

WAR AND POLITICS IN THE NOVELS OF PAKISTANI WOMEN WRITERS

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Abstract

It is a fact that the world events of the last ten years have focused the attention of world on Pakistan, starting with 9/11, through the decade with the War on Terror, and continuing today with continuous tensions between Pakistan and India, the Muslim world and the Western world, and Pakistan's own internal religious, social and political conflicts. Though the political relations between India and Pakistan are under stress, as a student of literature it is very necessary to study Pakistani literature. This study has a lot of significance in exploring how society and literature interact and intersect in their social, political, economic and cultural context. The present paper is an attempt to study South Asian English Literature and Pakistani English Literature in brief and to analyse the novels of Pakistani women novelists in the light of war and politics. It is assumed that Sorraya Khan, Uzma Aslam Khan and Kamila Shamsie are sensitive to the suffering and pains of the people and the issues of war and politics are reflected in their novels.

Key Words: *Pakistani women novelists, politics, war, Sorraya Khan, Uzma Khan, Kamila Shamsie,*

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Prologue:

'Literature is mirror held to life'. Literature is universal, and it speaks to the readers. It is a creative work which includes poetry, drama, novel, essay and non-fiction forms. It represents the experiences of life but in imaginative form. Human being loves to read literature of this or that form and tries to understand the meaning of the text by looking at how the author has presented life in the text. Therefore, how can one imagine human being live happily without literature?

Theory of Novel:

Literature is studied in terms of gender, race, social class and nationality and it reflects contemporary social condition of the age as well as class and caste struggles. It is a reflection of an author's own class or his interpretation of class relations. Thus, literature is a social institution and has a specific ideological function, based on background and ideology of the author. Novel is one of the major forms of literature, which is extended work of fiction written in prose. It is distinguished from the short story and the novelette, which has greater variety of characters, greater complicated plot and more sustained exploration of characters and motives. There are different types of novels, such as social novel, political novel, realistic novel, and novel of social realism.

The social novel is one where various contemporary social and economic conditions affect the characters and the events. It recommends social and political reforms in the society, where social problem such as gender, race or class prejudice, is presented. This sub-genre of the novel can be seen as beginning in the mid 19th century with novels like Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which is also called as thesis, or propaganda novel, because it is "strongly weighed to convert the reader to the author's stand" on the subject of slavery.

Another example is Charles Dicken's *Hard Times* (1854). The roots of the social problem novel in Britain are in the 1830s and 1840s.

Political Novel is also a subgenre of fiction which deals with political affairs. Political fiction has often used narrative to provide commentary on political events, systems and theories. Prominent pieces of political fiction have included the totalitarian fictions of the early 20th century such as Jack London's *The Iron Heel* and Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*. The other pieces of political fiction such as *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), *Candide* (1759) and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) are equally influential.

Morris Edmund Speare's has given the theory of political novel in *The Political Novel* (1924). He wrote about both English and American political novels but was concerned to show the differences and similarities between these traditions, and he argued that the political novel, had been introduced by Disraeli and developed by subsequent authors such as Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, Mrs. Humphrey War, and H. G. Wells, as well as by Americans such as Henry Adams, Winston Churchill, and Paul Leicester Ford. Speare's book itself does not describe the political novel as a fallen form. He never apologizes for exploring the political novel.

Howe Irving defines Political novels in his *Politics and the Novel*, "By a political novel I mean a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which a political milieu is the dominant setting. . . . Perhaps it would be better to say: a novel in which we take to be dominant political ideas or the political milieu" (17). Perhaps as a strategy for avoiding the bias that political literature is by nature inferior, Howe consistently aestheticized politics, thus transforming the object of his criticism slightly.

Siebers Tobin, in the book *Politics of Skepticism*, (1993) states about the interrelations between politics and literature: "Politics demands that we risk taking a position, that we stand somewhere ... The possibility of arbitrariness and risk in the political process is the only good rationale for binding ourselves to skepticism (viii)."

Hypothesis and Objectives:

It is assumed that issues of war and politics reflect in the novels of Pakistani women novelists. So, the objectives such as to study and review

Pakistani English literature in brief and to study the novels of Pakistani women writers have been formulated for the study.

Therefore, the scope of the present study is the select novels of Pakistani women writers, which are examined from point of view of war and politics.

