

A Post-colonial Reading of Muneeza Shamsie's *That Heathen Air*

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Abstract: *Post-colonial theory and literature feature different methods of intellectual discourse to analyze, explain, and to respond to the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism, to the human consequences of controlling a territory and establishing settler colonies for the political and economic exploitation of the native people and their land. The present study is a textual analysis of Muneeza Shamsie's short story That Heathen Air (2005) by applying different critical concepts from Post-colonial theory such as comprador, double colonization and the role of English language in the colonial agenda. The study argues that in the colonial India, the men from the Muslim nobility happily adapted to the culture and ways of the colonizer whereas their women resisted the hegemonic cultural practices of the imperial masters. Though doubly colonized, yet they continued with their struggle against the patriarchy and at the same time tried to preserve their native culture.*

Key Words: *Post-colonial, Muneeza Shamsie, Pakistani short story, comprador, double colonization*

*Delhi was once a Paradise,
And great the joys residing here.
But they have ravished this bride of peace,
Remain now ruins and care.*

*The Indians have been ruined, alas,
I cannot tell how they suffered:
Whoever the ruler of the day saw
Was only put to the sword.*

(Bahadur Shah Zafar qtd in Ali, 1940, p. 144)

Introduction

Pakistani English literature is a part of the larger body of Postcolonial literature from the subcontinent (Ashcroft et al., 2002). It addresses the themes of the tragedy of partition, nationalism, postcolonial identity, gender, hybridity, Diaspora issues, and indigenous culture.

English literature from the writers of Pakistani origin attained merit and recognition globally in the last quarter of the 20th century starting with the senior generation of writers like Sara Suleri, Hanif Kureishi, Bapsi Sidhwa, followed by the creative output by the writers of younger generation like Kamila Shamsie, Mohsin Hamid, Bina Shah, Uzma Aslam Khan and Muhammad Hanif and so on.

The Pakistani writers have highlighted the issues of women (Ahmed, 2013, p. 15). Like other postcolonial contexts, Pakistani women also have to struggle against their oppression which is because of the politico-religious conditions implicitly behind the social system of the country. Before independence, the Indian women on the one hand struggled against the patriarchy while at the same time they had to preserve the native culture by the resisting the hegemony of the imperial culture. Zia Ahmed (2012) notes that in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* the women characters, though marginalized, were responsible for preserving their native culture.

Similarly, the present study which is a post-colonial analysis of Shamsie's short story, *That Heathen Air* (2005), attempts to explore the roles and attitude of female and male characters in colonial India towards the native and colonizer's culture. I contend that the aristocratic Indian men in colonial India easily accepted the colonizers' culture and life style and were pragmatic enough to assimilate with their masters albeit not shunning off their patriarchal attitude towards their own women. On the contrary, the indigenous women tried to preserve the local culture by resisting the colonizers culture and their ways while struggling for their rights at the same time. Hence, they had to suffer more and were doubly colonized i.e. by the colonizers and their own patriarchy. The postcolonial concepts of comprador, double colonization and role of English language have been employed to analyze the text of the story.

The Story and its Author

Muneeza Shamsie is a prominent Pakistani critic, bibliographer, short story writer and the editor of three pioneering anthologies of Pakistani literature in English (Abdullah, 2009). From a family with three generations of women writers what Kamila Shamsie calls "a loving literary line", she is "the leading critic and expert on Pakistani Anglophone writing" (Shamsie, 2009). Her creative and critical work addresses the issues of colonialism, culture, language and gender in colonial and postcolonial era.

The short story under analysis, *That Heathen Air*, narrates the dilemma of Princess Gohar Taj, a lady of Mughal lineage in the colonial India's capital Delhi where the British "were now building their new imperial capital". The Princess represents the aristocratic Muslim women who despite their luxurious lifestyle were still dominated and controlled by the patriarchy. The princess is married to the anglicized Justice Sir Akbar Ali Khan who eulogizes the English culture, education and life style. A descendent of the Last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, she is content and compromises lots of things to be in marriage to her husband. But, when her

husband sends her young son to England for schooling, she, unable to bear the pain of separation, shows off her motherly emotions to her husband's displeasure. Same fate lay in store for her younger son and probably her sister's children also.

