

**POSTCOLONIAL MARXISM AND RESISTANCE LITERATURE: A  
STUDY OF *TISHNAGI***

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**Abstract**

*The regional languages have contributed a substantial body of work with major postcolonial concerns of resistance in almost all such locations that experienced colonization. This paper explores the literary journey of Postcolonial Marxism in the Indo-Pak Subcontinent as reflected in Tishnagi, a novel by Rasheed Nadvi. The article reviews the critical works that trace the commonalities and differences between two theoretical horizons namely Postcolonialism and Marxism. The review leads to a framework that blends some elements of the two theories and allows a Postcolonial-Marxist study which, though contentious, has been employed here to investigate the patterns of social and anticolonial movements documented as fictionalized history in Tishnagi. It is found that anticolonial and Marxist lines of resistance are overlapping in the novel under study, providing a rationale for the combination of the two areas of study.*

**Key terms:** Postcolonial Marxism, Resistance Literature, *Tishnagi*

**1. Background**

Literary postcoloniality is often discussed with reference to works written in English while works in regional/local languages are often not considered worthy of 'scholarly' critiques in the light of European and American 'high theory'. The fact, however, is that, more than the works produced in English, it is the regional/local languages that have contributed a substantial body of work with major postcolonial concerns in almost all such regions that experienced colonization. The Indian subcontinent is no exception. This paper is a brief

exploration of one such work written in the context of postcoloniality in the subcontinent. There have been numerous postcolonial and Marxist voices in Pakistan since 1947: Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1989), Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* (1989), Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1994), Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009), and many more. Pakistani Urdu literature is particularly rich in such themes as exploitation, colonization and oppression. Almost all the prominent writers in Urdu, such as Sa'adat Hassan Manto, Abdullah Hussain, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, Qudrat Ullah Shahab, Mumtaz Mufti, Mustansar Hussain Tararr, and others, have created works with major postcolonial themes either as the main text or the sub-text. Fiction writers of other Pakistani languages have also given some space to the issues related to Pakistan's colonial past and post-Independence conditions. In Pashto, writers like Master Khan Gul, Master Karim, Mehdi Shah Bacha, Ajmal Khattak, Qalander Momin, etc. have produced fictional works with postcolonial subtexts. Likewise, in Sindhi, Abdul Qadeer Junejo, and Muhammad Usman Deepali are the prominent figures whose work can easily be dubbed as resistance literature. Fiction writers of Balochi, such as Hanif Shareef, Hafeez Hassan Abadi, Saba Dashtiari, Atta Shad, have also created works with undercurrents of postcoloniality and resistance. Similarly, a trace of postcoloniality may also be found in the works of Saraiki writers such as Aslam Rasoolpuri and Mushtaq Gadi.

Historically, fictional works produced before and after 1947 in the regions that now constitute Pakistan have been strongly influenced by Marxist praxis as during the 1930s and 1940s many writers joined what was known as *Taraqi Pasand Tehreek* or Progressive Writers Movement. Due to their focus on power relations among various socio-economic classes, many writers of various Pakistani languages have traditionally opted social and economic disparities and political struggles resulting thereof as their major themes. The materialist critique of Marxism, like Feminism, has been influential in (de)shaping the course of postcolonial theory as a discourse of resistance. That explains why so many postcolonial critics and creative writers have Marxist leanings.

## **2. Postcolonial Marxism**

Since European and American imperial and neo-imperial projects have been driven by capitalism, a number of theorists have traced the essential link between Marxism and Postcolonialism as ideologies of resistance. Aijaz

Ahmed's *In Theory* (1992), Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Aditya Nigam's "Marxism and the Postcolonial World: Footnotes to a Long March" (1999), Nimtz's "The Eurocentric Marx and Engels and Other Related Myths" (2002), Jani's "Marx, Eurocentrism, and the 1857 Revolt in British India" (2002), are some of the famous theoretical studies on this theme. These and many other works (such as Robinson, 1983; Young, 2001; Noyes, 2003; Alan, 2001; Camara, 2008; Buck-Morss, 2000; Gugelberger, 1985, Larsen, 2002; etc) study the ways in which Marxist and postcolonial struggles exploit each other. Nimtz (2002), Jani (2002), Benita Parry (2002), E. San Juan Jr. (2002), Wilkerson (2011), etc explore how Marxism has been used in anticolonial struggles, and how it deals with the bad effects of capitalism, imperialism and colonialism. It is agreed, by many, that the primary concern of both the movements is same. Hence, Bartolovich and Lazarus' *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies* (2002) advocates "a Marxist postcolonial studies" as "Marxism is crucial to understanding and, ultimately, changing circumstances such as uneven development, modernity, industrialization, geopolitical tension and conflict, socioeconomic polarization that are of primary concern to postcolonial studies" (Groening, 2004, p. 193-194). However, Marxism and postcolonialism are not without differences. The biggest difference is that while postcolonialism allows pluralism, particularly in terms of classes, Marxism strictly discourages accommodating more than one class. Many studies bring into the limelight their contrasting areas and how they are mutually irreconcilable, though most of such works acknowledge the relationship between the two movements, considering it a kind of "troubled relation" (Moore-Gilbert, 2001, p. 9). Blending them together may have threatening implications for postcolonial studies but it would have a positive effect on Marxism. Some Marxists go as far as suggesting the abolition of the separate discipline of postcolonial studies. Admitting the importance of the postcolonial movement, they allow a "subsumption of its objects of study within Marxist traditions" (Moore-Gilbert, 2001, p. 11), thus supporting the area of postcolonial Marxism. The present paper, a case study of Urdu novel *Tishnagi*, explores the extent to which this type of subsumption has been fictionalized in resistance literature of the Subcontinent.