The Review of South Asian Literature:

The term "South Asian literature" refers to the literary works of writers from the Indian Subcontinent and its Diaspora. South Asian literary writers are from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Shri Lanka and Nepal. Further, works from Bhutan, Myanmar, Tibet, and Maldives are sometimes also included. South Asian literature is written in English as well as the many national and regional languages of the region.

South Asian literature has been produced in about forty major languages, including translations into Persian, Portuguese, French, and English, since 1750. Most of the region's modern writing is in Assamese, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, and Telugu (all in India), Urdu and Punjabi (in India and Pakistan), Bengali (in India and Bangladesh), Tamil (in India and Sri Lanka), Sinhala (in Sri Lanka), Nepali (in Nepal and India), and English (in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka). All the native languages in this group have centuries-long literary histories and have interacted with one another—and with Sanskrit, Persian, and English—at different periods.

Some of the best postcolonial Urdu and English writers from Pakistan, for instance, live in England, Canada, or the United States. The best-known Diaspora literature of South Asian origin has appeared in English since the 1960s; its authors include Zulfikar Ghose, Hanif Kureishi, Sara Suleri, A. K. Ramanujan, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Agha Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander, Michael Ondaatje, and Shyam Selvadurai.

Survey of Pakistani English writers:

Muneeza Shamsie explained that she turned into the history of South Asian women's English fiction when she was asked why it was that South Asian women wrote in English after the publication of her anthology *And the World Changed: Contemporary Stories by Pakistani Women*. After independence writers like Attiya Hosain and Mumtaz Shahnawaz to produce works in

English, such as the novels *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and *The Heart Divided*. Shamsie noted that English fiction by women was seen as futile, and there was a general unwillingness to recognize for women who wrote about politics, after partition.

The most prominent case in this regard is that of Zaibunissa Hamidullah, who was a columnist for *The Dawn* but left the newspaper after she was rebuked for broaching political topics and not confining her writing to 'women's issues'. Hamidullah then went on to found the monthly publication *The Mirror*, which was banned in 1957 for its criticism of Iskander Mirza's regime. Hamidullah appealed to the Supreme Court over this ban, won a judgment to her favor and wrote a collection called *The Young Wife and Other Stories*. Other politically active women continued to write in English newspapers but Shamsie remarked that English fiction by women disappeared for about 20 years in Pakistan until Bapsi Sidhwa published the first of her novels. In the meanwhile, women from the Pakistani Diaspora, such as Rukhsana Ahmad and Tahira Naqvi were producing exciting fiction and poetry in English. The next event of significance in the world of female Pakistani English writing was the publication of Sara Suleri's unique memoirs *Meatless Days* and *Boys Will be Boys*, which blended the public and the personal and the historical and the social. Following this, the next generation of more prolific Pakistani female writers of English fiction came up, which includes Talat Abbasi, Shahbano Bilgrami, Nafisa Haji, Sorayya Khan, Kamila Shamsie, Moni Mohsin and Uzma Aslam Khan.

Pakistani writers and Indian writers have similar thematic concerns, writing about the self and the nation. Some are preoccupied with the memories of Partition, the War of 1971 or the Islamization of the state. Others write about the immigrant experience, the history of Pakistanis that continues with migration and exile. Almost all of them explore issues of identity, hybridity, home and exile. They collectively counter the representation of Pakistan, revealing the nation's multiplicity.

Contemporary Pakistani politics is explored by Muhammed Hanif, Mohsin Hamid, H. M. Naqvi, Aamer Hussein, Maniza Naqvi, Daniyal Mueenuddin and Kamila Shamsie. They have explored Pakistani society and its stratifications, from the 1950s to the 21st century in their novels, novellas and

short stories. While Pakistani writers have a lot to say about current political events, they don't wish to be pigeonholed into writing solely about terrorism, Islamic extremists, the oppression of women. It's said that Pakistani writing is more political, Indian writing sociological – as Pakistanis feel the effects of politics (how power is manipulated) more intensely than Indians.

Contemporary Pakistani Women Novelists:

Pakistan has a lot of creative talent, for which it has seldom won much international recognition. Sorayya Khan, Uzma Aslam Khan and Kamila Shamsie are new generation Pakistani English novelists at the beginning of twenty-first century. As all of them have taken equally higher education in literature and arts, they have a commitment to the novel form and have contributed to the development of Pakistani English novels. Apparently, in their novels, there are some basic similarities with reference to the theme of war and politics.

