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RESEARCH PAPER

Resisting Paranoid Doctrines and Logic of Violence: A Saidian Literary Humanist Perspective on Selected South Asian Short Fictional Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies how the selected South Asian short fictional narratives thematize the humanist dimensions by repudiating the brutal logic of violence perpetuated through paranoid patriotism and insular exclusivism. Situating the critique at the theoretical pivot of Edward Said's argument for indispensability of the humanist endeavours in the wake of all-pervasive belligerency the world over, as presented in one of his later works *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), the study approaches two of the tragic narratives taken from Zaman and Farrukhi's anthology *Fault Lines* (2008): Masood Mufti's "Sleep" and Mohan Kalpana's "Traitor". Both of the selected stories are marked by the strains of "circumstantiality" and "historical contingency" with a focus on portrayal of the instances of ferocity resulting from the spurious sloganeering and predisposition to nationalist prejudice. Through a thorough textual analysis of the primary sources, guided by the theoretical framework, representations of the peculiar exploitative pattern of violence and unwarranted deeds of the perpetrators have been discussed. Thus, the critique shows that the selected South Asian short stories deprecatingly represent exclusivist nationalism and the consequent violence to proffer a humanist vision and plead for co-existence.

| **KEYWORDS** | Humanism, Nationalism, Saidian Perspective, South Asian Fiction, Violence |

Introduction

Representation of prevalent sociopolitical practices of the present, and also of the contemporary perceptions of the past, has always been a central feature of the literary discourses. Literary texts are located in the society where they are being produced and consumed. Therefore, they develop a reciprocal relation with the social realities— on the one hand, they are shaped by the social and contextual factors, but on the other hand they contribute to shape these circumstantial dynamics. Said has described this complex relation of a text with the material world as "worldliness of a text" (1983, p. 37) and "historical contingency" (1983, p. 39). Consequently, the literary texts become an active part of the social interactions and contribute in many different ways to the cultural conditions.

The study takes the short fictional works as the primary sources from the anthology *Fault Lines* (2008) edited by Zaman and Farrukhi. The anthology is an encompassing collection of the narrative charged with political discourses and social debates vis-à-vis the significant events of 1971 in the context of Indo-Pak War and the resultant secession of the East Pakistan. It covers various representational perspectives to create a comprehensive collection of the fictional works. The works by Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, and South Asian diasporic writers have been included by the editors to bring neutrality and inclusivity to the anthology. In this way, it stands as a unique work to approach the

politically problematic and socially charged issues revolving around the theme of 1971. The work has also won wide acclaim across the boarders due to its inclusive nature.

As short story is a "powerful art form" (Shaw, 2014, p. 10), it has the capacity to gain in intensity what it loses in length. Therefore, from this rich repository of the short stories, the present study takes two works: Masood Mufti's "Sleep" and Mohan Kalpana's "Traitor". Masood Mufti is a "widely read" (Zaman and Farrukhi, p. 333) short story writer from Pakistan. His writings particularly revolve around the 1971 theme as he himself remained a prisoner of war for a couple of years. His "Sleep" is a narrative depicting the tragic death of an innocent West Pakistani in Bengal during the turmoil of 1971. In the story, the death of an innocent citizen stands as a synecdoche for the colossal collective loss. The other short story writer, Mohan Kalpana, is a "Sindhi fiction writer" who "grew up in Karachi but after 1947 [he] had to migrate to India" (Zaman and Farrukhi, p. 331). His "Traitor" fictionalizes a Muslim character who becomes victim of a misunderstanding and gets his life ruined.

Focusing these two fictional narratives, "Sleep" and "Traitor", the study aims to develop an argument about the ferocious nature of parochial politics culminating in the nationalistic hatred that costs the lives of innocent humans for trivial matters. It has been attempted to unpack the textual passages to come up with a rigorous interpretation informed by the relevant theoretical postulates. Thus, the humanist perspectives present in these narratives have been highlighted to emphasize the significance of tolerance, co-existence, and pacifism in the contemporary times of precariousness and confrontations.