Before presenting the analysis of the text, it's appropriate to briefly discuss the related theoretical concepts.

Post-colonialism

The term Post-colonialism deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies of the ex-colonies. From its first use by the historians after the Second World War, the term was used by the literary critics in 1970s to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization. According to Ashcroft et al., (2007)

Postcolonialism is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps, the differing responses to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre-and post-independence nations and communities. (p.169)

Consequently, the Postcolonial literature is a body of literary writings by the peoples of former British colonies much of which is also of interest and relevance to the ex-colonies of other European powers. It concerns with the themes of colonialism, race, gender, hybridity, identity crisis, language and culture. The native writers (from former colonies) use English language as a tool to write about their experience of colonialism while asserting the indigenous cultures against the Eurocentric notions of Orient and their culture.

Double Colonization

A term coined in the mid-1980s refers to the women of the Empire's colonies who were doubly colonized both by the domination of male patriarchy and by the colonial domination of the imperial masters. "In this respect empire and patriarchy act as analogous to each other and both exert control over female colonial subjects, who are, thus, doubly colonized by imperial /patriarchal power" (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 66).

Ironically, the women's struggle for their liberation and rights continues even after the independence of their homelands from the colonial powers. Because, their patriarchy becomes either more established or takes on the role of brown masters as well. In Ashcroft et al.'s words: '. . . Post-colonial nationalisms do not necessarily alleviate this situation but may entrench rather than dismantle the power of patriarchy, so that women's struggle against colonial

domination often continues after national independence' (2007, p. 66-67). The term is very much relevant in the sub-continent where after independence the patriarchy took on the role of brown masters while the ex-masters still exercise power and influence directly or indirectly in the form political and financial institutions. Thus, the oppression of women and their struggle for liberation continues even in post-colonial conditions.

Comprador

A Portuguese word meaning 'purchaser' used by Marxists to refer to those local bourgeoisies who owe their privileged position to foreign monopolies and hence maintain a vested interest in colonial occupation. In postcolonial theory, the term is used in a broader sense to include the intelligentsia whose independence may be compromised because of their relationship with colonial power (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 47). Ashcroft et al observe that the term continues to be used to describe 'a relatively privileged, wealthy, and educated elite' who maintain a higher capacity to indulge in the international communicative practices of the colonial masters, and 'therefore may be less inclined for local cultural and political independence.' (ibid., p. 48)

Discussion / Analysis

Comprador Class: Justice Akbar Ali Khan's love for the Colonizer's Culture

Princess gohar Taj belongs to the Mughal nobility. Her husband Justice Sir Akbar Ali Khan belonged to that 'respectable stock' that 'had remained loyal to the British during *The Ghaddar*' (Shmsie, 2005, p. 159). The title of "Sir" is evidence enough that his husband was one of those families who were loyal to the British. On the other hand, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the Mughal ancestor of the Princess was convicted for treason by the British.

In postcolonial terms, Justice Akbar Ali Khan is a Comprador in the true sense of the word. He belongs to a privileged family of Indian elite who is closely associated with the British and their culture. He is 'clever, important and sober' who 'enjoyed the confidence of Englishmen and Indian alike'. (ibid., p. 159) He appreciates the British culture, life style, and education. He owns a modern, westernized home with 'French windows' which he had bought from some English Merchant. 'He had renovated an entire suite for himself, based on some grand house he had seen in England.' He had hired an English governess for his children's upbringing. 'He wants his son Jamshed to be equal to any Englishman'. Princess Taj becomes an 'Other' in her own house as her children are looked after by their English governess with strict rules. Princess Taj has to follow the schedule set by the Governess. And, she as a mother can't show her affection and emotions freely.

Since, Justice Akbar Ali Khan belongs to the Comprador class with (vested) interests in the colonial domination of India; he shows no attempt to resist the colonization or the cultural hegemony of the empire. Rather, he belongs to that creed of colonial India who maintains and

perpetuates the colonial legacy – their culture, language, political and social hierarchy – at the cost of Indigenous language and culture.