Sorayya Khan's *Noor* (2003) is a remarkable novel as it breaks the long silence among Pakistanis of all hues to speak of the horrors of what they saw and did in East Pakistan. Ali, a young Pakistani soldier, brings home Sajida, a girl of "five and six" who has lost her family in a cyclone and is found wandering about a Dhaka street, and raises her as his own daughter. Sajida marries, grows roots in Pakistani soil, has children, one of them being Noor, a child so special and different and gifted that she has access to secrets yet to be revealed and to memories her mother and Ali have buried. Noor, born with Down's Syndrome, begins to paint the most astonishing pictures from her very first birthday. Noor's unerring drawings bring the past back for Sajida: the cyclone, the sea full of fish, the fish-boats plying the seas and the shores of what was once East Pakistan and has since become Bangladesh. In a series of chilling portraits, Noor brings the past back with an exactness that is both fearful and astonishing. She draws uprooted trees, shattered boats and the unrelenting monsoon rains. But she also gives detail of the atrocities too unimaginable and inhuman committed in the name of nationalism: the senseless killings of millions, the rivers red with blood, the bloated corpses with tied hands floating like paper boats down the river and the graffiti in a now-forgotten script written on a wall: *Joi Bangla*. Noor draws what Sajida has forgotten and what

Ali has barred and bolted in the drawers of his memory. Her drawings reveal a "connection" — not severed, merely buried — with Sajida's past, with Ali's compliance in those acts of unmitigated barbarism.

Sorayya Khan's another *Five Queen's Road* (2008) is a novel that weaves together family saga, memoir, and national history. The house, Five Queen's Road, initially built by an Englishman in Lahore, is shared between a Hindu landlord, a Muslim tenant and his family, and eventually, a foreign daughter-in-law who joins them. Irene, a Dutch woman scarred by war-stricken Maastricht and Amsterdam, becomes part of the family and all slowly discover that they share more than imagined. The novel is about memory and family and surviving tragedies like the 1947 Partition of the Indian Subcontinent and World War II in Europe.

The novel *Trespassing* (2003) written by Uzma Aslam Khan is set in 1990's during the aftermaths of the Afghan War and Gulf War. It is an epic novel, which has the background from three continents and three different intimately related families. Personal and political conflict as well as cultural and ethnic conflict is present in the novel. It reflects the dirty politics of the time and a romantic, spiritual and political novel. What's revised is the character of Salamat, the sindhi fisher-boy who moves to the Karachi and apprentices himself to a Bus Body maker and then to a terrorist outfit and finally ends as a driver to an arms dealer. 'Salamaat consoled himself that if he carried a load of torture equipment, it was better than being the one tortured.'

The theme of Uzma Khan's next novel *The Geometry of God* (2008) is freedom of women, science and politics. It is a novel one can read greedily, following these characters as their lives unfold against the backdrop of General Zia's Pakistan, where religious fundamentalism gains ground and the mujaheddin is funded by gem sales and the Americans.

Uzma Aslam Khan chronicles the struggle of one family in Pakistan during and after President-General Zia's administration as it battles on the side of evolution against creationism and fundamentalism. As Amal and her sister grow older, political tensions in their country intensify. Their grandfather, Zahoor, refuses to stop teaching evolution and becomes the focal point of a smear campaign put forth by the Party of Creation. Zahoor becomes a public pariah after being blamed for converting Norman Anwar, a former Party

member responsible for censoring textbooks. Khan attempts to write the novel from the perspectives of the four main characters, ultimately causing long, drawn-out chapters that are often redundant. If the question refers specifically to the violence in Karachi through the 1980s and early 90s, well, it was a very violent time. The Soviets were in Afghanistan, Pakistan was ruled by its most brutal military dictator, General Zia ul Haq, a United States ally, billions of dollars worth of arms spread across this country, mostly to Karachi, where a nasty ethnic war ensued between the indigenous people of Sindh, and the Urdu-speaking, Punjabi, and Pathan migrants who settled in Sindh after Partition (and continued to pour into the province during the Afghan War).

Kamila Shamsie's first novel *In the City by the Sea* (1998) is a political novel, set in Karachi. It features the upper-middle class elite and their experiences in a politically turbulent homeland. The novel reflects the turbulent political environment and oppressive military rule of the country. It is political in quiet and subtle way.