Literature Review

Iqbal (2017) attempts to complicate Robert Young's theorizations of postcoloniality through exploration of the nationalist clashes in the South Asian context from the perspective of the theoretical insights apropos of the questions of politicality and identity. As regards primary source for his inferences and interpretations, he relies on Zaman and Farrukhi's *Fault Lines* (2008). While drawing the comparison, Iqbal shows his skepticism especially of the Bangladeshi narratives by stating that aims "to look beyond the nationalistic propaganda literature from Bangladesh" (p. 101). Hence, the study presents an intriguing discourse regarding the chequered textual trajectories on the combative narratives.

Worthen (2020) works at the interface of literary and liberal art forms to negotiate the nuances of the humanist discourse. The book comprehensively covers the theoretical engagements with the relevant issues through history, ranging from the classical Aristotelian notions to those offered by the modernist minds like Julian Huxley. She has perceptively created the relation between the historicity of the humanist visions and their extension to the contemporary art and society. The thrust of her argument is to expose the inherent "political stakes" (p. 1) by studying how the humanist ideologies inform the theatrical performances.

Davies (2021) suggests paying heed to the dire need of creating a humanist version of postcolonial studies in the wake of the contemporary challenges. Postcolonial literatures coming from around the world are creating a new but complex variety of world-literature. However, as world-literature, he contends, is more "social scientific" (p. 113) in its tenor and project, there is an urgent need to humanize it to relieve it from the clutch of the capitalist discourses facilitating consumerist practices. This plea for revival of the humanities with the help of postcolonial studies seems a seminal idea.

Elmeaza and Baroud (2019) locate canonicity of Edward Said within the discourse revolving around social justice and humanism. By explicating the Saidian argument regarding humanist praxis, they try to explain the duality of the issue — on the one hand, humanism runs as a discourse to be elaborated by academicians, but on the other hand, it remains present around as a social practice attracting the masses and institutions equally. Thus, the article thoroughly deals with both discursivity and politicality of the humanist vision. Consequently, they vociferously portray Said as an intellectual "determined to speak truth to power" (p. 54).

Murmu and Pandey's (2022) is one of the latest studies on the perplexing eco-critical dimensions present in the South Asian literary writings. It covers a wide variety of relevant debates to accomplish the argument: "ecocide" (p. 60), "biopolitics" (p. 133), "apocalypse" (p. 176), "capitalist modernity" (p. 196) and so on. Precisely, the study invokes the perspective with references to the environmental issues and the resulting human crises to reflect the ecological consciousness present in the texts coming from the former colonies.

Danish and Ahmed (2023) have developed a new historicist argument by juxtaposing the fictions of 1971 War coming from Pakistan and Bangladesh. The focus of the study is on exposing the "split" and "disparity" (p. 504) found in the perceptions of the event and, also, in representations of the details of the event. The article posits that all these narratives are politically motivated partisan narratives that fabricate in the name of representation. The argument is helpful for grasping confounding multiplicity of the renderings of the historical details.

Ahn (2023) has developed a theoretical critique of the polemical dialogue between humanist and post-humanist visions. However, her position aligns more with the humanist rhetoric about the conceptual complexities. By taking side with the Marxist humanism, she tries to emphasize the agentive role of humans in continuity of history. Moreover, she explicitly posits her anthropocentric argument to counter the post-humanist tendency to undermine the humans on the ground of their "ontological vulnerability" (p. 63).

The review of the existing scholarship regarding the relevant categories locates the study within the discourses of nationalism, humanism, fictional representation, South Asian fiction, and Edward Said's contribution to the critical thought. Accordingly, it facilitates development of a rigorous argument by creating a link between the approach of this study within the broader discourses.

Material and Methods

Theoretical Framework

The study capitalizes on Edward Said's negotiations of the interrelation between "humanism and critical practice" (2004, p. 3). Therefore, his work *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004) has been taken as the theoretical model to frame the conceptual approach of the study systematically. This work is a critique of the contemporary "world [that] has become far more integrated and demographically mixed than ever before" (2004, p. 24). Here, said has emphasized that all the intellectuals working in the humanities should realize significance of the moral demands of their domain and start actively advocating for creation of the humanist consciousness across the globe for sustainability of life.

