammad Iqbal’s works. He regards Islam as a cultural movement and notes that rejecting the old static view of the universe Islam presents a dynamic view. He notes that, it rejects blood-relationship as a basis of human unity, because, blood-relationship is earth-rootedness. Thus, “Such a perception is creative of fresh loyalties without any ceremonial to keep them alive, and makes it possible for man to emancipate himself from the earth” (Iqbal 63). So, Pakistani English Literature may have formed as a form of self-assertion of national belonging strongly related to religious belonging, but this does not hold it limited in theme and form.

Iqbal’s ideas also present new approach towards identity noting that it can comprise several elements, rather than be based on blood relationship or land of birth. This helps to investigate another problem

that has often been discussed while talking about Pakistani identity, especially identity problem aimed at Pakistani expatriate and diaspora writers - the discussion around national belonging without taking into consideration that belonging is also composed of cultural identity which does not necessarily coincide with political national identity shown on identity card. From this point of view, Pakistani English fiction provides an interesting angle to this discussion. For example, Zulfikar Ghose's creative work requires a careful consideration. It reveals a fact that, "[...] the critical culture, at least in certain quarters, is still more tribal and ethnographic than national- cosmopolitan- and is not sufficiently well equipped to deal with more sensitive issues of expatriation and exile" (Hashimi 269). Thus, his creative world should be regarded as a milieu where various cultural values blend, producing a complex cultural belonging rather than being reviewed as a reflection of problematic national belonging. These values find their depiction throughout Pakistani English literature, in Ahmad Ali as mixture of Eastern and Western cultural influences, in Suhrawardy as English- Persian –Bengal experience, in Bapsi Sidhwa as perfect combination of the Panjabi-urdu-gujrati-english languages and in Mohsin Hamid as an interesting Pakistan-American worldview. When Alamgir Hashimi says, "The matter should thus make one raise questions not only about a Pakistani idiom in English, but also about "Pakistaniness", what constitutes this, that and the other? And who may best exemplify these? " (Hashimi 269). He tries to clarify the point we are discussing, what can be taken as a decisive aspect of belonging or identity?

Frantz Fanon writes, "For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity" (Fanon 44). It is a fact that, the land may be regarded as a primary designation of identity and that is why Zulfikar Ghose in *The Murder of Aziz Khan*, Nadim Aslam in *The Season of the Rainbird* or Moni Mohsin in *The End of Innocence* describe it from this perspective. But, what happens if one day one starts feeling as an alien on the land of his birth, as we observe in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Ice –Candy Man*? What determines one's national identity when he becomes a stranger in the consequence of social political circumstances? That is the main source of the feeling of alienation we often observe in postcolonial literature. Thus, if the detachment from the land deprives an identity of fulcrum we are left to search for an alternative definition of belonging. That is why, in contemporary Pakistani English literature, for example in Mohsin Hamid's and Kamila

Shamsie's characters, who if we consider belonging as a category determined by land of birth, despite living on the land they belong to, face identity crises resulting from assumed differences between social classes and cultural values and display the idea that identity cannot be determined by one factor but is composed of various aspects and is in constant formation process. We may as well say that, the way we are approached by others influence the formation of our sense of belonging. From philosophical point of view it is in fact, the attitude of the surrounding that adds meaning to geographical location and defines it as a modifier of national belonging. Namely, this elaborate or instinctive attitude of others intensifies the main character of Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* Chengiz's inner conflict which arises from binary cultural values and forms his feeling of cultural belonging. By depicting experience of cultural hybrid, practice bearing no difficulty for the author himself, Mohsin Hamid displays a new approach to the notion of belonging as a relative concept, as the only multicultural solution to the problem. If the society fails to develop such an understanding of the discussed idea, it will have to face agitated identity crises in individuals, "[...]without an anchor, without a horizon, colorless, stateless, rootless" (Fanon 218) or problems like extreme nationalism and fanaticism stemming from past, imagination and myths, as the world has once gone through at the result of colonial ideology based upon the ideology feeding on national discrimination and generalization, and experience the same human trauma once again. This is the type of belonging which has undergone a formation process described by Frantz Fanon as, "[...] the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense of which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self" (Fanon 109).

Kamila Shamsie also displays very interesting point of view through her character Hiroko regarding the notion of belonging not as contradictory as it has usually been viewed. The way we appreciate this approach, see the complex nature of comprehending local and global belonging without regarding them as opposite poles leads the characters to find their place in the world or on the contrary, in case they fail to achieve this approach they are left to suffer in fanaticism, extremism and psychological crises. Identity crises Chengiz suffers from is regarded from a new angle by Kamila Shamsie in her novel *Burnt Shadow* character Hiroko Tanaka. The author takes Hiroko through nuclear bombing in Nagasaki to war in Indian Subcontinent, to Pakistani city of Karachi that is in turmoil due to

the war in Afghanistan and finally to New York where the 9/11 terror attack is experienced. In this way she depicts how violence causes the same pain on human personality, how the events seen as unrelated gets interrelated through their effect on personalities belonging to different nations and the notion of belonging loses its primary importance in the struggle of survival. Hiroko displays the relative nature of such categories like national belonging and that makes it possible for her to live through all the traumas in her life, the only way to survive which could not be achieved by Chengiz in Mohsin Hamid's novel.

Here we observe that the land is no longer regarded as a determiner of national identity, but global belonging or hybrid identity stemming from various cultural heritage and influences come into focus. It can be taken as the most apt answer to identity crises discussed in postcolonial methodology. Considering this, we may say that, the phase of turning back to history in search of roots or regarding geographical location as defining factor of belonging is already over, contemporary Pakistani English literature depicts the complex formation process of national belonging and identity where past, including colonial experience, present and potential future find reflection, displays the writers' attitude and using unique opportunity provided by literary techniques invites the reader to take part in narration and consider individual approach to the matter.

