

**SUBALTERN SPEAKS: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF
KAISER HAQ'S ODE ON THE LUNGI**

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the poem 'Ode on the Lungi' (2007) by Kaiser Haq, a Bangladeshi poet, in the perspective of postcolonial theory. The lungi, as a symbol of the excluded and marginalized people in the society, or in the words of the poet, 'global left-outs', articulates its claim for equality, dignity and position. It attempts to blur the social, political, economic and cultural binaries that exist in a postcolonial world in order to achieve a global position and acceptance.

Key words: *lungi, society, postcolonial, subaltern, elite, binary, global, equality, hegemony, colonized.*

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The contemporary world is witnessing renewed attempts by the writers especially from the former colonies to address the issues of marginality, subalternity, hegemony, identity and existential crises and social exclusion caused by a fragmented postcolonial world. The following analysis of the poem *Ode on the Lungi* (2007) by Kaiser Haq is an attempt to negotiate these burning issues in a postcolonial perspective. Kaiser Haq is a Professor of English at the University of Dhaka and at the same time he is a distinguished poet and a creative writer in English not only in Bangladesh but also in the whole SAARC region. Being an active member of FOSWAL (Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature), he is a representative literary figure in South Asia. He deals mainly with the social issues and the problems of inequality that exist in our global society. Besides *Ode on the Lungi*, another important poem by him, *As Usual* appeared in the same volume Published in the Streets of Dhaka: Collected Poems 1966-2006, deals with social evils, corruption and misuse of power.

The poem, under discussion, articulates the voice of the subaltern in the form of a lungi (a rectangular local garment vertically stitched to make a textile tube) for global acceptance. The poet urges that, being a familiar dress among people more than the population of the USA at any time, the lungi, though a costume basically subaltern, must be given equal status and regard like any other popular costumes in the West. The poem, therefore, exhibits the poet's democratic ideals. Moreover, it attempts to blur the much contested binaries in postcolonial discourse: the binaries of 'us' and 'them,' (the so-called advanced West and the backward non-West), hegemony and subalternity, and above all, the local and the global.

In postcolonial theory, the term 'subaltern' is a much debated concept. It is mainly derived from Marxist cultural critic Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and it generally identifies those people or social groups who are outside the hegemonic power structures of the West and its colonies and therefore, are excluded socially, politically, economically and geographically from a society's centre-stage. However, a group of South Asian historians who formed the Subaltern Studies Group in the late 1970s and early 1980s started writing history from below, not from the perspective of the colonizer but from the perspective of the colonized. They tried to give voice to the masses – the people who live at the margins of the society other than the social and economic 'elites.' Kaiser Haq too in his poem *Ode on the Lungi*, attempts to give voice to these socially, politically and economically excluded people who are 'ridiculously' clad in modest lungis.

The main focus in this study is, how the lungi as a designated symbol of the subaltern, is able to speak against torrential attack and encroachment of aggressive modernity under the guise of globalization which is incessantly engaged in promoting/imposing Western and elitist culture. Be it fashion in regard to costumes or cosmetics and the culture of Coca Cola, Mac-Donald or Pizza, fashion parties and night clubs – these are so meticulously injected in the minds of the indigenous people wherefrom a particular 'elite' group who are economically sound and even educated, tend to become dominant like any other dominant foreign groups, and thereby make their own people subordinate or subaltern. The Western cultural propaganda through numerous media resources has not only punctured the local culture, lifestyles, ways of thinking etc., it has also given birth to a class of native people (whom Ranajit Guha, one of the pioneers of the Subaltern Studies, might term as 'elite' in his discourse on colonial historiography) who take pride in looking and behaving Western. These indigenous 'elite' groups are interestingly designated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as 'native informants' (in Bill Ashcroft et al 26) who voice against their own 'other' for the interest of the first-world which is the monolithic proprietor of the global market and 'culture industry' (Satchidanandan 143-154). Now, the vital question is: can the lungi as a subaltern, speak? Perhaps, there is no definite answer to this

question.

The disease is within, if not altogether without – the colonial legacy. The so-called 'elite' people in the former colonies suffer from a 'colonial hangover' syndrome. The backward, the uneducated, the downtrodden, and the politically excluded and economically deprived underdogs of the society are therefore, looked down upon by the more educated, politically powerful and economically affluent class of people who consider themselves a class above the common people. The consciousness of difference as a class apart from the common mass in their psyche and their behaviour and actions make us realize that some form of neo-imperialism is at play. Kaiser Haq rightly says in his poem:

Think too of neo-imperialism
and sartorial hegemony,
how brown and yellow sahibs
in natty suits crinkle their noses
at compatriots (even relations)
in modest lungis, (49-54)