In the work, Said has severely criticized the "negative models" that have threatened "the mutuality of cultural pluralism" (2004, p. 50). He has identified some of the essential factors that are contributing to the kind of sociocultural negativity that has proven eroding for the global community. Nationalism and exclusivism are two of the prominent these "paranoid doctrine" (2004, p. 50) that have caused harm to the humanist ideals in the society. His informed and inform critique of the causes, dynamics, and consequences of these negative collectives serves as a timely call for the remedial steps for eradication of the monstrous social evils threating the international community.

Thus, Said speaks for the "overwhelmingly evident" (2004, p. 121) role of the writers for nurturing the public opinion with reference to the humanist consciousness that, in turn, helps to create harmony on the global level. He persuades the intellectuals to counter the powerful "antagonists" (2004, p. 132) who have institutionalized the various versions of violence and created the modes of discourse that serve to legitimize their villainous practices and unwarranted advances. Therefore, the writers in the field of humanities should face the contemporary collective despondencies with courage and "go forth to try anyway" (2004, p. 144). The significance of the Saidian suggestion for creation of the humanist sensibility through writings is evident and, therefore, he has been acknowledged for his "last-ditch advocacy of humanism" (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 2008, p. 10).

Analysis of the Selected Short Fictional Narratives

The analysis of the study covers two of the short fictional narratives from Zaman and Farrukhi's acclaimed anthology *Fault Lines* (2008). The one short story, "Sleep", is produced by a Pakistani writer Masood Mufti (Zaman and Farrukhi, p. 333). Whereas the other short fictional narrative, "Traitor", is written by Mohan Kalpana's who born in Sindh but migrated to India at the time of partition (Zaman and Farrukhi, p. 331). The critique aims to show, from Saidian humanist literary perspective, how both of these short stories depict the bleak scenarios in the context of the events of 1971 by showing the innocent people becoming victim of the cruel circumstances generated by exclusivist nationalist rhetoric.

Primarily, the short stories precisely portray the existential precariousness created by the political turbulences and social exigencies produced by the war. Mufi's narrative begins with a statement that consummately conveys the turbulent nature of the time: "Dhaka was bubbling like water in a kettle" (p. 30). The simile communicates the intensity of the "frenetic race" (p. 30) that was consuming the peace of the region. Likewise, Kalpana's story is marked by the alarming sirens of war that are signaling the approaching havoc. The "bomber planes" are on move and the cities are "under fire" (p. 141). This insecurities created by the war and the civil war have been depicted with acuteness to recreate the aura of fear that had overwhelmed the region during the tragic times of 1971.

Death, coercion, and incarceration are the consequences of the logic of violence being fired by the hatred. All these remain the defining features of these tragic fictional narratives produced by Mufti and Kalpana. Mufti's poor protagonist becomes victim of the irony of situation. The Bengali boys coerce him to raise the slogan "Joy Bangla" (p. 31) and when he does so under their pressure, the soldiers mistake him for a rebel and he has been made to lie "in eternal sleep" (p. 31). In this way, an innocent West Pakistani becomes a victim of the political pressure and institutional violence. Similarly, Kalpana's Ghafoor is going to be executed as he has been "arrested" for being a "spy" (p. 142) who is found helping the enemy's forces during the war. It is obvious that he stands no chance of survival due to the heinous nature of the crime he with which he has been indicted. Thus,

the central characters of both the stories are shown either in the cruel clutch of death or waiting for the impending death in imprisonment.

Acts of violence inflicted upon the innocent victims are also manifest in these narratives. The unnamed West Pakistani character in Mufti's short story has been "punished" and made victim of the psychological violence "not for any crime, but rather for being a West Pakistani" (p. 30). This intimidation from the Bengali mob pushes him into a situation where he becomes a victim of the physical violence due to the mistaken identity. Hence, the psychological violence by the mob throws him into the jaws of the monster of the physical violence by the state machinery. Correspondingly, Kalpana's protagonist is tortured psychologically by his friend Abid who states about Taj Mahal, "it must have been broken into smithereens" (p. 141), although he know that Taj Mahal is the metaphor of life for Ghafoor. Disturbed by the bruises inflicted by the psychological violence, Ghafoor reacts hysterically and, in turn, "given, slaps, boxes" (p. 142) and, ultimately, incarcerated. Therefore, both the short stories are in consummate correspondence in terms of creation and refutation of the both kind of violence: physical violence and psychological violence.