Pakistani English literature clearly displays that cultural diversity in society cannot be regarded as a cause of contradictions unless they are used for political purpose. The society composed of diverse cultural heritage may face violence only as a result of deliberate or inappropriate political ambitions. Ahmad Ali in *Twilight in Delhi*, Bapsi Sidhwa in *Cracking India*, Sorayya Khan in *Noor*, and Nadim Aslam in *Season of the Rainbirds* express this point using realistic style while Mohsin Hamid chooses allegory to convey a similar idea. His novel *Moth Smoke* starts with an interesting prologue which states that the sufi saint's predictions prove right and, "Imprisoned in his fort at Agra, staring at the Taj he had built, an aged Shah Jahan received as a gift from his youngest son the head of his eldest. Perhaps he doubted, then, the memory that his boys had once played together, far from his supervision and years ago, in Lahore. ..When the uncertain future becomes the past, the past in turn becomes uncertain" (Hamid 5). The novel ends with such an epilogue, "Emperor Aurangzeb dictated a final letter to his favorite daughter. "I reflect now on my life with sadness," he wrote. "Tell my sons not to fight



as we did. To teach I will leave a portion of my lands, so he needs not make war on his brothers.” .But merciless Aurangzeb, who faced an elephant without fear as a child and ruled his empire as a land of one belief, failed at the task of fathering sons unlike himself. ...Fission of empire, a new fusion, then fission again as children parted ways.” (Hamid 246). By naming his heroes after Moghol princes who had become enemy to each other (Ozi-Aurangzeb and Daru-Dara Shikoh) and by setting the story of Lahore in 1990 at the background of Moghol history the author tries to attract the readers’ attention to the shared history of two nuclear powered countries of the Subcontinent, by this way, inviting us to see the underlying political causes behind ethnic, religious, ideological misunderstanding and conflicts. We can easily see how these conflicts cause violence as depicted in *Ice-Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa. While reading the novel the reader not only travels through multicultural society of pre-partition and newly formed Pakistan, but also gets a chance to view how easily pluralist society can change into ethnic battleground due to political games which are often manipulated by foreign powers. The novel is a story of trauma in which violence finds its vivid depiction. However, the choice of nine years old Polio affected child as a narrator gives the writer an opportunity to ease the heavy tone and readers’ attention does not linger on those scenes thanks to the innocent child’s narration in which she often confuses literal and metaphorical meaning of things which on its term helps the reader explore absurdity in human actions. Multiculturalism finds its reflection in literature by the chosen agency. Bapsi Sidhwa’s characters in this regard, usually come from different cultural background, she also tries to explore women’s position in multicultural societies where they face double pressure, who are regarded not as part of events but as symbols on which violence is acted and her position as a multicultural writer enables her to explore these issues from a neutral and more objective point of view. Unfortunately we do not easily learn from history, as we can see how the violence of 1947 was repeated in 1971 as Sorayya Khan tries to remind in her novel *Noor*. By depicting the past, these writers do not try to remind us who must be blamed for the misfortunes inflicted on societies in history, we should regard them as a call to stop regarding each other as symbols reflecting diversity of believe systems rather than humans in order not to give way to outrage that one generation witnessed, the following forgot, failed to control and repeatedly lived throughout history. Development of a society in harmony passes not from forgetting but remembering and forgiving. Literature gives us this unique chance to review the past. By visualizing

events and seeing the results, literature can serve to create ideology which enables empiric understanding of cultural diversity and help to choose appropriate policy to keep balance in a multicultural society.

As a multicultural milieu, Pakistani English literature develops by Pakistani Diaspora writers living beyond geographical borders of this country. When we talk about Diaspora literature the main questions we face are related to national identity and the difference between immigrant and Diaspora literature. Personality is formed by political geographical factor which is reflected in official national identity. Our cultural heritage which cannot depend on our geographical position comprises our cultural identity which may and may not find its reflection on our official identity. People who immigrated from Pakistan to other countries changed their geographical positions and in this way changed their national identity, but their cultural identity remained unaltered and continued to develop under the new condition. The new generation did not immigrate, but were born in immigration, so acquired a kind of hybrid identity under the cultural environment of the family and the country in which they were born, but were still considered foreigners due to their cultural identity, thus they dwell in a position between the local and global, between two different cultural heritages which give them unique opportunity to observe both sides with equal familiarity. That is why it is more appropriate to call them Diaspora rather than immigrants. This feature enables the writers like Nadeem Aslam, Sorayya Khan, Sehba Sarwar and others to find a meeting point between past, nostalgia and present, between abstract vision of homeland and land of their birth or the society they are a part of. Through their personality and works we see how personality can develop comprising diverse cultural heritage, first experiencing inner conflict, identity crises to find a true self, true identity and finally learn to find a balance and achieve inner peace, live comfortably as a multicultural personality.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I tried to examine Pakistani English Literature from the perspective of multiculturalism. Basic value system of multiculturalism is based on the recognition of deference.

In Pakistani English Literature this idea is expressed through depicting two themes- racial/gender equality and assimilation of immigrants; in the ideological aspect representing a unique possibility of living as a

culturural hybrid; in stylistic elements employing innovative methods, symbolism and dialogic chronotope. By this way, literature acquires heteroglot, polyphonic features and Pakistani English Literature acquires transgeographical reach and universal character.

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