The poet invokes Walt Whitman, the celebrated American poet, who is known as a champion of democracy that, instead of a Western costume, let him too try a lungi for a White House appointment. But no way, the 'laureate of democracy' would prefer a kilt to a lungi! The kilt is the costume of the West while the lungi is the costume of the non-white subalterns. Few crucial questions may linger in our minds: how can a white man accept the subaltern lungi as his costume as he learnt to believe that the 'kilt' is superior to the 'lungi'? Will his conscience permit him to erase the cultural difference? Isn't it the 'clash of civilization'? The poet, Kaiser Haq, however, rejects the possibility of any 'clash of civilizations' (formulated by Samuel P. Huntington) at work here. He condemns such a civilizational/cultural 'clash' as sheer illogical:

Is it a clash of civilization?
The sheer illogicality of it –

the kilt is with "us"
but the lungi is with "them!" (45-48)

The poet retorts that there are hundreds of millions of people from East Africa to Indonesia wear the lungi with different names such as sarong (popular ethnic dress in Indonesia), munda (popular among Adivasis both in India and Bangladesh), htamain (used in Myanmar), saaram (ethnic Korean traditional dress), kitenge (ethnic African dress), kanga (a colourful African garment similar to Indonesian sarong and mostly worn by women), etc. day in day out. The poet poignantly postulates that at any one moment, "there are more people in lungis/than the population of the USA" (33-34). He is disheartened with the invasion of (sartorial) hegemony even in the private space: "my cousin in America/would get home from work/and lounge in a lungi - /till his son grew ashamed/of dad and started hiding/ the 'ridiculous ethnic attire'" (68-73). The depressing situation makes the poet desperate to do something for the lungi in order to achieve equal importance and regard for it in all places. The poet proudly proclaims:

I AM A LUNGI ACTIVIST!
Friends and fellow lungi lovers,
let us organise lungi parties and lungi parades,
let us lobby Hallmark and Archies
to introduce an international Lungi Day
when the UN Chief will wear a lungi
and address the world (83-89)

It is interesting to note here that the people of Dhaka, mostly young men clad in variety of lungis actually organised a lungi parade as a protest against the diktat of Baridhara Society, a posh area in Dhaka among others such as Gulshan and Bonani. The Baridhara Society banned the lungi-clad rickshawallas from their locality. Even the poet himself wonders how his words in the poem translated suddenly 'into action.' (Dhaka Tribune, April 19, 2013) But, the crucial point to be noted here is that these lungi-clad subalterns, as stated before, are looked down upon by their own people who

enjoy the status of 'elite' class, the colonial brown sahibs! It is often regretfully said that the colonies, with decolonization and independence, have got rid of the White sahibs, but they are still ruled by the replicated home-grown brown sahibs.

Kaiser Haq's poem, therefore, attempts to give the subaltern or the marginal groups their due status in the society. The 'sartorial equality' it speaks about, is, in fact, the equality of all people and it is rooted in this democratic ideal: "All clothes have equal rights" (14). The lungi, as the poet suggests, is:

an emblem of egalitarianism,
symbol of global left-outs
Raised and flapped amidst laughter
It's the subaltern speaking (158-161)

The poet seems to be not against the use of particular clothes required in certain places and therefore, has no complaint or disregard against the jacket and a tie in fancy dress parties or the ones suitable for sports in the spirit of the game. His fundamental concern is 'sartorial equality' as mentioned before and to achieve this end, he chooses lungi as a vehicle to resist 'sartorial hegemony.' In other words, it is an attempt of resistance to hegemony of all types. It is like the wretched of the earth fighting back for his equal share, dignity and position in all spheres.

The rectangular textile tube has a genuine claim to be treated equally since it has multiplicity of uses as an effective dress in different weather and conditions. One can fasten it around the waist and one particular size fits all. Again, a spare lungi can be folded up like a scarf. It can be used as an Arab-style headgear or a Sikh-style turban. As a G-string, it can fit sports like wrestling, kabaddi etc. In an event of natural calamity, like great floods, which is quite common in Bangladesh, this subaltern cloth, if hand-pumped air to balloon up, can become a humble ark and it can save one's life. In short, the lungi is a 'complete wardrobe.'

The modest lungi, therefore, is an emblem of equality in all respects: human, social, political and economic. The lungi, as a symbol of the excluded and marginalized people in the society, or in the words of the poet, 'global left-outs', genuinely articulates its claim for equality, dignity and position in the global society. Though a symbol of 'global left-outs', a marginalized and neglected subaltern, yet, when it is raised and flapped with dignity, it screams for equality. The poem meticulously attempts to blur the social, political, economic and cultural binaries that exist in today's polarized world. The poet, therefore, has justifiably made the lungi as a mouthpiece of the subaltern people craving/claiming for a dignified place in this bifurcated postcolonial and globalized world. As a true symbol of global left-outs, undoubtedly, it is the subaltern speaking!

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