Sahibzada Mahboob Ali Mirza

Sahibzada Mahboob Ali Mirza is the husband of Sultan Jehan, the younger sister of Princess Gohar Taj. The handsome and aristocratic Mahboob Ali belongs to the Indian elite as does Justice Akbar Ali Khan. He shares the same English taste and his liking for the imperial culture is shown to extreme levels. He has travelled the world over. “He had often spoken to her [his wife] of Europe, its spirit of inquiry, its spotless, lamp lit cities, its great factories out wonders: it was another century” (Shamsie, 2005, p. 158). He is so impressed by his colonial masters that he is all praise for everything that belongs to them. Consequently, he is so convinced of the colonizers’ notions about the ‘Orient’ that he has internalized them. His wife quotes him that the British were able to become masters of India due to the ‘cold invigorating climate’ of England and the water they drink and the food they eat is so beneficial. Contrastingly, to him, Indians have been debilitated by the spices and chillies they eat and the hot weather of India is also the reason. The analogy drawn by Mahboob Mirza is ironically colonialist and serves the cause of the empire by reinforcing the Orientalist discourse about the Orientals as weak and inferior: it declares British as strong and powerful and Indians as weak and infirm.

Despite his deep admiration for the European culture and lifestyle, when it comes to the women rights, Mahboob Mirza, behaves like a typical Patriarch who is disturbed by the idea of women getting equal rights. His hypocrisy and double standards are well expressed by the narrator: “. . . he had expressed abhorrence for a strange band of abnormal women there [in Europe], who demanded equality with men” (ibid., p. 158). The patriarchal men like Mahoob Mirza and Akbar Ali Khan would adapt to the ways of the British, and enjoy all the luxuries of Comprador class but dismiss the idea of giving their women rights and liberating them. These men break away with the local/indigenous culture and tradition in every way and proudly switch to the modern lifestyle except giving their women their due rights. They would like to continue ruling women’s souls and bodies as their colonial masters rule their lands.

Suffering of the Natives

Shamsie’s female characters in the story, in contrast to the male characters, exhibit a different consciousness about the colonial experience. Princess Gohar Taj and Sultan Jehan who are the descendents of Mughal emperors detest the colonizers for their atrocities and their policies of political, economic and cultural victimization.

Princess Gohar Taj had grown up on tales of British atrocities, during *The Ghaddar*, the Rebellion of 1857, she knew exactly how the Prize Agency (as the East India Company had been called) had hunted down and executed men of her family – the imperial princes and displayed their severed heads on the Khooni

Darawaza, the Bloody Gate. The British had raped the women too, or given them to their Indian allies as slaves or booty. Her grandmother was fortunate to have escaped, but had never forgotten the red-haired, red-faced Englishman who had ripped her earlobes to steal her ruby and pearl earrings (Shamsie, 2005, p. 158).

The small paragraph gives the details of the dark side of the colonial mission. Here, the British colonizers are depicted as killers, rapists and looters as against their proclaimed mission of civilization and humanity. Princess Gohar Taj had 'grown up on tales of British atrocities' which suggests that the Mughal family (women in particular) in contrast to official account of colonial history tried to preserve a personal/native account of the events by orally transferring it to the coming generations. The author suggests that the role of female members of the princess' family was significant in keeping alive the tales of the British atrocities. Consequently, it is the women who abhor the British and take the responsibility to resist them as their own men showing practical sense unhesitatingly adapt and assimilate with the British ways.

In this context, we can understand that the educated Muslim women like Shamsie took the responsibility of presenting the oral tradition in written form: writing their history through fiction. As Kamila Shamsie, a prominent writer of English fiction and daughter of Muneeza Shamsie proudly shares that she is from the family with three generations of female writers. "It was much later that I realised how important it was for me to grow up in a family where the written word mattered so deeply. Even later that I saw how the various women writers of my family were involved in dismantling stereotypes and breaking free of the traditional roles expected of women" (Shamsie, 2009). Thus, Muneeza Shamsie and her daughter have continued with the tradition of elder Shamsie's grand-mother, Inam Habibullah's who believed it vital to write for other women - many of whom lived profoundly restricted lives.