It is obvious that in both the short stories the main characters have been victimized only for failure to conform to some spurious descriptors of nationalist affiliation. The West Pakistani protagonist of Mufti's short fictional narrative is being victimized with psychological violence for not raising a slogan "Joy Bangla" (p. 31). But when he raises the same slogan unwillingly, he finds himself in front of the people who do not want the slogan to be raised. So, an innocent person has to die in a tragic way only because of a slogan. Also, Kalpana's Ghafoor, a migrant, is punished for his love for "Taj Mahal and "Agra" (p. 141-142). He has done no harm to the society, but his failure to chant the rhetoric of the mob has placed him in the ruinous position. Thus, the trivial digressions from the collective sensibilities of the colliding factions are being punished with severity in both f the narrative.

The trope of the mistaken identity is found in both the short stories. In Mufti's short story, the major character has been killed only because he has been mistaken for a rebel raising the slogan "Joy Bangla" (p. 31). Actually, the character is a loyal West Pakistani who has uttered the words unwillingly only to avoid the intimidation of the Bengali mob. However, the circumstantial pressure gives him the semblance that causes his death. In the same manner, Ghafoor in Kalpana's story gets victimized for calling aloud, "Agra—Agra" (p. 142). His love for the city is only because of "the greatest artifact [Taj Mahal]" (p. 142). But his aesthetic predilection is misappropriated by the nationalist frenzy. Thus, the trope of mistaken identity has been skillfully used by the writers to expose the shallow nature of the exclusivist rhetoric.

Another aspect of parochial politics represented in theses texts is pervasiveness of inhuman indifference at all levels: wild individuals, frenzied mobs, and unbridled institutions. Mufti's protagonist is harassed by a mob and killed by the forces. Likewise, Kalpana's Ghafoor is psychologically tortured by and individual, physically beaten by a mob, and incarcerated by police. All these instances evidence the presence of bestiality across different social, ethnic, and political strata. In both of the narratives, the individuals, groups, and institutions have been shown to be moving without any sense of moral responsibility. They are being guided only by their blinding frenzy.

By depicting the scenarios marked by precariousness, politically triggered human crises, instances of victimization of the innocent characters, and events rooted in the mistaken identities, the short stories consummately represent the ruinous façade of

exclusivist nationalism. In doing so, the stories expose various versions of the exploitative social practices in vogue in the name of nationalist idealism. In addition, the fictional narratives tend to deconstruct the socio-politically institutionalized logic of violence. Thus, the fictions speak for the desirable "mutuality" (Said, 2004, p. 50) in the social sphere for creation of harmonious international relations.

Conclusion

The analysis of the texts and the textually substantiated inferences make it evident that both the short story writers, Masood Mufti and Mohan Kalpana, have focalized and fictionalized the themes of unwarranted exclusivism, unbridled nationalism, and violence in the context of the 1971 War. They have portrayed a bleak picture of life foregrounding miseries, tensions, vulnerabilities, apathies, and degradation. Especially, through characterization of the innocent victims and delineation of the exploitative social practices, the writers have attempted to attract the attention to the questions of civilizational survival. Accordingly, the writers denounce the violent extremes of the morbid perpetrators in these narratives. Therefore, Masood Mufti's "Sleep" and Mohan Kalpana's "Traitor" can be read as the palimpsests of disturbed literary sensibilities that have to grapple with violent circumstances in the representational textual spaces. In Saidian terms, the narratives have exposed the "paranoid doctrine" of exclusivism and disparaged the "negative models" (2004, p. 50) of human existence promoted by the institutional "antagonists" (2004, p. 132) sitting at the helm. Thus, both the writers are playing their "overwhelmingly evident" (2004, p. 121) role to resuscitate the humanist sensibilities required for moving towards the ideal of co-existence.

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