Hasan 11 years old boy, lives cheerful life in secure and loving family; but turn changed totally when he sees a young boy dies while flying a kite. Thus he is made aware of the frailty of life - how secure environment can change. Then his uncle Salman Mamoo, a dissenting politician, is arrested and imprisoned for treason, for leading a rebel political party. Thus the turbulent political environment and oppressive military rule of the country is reflected through the sheltered world of Hasan. Hasan is a bright, interesting child, and his relationships with his parents and uncle are loving. Hasan is never happier than when lying in his hammock staring at the night sky, pomegranate in hand. We see the problems of Karachi through Hasan's eyes, and so while this political unrest affects many, we focus just on Uncle Salman's arrest.

In Shamsie's other novel *Kartography* (2002), Karim and Rahim, the protagonists, are in their early 20s, but through flashbacks it depicts their 1970s childhood, which tells the stories of their parents. The development of their childhood friendship is set against the turbulence of political violence in Pakistan. The novel explores the experiences of the wealthy elite in an unstable nation, through flashback of the 1971 civil war. The wealthy position is not secure, people from upper social class are aware of the dangerous situation. There is sensitive political and social background, which offers much neglected

story of Pakistan to the readers. This is a novel about Pakistan, about political violence, about growing up rich and comfortable in a land that is always on the edge of riot and despair.

Karim's parents want to move their family to London because of troubles in Pakistan, and the best friends are separated. As tensions mount at home, Raheen sets out to uncover just what happened between the two sets of parents years before. Interspersed into Raheen's narrative are flashbacks to the early 1970s, when the Bangladesh Liberation War caused political turmoil in Karachi. These flashbacks slowly unfold the secrets Raheen desperately wants to know—and later desperately wants to forget. The reader is thrown into political arguments, forced to decide what is right and what is wrong. Raheen grows into a young adult with opinions of her own, and though she tries to avoid the issues facing her country, she has no choice but to confront them.

In Shamsie's *Broken Verses* (2005) Aasmani Inqalab is a 30 years old young woman, struggling with tragedy. Her mother, Samina, a feminist activist, has been missing for 14 years along with Samina's lover, a revolutionary known as 'The Poet' who is presumed murdered. Aasmani feels angry and hurt that she was neglected and abandoned for the sake of politics. She is torn between her wish to continue her mother's work and her need to free herself from the shadow of this powerful woman. Aasmaani is assailed by memories of the 1970s and 80s, when the nation could be made to buck and rear at the sound of her mother's political speeches or the biting allegories of the Poet, her mother's lover. Under the administrations of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia ul-Haq, the unrepentant couple went through police violence, imprisonment and exile, then the Poet was (if received wisdom is to be believed) violently murdered - and yet poetry, politics and love were grand, excessive and indispensable.

Broken Verses explores idealist fundamentalism and conflict between personal life and political activity, and its setting is Karachi. Aasmani's character does not develop but at the end she is making a documentary of her mother's life and work. This represents a country that is still held back by idealistic visions of the past.

Kamila Shamsie's recent novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009) deals with challenging issues, and once again Shamsie confronts the reader with political

debates and moral uncertainties. It is an ambitious epic, which spans more than half a century from World war II to 2001 world trade centre attacks and post 9/11 world, spanning the years between August 1945 and September 2001, is a story of two inextricably connected and politically impacted families. The novel moves from the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, in Japan, 1947 partition of British India, new Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US. At the opening of the novel, an unnamed man naked, chained and terrified is led into a cell and further it moves back to 1945. Hiroko Tanaka, a Japanese woman, is the central character. Her beloved German fiancée, Konrad Weiss, is killed by the Nagasaki atom bomb. Hiroko falls in love with a Muslim, Sajjad Ashraf. After the partition of British India, Hiroko and Sajjad take their son Raza to live in Pakistan. While depicting the personal stories of two cross cultural families, whose pains and losses bring to life the real human suffering behind war and politics.

Burnt Shadows raises and explores a vast array of topical and controversial issues as well as the relationship between place and identity as well as relationship between people from vastly different cultures. The characters in the novel struggle to understand national identity, religion and politics.

Epilogue:

The research paper writer thinks that the select novels of Pakistani women writers are with the theme of war and politics. They have an astonishing maturity and exhilarating style, transports us to a world we have not seen in fiction - vibrant, violent, utterly contemporary Pakistan. Their novels focus on some of the issues of politics, civil war, conflict between personal life and politics, cross-cultural relationship and cultural identity, and violence, etc. It is hoped that the present study is a modest contribution to the political interpretation of the novels of Pakistani women novelists.

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