One day when Gohar Jahan discovered that her brother was going to join the Anglicized Muslim University of Aligarh, she couldn't accept it. She was not convinced by her father about the importance of learning English and the need for Muslims coming to terms with the British presence in India: "Never! She had cried. Never would she accept the British. Why, if she ever saw an English face, she would spit on it" (Shamsie, 2005, p. 159). Here again we see that women have taken the burden of resisting the colonial legacy on their shoulders as their men seem succumbing to compromise and practicality.

Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*, a remarkable fictional account of the decline of the Muslims' culture in Delhi, also narrates the organized elimination of the native Indian Muslims during the war of independence of 1857. Begum Nihal, the wife of the protagonist Mir Nihal, recalls the cruelties of the colonizers during 1857 that how the Muslims were brutally killed and their properties looted by the Prize Agency.

And she began to relate how ruthlessly Delhi had been looted by them [the Britishers] at the time of the 'Mutiny' and the Mussalmans had been turned out of the city, their houses demolished and destroyed and their property looted and usurped by the 'Prize Agency'; and the city was dyed red with the blood of princes and nobles, poor and rich alike who had happened to be Mussalmans. . . . (Ali, 1940, p. 142)

Begum Nihal curses the Britishers for their cruelties against the native Muslims. Interestingly, Begum Nihal is a subjugated woman confined to the four walls of her home, but still she actively takes part in conversation about the atrocities inflicted by the Empire and plays her part in preserving her story of the colonial oppression. She never forgets to curse the good-as-dead Farangis, the Britishers.

The novel also portrays the pathetic and pitiable conditions of the Bahadur Shah's grand children in India. Those who survived the British onslaught became penurious and had to menial jobs to survive.

In Delhi to this day there were innumerable princes and princesses alive, daughters and grand-daughters of Bahadur Shah. Many cut grass for a living, other drove bullock carts to keep body and soul together. The princesses had married cooks and kahars, their own servants, or served as cooks and maids. Many of them had become beggars and went about begging in the streets (ibid., p. 142).

Like Shamsie, Ahmed Ali also highlights the women of Mughal nobility more than their males. Shmsie's female characters are fortunate since they were married off to 'respectable Indians', whereas, Ali's women of nobility are faced with tough choices: either they had to marry their own servants or had to opt for begging. The suffering of these women was multiplied by the fact that in colonial India they didn't have much chances of finding respectable jobs.

The character of Gul Bano, a grand-daughter of Bahadur Shah, represents the helplessness and hopelessness of the Muslims/Mughal descendents and the havoc that the colonization caused against the Muslims at individual and collective level. Gul Bano married a cook who treated her badly. Eventually, when her husband died, she was reduced to begging from house to house. "She never begged directly, but Sang Bahadur Shah's poems. . . ." (Ali, 1940, p. 143). Gul Bano's account of what Britishers did to the Mughal rulers of India is similar to the princess Gohar Taj's version. In Gul Bano's words: "*But they usurped our throne, banished the king, killed hundreds of princess before these unfortunate eyes which could not even go go blind, drank their blood, and we could do nothing*" (Ibid., p. 143). Princess Gohar Taj and Gul Bano share the same experience of double colonization. Gul Bano's suffering starts at the age of seven when her family had to leave Delhi to escape the wrath of the oppressing forces of the empire.

After her family died of Cholera she returned to Delhi only to be mistreated by the man, a cook, she marries with. After her husband's death, her misery doesn't stop and she has to beg to keep her body and soul together. Gohar Taj's oppression and suffering after marriage is more of an emotional and psychological nature. We will discuss it in detail in the next section

Women in the Story: Double colonization

Princess Gohar Taj

Shamsie depicts the emotional dilemma of a mother who is going to be separated from her young son(s). Princess Gohar Taj has all the worldly luxuries at her disposal. Yet, she is helpless against her husband's control over her and her children. Her suffering started when her family fell on hard times after their ancestor, the last Mughal king Bahadur Shah Zafar was convicted for treason and exiled to Rangoon in 1858. Her suffering is multifold: she was the victim of childhood marriage, she has to change her personality to appease her husband and finally she has to bear the burden of separation from her sons. It is pertinent to discuss these one by one in detail.

Gohar Taj was married off to Justice Akbar Ali Khan at the tender age of thirteen. The decision was made by her father who considered her fortunate with a secure future after being married to an elite Indian Muslim. It's evident from this incident that her life is completely controlled by the patriarchy, her father in this case. She is the victim of a child marriage which was a common practice in colonial India. Like any patriarchal society, the fate of the young princess is deemed secure only in marriage and considered fortunate if she is married to a wealthy man. The girl's right for having a say in the matter, and the man's character, age and other factors are not a consideration while deciding the fate of the girls. In Gohar Taj's case too, though she is apparently not pleased with the idea of her marriage to Justice Akbar, but she has to remain silent as demanded by the values of silence, decency and obedience inculcated in her since childhood. The narrator tells us about her feelings: "Princess Gohar Taj did not think so, [that she was lucky girl] but since she could not express any opinions on her marriage, she resigned herself to fate" (Shamsie, 2005, p. 159). Hence, as in a patriarchal society like India the fate of the girls/women was/is decided by their men. Likewise, Gohar Taj accepts her child marriage to a stranger as her fate, something she can't fight or resist.

It's interesting to note that she raises her voice against the idea of her brother getting English education and learning English language, but silently accepts her father's decision on her marriage albeit against her will. Generalizing, we may interpret that the women in colonial India were more concerned with preserving their native culture than liberating themselves from the dominating patriarchy.

Princess Gohar Taj had to make a hard compromise regarding the British culture to fulfill her social duties as the wife of an anglicized husband. As we discussed earlier, she had objected to

her brother's English education. But, after marriage, as demanded by her role of "Gracious lady Akbar Ali Khan" she had to change her entire persona, at least on social gatherings. We learn from the text that in the social circles of imperial India, she was "one of the first Muslim women to discard the veil, learn English and entertain the Viceroy and Vicereine, Governors and Princes" (ibid., p. 158).

It's significant to mention, that the change of her persona is not internal rather she takes on this role as a demand from her husband's social life. At heart, she still hates the Britishers and never behaves as an anglicized woman in her personal life. Shamsie introduces her in the first paragraph of the story as wearing "a light shawl over her long shirt and clinging *churidar pyjamas*". She has firm faith in God and believes in prayers which are always answered except in one case: her young son being sent to England for education against her will. Moreover, she behaves very emotionally showing her sentiments while she is about to be parted from her son. Her husband is annoyed by her show of emotion and would not even allow sending for a doctor. Thus, she behaves like a typical eastern mother: "I don't have courage. All I have is a broken heart" (ibid., p. 157).

Ironically, the protagonist's change in persona is not a real empowerment that could enable her to demand equality and rights from her husband. Rather, what may seem empowerment and liberation to other people or her husband's British's guests is, in reality, a fake persona adopted to fulfill her duty as a wife of her Anglicized husband who needs to present his wife as a modern lady. At home she is a different lady. Her discarding veil, learning English and entertaining the British royalty doesn't change her position at home. She has no say in the matters regarding her children's wellbeing and education. Rather, her husband has hired a British governess to upbringing her children according to the western ways. And ironically, at her home, she has to follow the rules set by a foreign lady. For the Princess, it's not just her country which has been colonized by the British, her very home has been colonized by a British lady who controls and governs her children's lives. Shamsie has masterfully shown the effects of colonialism at national level as well as family (individual) level.

The protagonist's current dilemma is her son's separation from her. Her husband is sending their elder son, Jamshaid only ten years old, to school in England. And she knows that his husband will also send the younger one, Junaid, after few years. She could perhaps bear the pain of physical separation but she fears the worst. She is afraid of the alienation that will be created between the mother and her son. She is apprehensive that her son would not only be separated from his biological mother but would also lose/forget his homeland, his metaphorical mother because he "will imbibe that heathen air and that water which has made men masters of India" and which will alienate her sons from her, forever. She fears that "they will probably become Christians and marry English women. . . ." (ibid., p. 159). In Postcolonial theory, the Princess' apprehensions are true as according to Ashcroft et al. (2002) language is medium through which the imperial masters perpetuate the hierarchical structure of power and establish the conceptions

of 'truth', 'order' and 'power'. Thus, she rightly fears that her son will return as one of those colonizers who looted and destroyed India: the memories of their atrocities are still fresh in her mind.

Language is an important issue in the postcolonial theory. In Ashcroft's words, "One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and *marginalizes* all 'variants' as impurities" (2002, p. 7).

As far as Language is concerned, India and its people faced the same situation. The policies of the empire resulted in English gradually becoming the dominant language associated with power and prestige whereas the position of Persian, Sanskrit, Arabic and Hindi became marginalized as they were called 'the vernacular dialects' by the empire. After the establishment of English as a dominant language in India, through English Education Act 1835, English education system was introduced, in Macaulay's words, to form "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (English Education Act, n.d.). This policy left deep-rooted effects at national and individual levels. At individual level, in the house of Princess Gohar Taj, an English governess and English language push the lady of the house and her native language into a marginalized position. Though, she tries to resist it but in vain. She always defied English language: although it was forbidden by the English governess, she always spoke to her children in Urdu in the nursery. Her husband, her children and her brother have fully accepted the English language something which she could never do. She fears that the increasing gap of the language between the mother and sons will create a gulf which could never be bridged. She thought she would never be able to master the English classics of Dickens, Shakespeare, Hardy and Kipling which held his son in thrall. While "her soul could only respond to the lyrical, mystical poetry of Urdu, which his governess considered a lesser language and which he [her son] could hardly read" (Shamsie, 2005, p. 163). The linguistic and cultural divide between the mother and the son is evident as one's heart is in lyricism and mystical Urdu poetry. On the other hand, the son's imagination was captivated by English classics. The divide would only increase when her son would study at an English school in England. For her it's a double loss. At personal level, she has lost her son and at national level she has lost a part of her language, her culture and her faith.

Princess Sultan Jehan

The younger sister of Gohar Jehan, Sultan Jehan, has been portrayed in relation to her elder sister only. Married to Sahibzada Mehboob Ali, she had come to Delhi to console her aggrieved sister. Her position in the society is not different from her sister. Like her sister's, her husband is also Anglicized yet patriarchal as far as his ideas about women are concerned. He doesn't have any respect for his wife feelings. Sultan Jehan who is pregnant, when upon her sister advice, she asks her husband to promise to never send their babies to school in England. Her husband laughs. And

he didn't even think that she deserved an answer. Thus, the author is able to communicate, that a similar fate awaits Sultan Jehan and both the sisters share the same dilemma.

Conclusion

The study analysed the short story from the postcolonial perspective. The study elucidates that Muneeza Shamsie has presented the dilemma of female characters from the Muslim nobility in the colonial India. Princess Gohar Taj's husband Justice Akbar Ali Khan was an anglicized Muslim, a comprador, who was deeply influenced by his colonial masters. However, at his house, he has colonized his wife. Gohar Taj, though has an access to English language and the English elite of colonial India, yet in her personal life she prefers and takes pride in Indian culture and language. Her heart responds to the mystical and lyrical Urdu poetry than Dickens and Shakespeare. She is doubly colonized: at national level her country is colonized by the British, at personal level she is colonized by her husband who controls her body, her will and her emotions. Yet at another level, her home and her children are colonized by an English governess. Princess Sultan Jehan's situation is not different either. Her husband Sahibzada Mahboob Ali Mirza appreciates European culture except the idea of giving women equal rights.

Summing up, the women of Muslim nobility had to suffer politically, economically and culturally due to British occupation of India. However, these women struggled to survive in the face of colonial and patriarchal domination. The men from Muslim nobility happily accepted the colonial agenda and legacy. However, the women made sure that they and their coming generations never forget the atrocities that the Britishers committed against the natives. Also, they entrusted themselves the responsibility of preserving the native language, values and culture.

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