### **3. Tishnagi: A travelogue of the resistant**

*Tishnagi*, written by Rasheed Nadvi, is structured in the manner of a travelogue, a young man's journey against the forces of oppression in the colonized subcontinent. In the first few chapters, however, it appears to be a romantic

reading. But the phrases like *mehkoom qaum* – colonized nation (Nadvi, 2007, p. 24), *azadi ki fiza* – environment of freedom (p. 25), *dusri qaum ke ghulam* – slaves of the other nation (p. 30), and *azadi ke talabgar* – seekers of freedom (p. 30), in the fourth and fifth chapters of the novel reveal that revolt and revolution are not far behind romance. Although the thread of postcoloniality remains intact till the end of the text, yet from ninth chapter onwards, the story revolves, predominantly, around the theme of socialist activities. It turns out to be a Marxist reading in chapter fifteen in which the laborers are praised with comments like: *mazdoor ki insani rag hamesha jagti rehti hae* i.e. humanism always remains alive in a laborer (p. 128) and *mazdoor ke dil ki tarah mazdoor ki jhonprri min bhi wus'at hoti hae* i.e., a laborer's hut is vast just as his heart is (p. 129). The protagonist while working as a manager in a firm, where thousands of laborers work, decides to involve them in his anti-colonial movement (p. 135). This is the point where Marxism and postcolonialism are reconciled and they stay so till the end of the book.

Mohsin, the protagonist of the book, has an interesting identity: he is a young and intelligent orator, a poet, and the only son of a landlord. He falls in love with a British girl Mary, participates in the struggle against the British rule, is imprisoned and escapes from jail with a laborer, Nooru, who has rescued a poor girl, Naju, from a wicked *Seth*. Following their escape, Nooru, Naju and Mohsin go to Daru Basti near the borders of Burma. Naju dies accidentally there, and Mohsin and Nooru go to Rangoon where Mohsin starts working as a manager in a firm. This is the point when the protagonist's worldview is changed and he starts organizing the laborers in order to fight capitalism and colonialism. However, before his anti-colonial socialist ideas mature, he meets Manorma who is his old college fellow. This meeting proves catastrophic for Mohsin and his newly conceived plan to achieve his ambition. Mohsin is forced by the owner of the firm to leave the country in order not to establish a permanent bond with his niece Manorma because Mohsin is a Muslim and Manorma a Hindu, and, of course, in Rangoon Mohsin is a worker while Manorma is a capitalist's niece. Mohsin arrives in Russia and witnesses the laborers' power there which strengthens his belief in Marxism as an anti-colonial and anti-capitalistic ideology. Back in India, as a result of an agreement between the government and the leaders of independence movement, all the political prisoners are released. Consequently, Mohsin comes back to the subcontinent and starts working on propagating anti-colonial socialist agenda in Lahore. On his way back to Lahore, he also meets Manorma and tells her why

he had to leave Rangoon earlier. Due to this news and the shock of separation caused by her own uncle, she dies. Carrying these bitter memories and unfulfilled personal desires, Mohsin dreams a classless society which will, in turn, fight colonialism. He opens a hostel where poor, unwanted students reside and all the expenses of their studies are afforded by Mohsin. He even declares all his belongings as collective public property for the poor students living there. Another girl of rich background is impressed by his poetry and ideals, and poses to be in love with him. Her betrayal leads Mohsin to a road accident where he dies.

A number of questions can be posed to study this novel. For example, does *Tishnagi* reflect or resist the dominant ideologies? In British India, racism, religion, caste system and an economic system based on capitalism shape a hegemonic social superstructure which is continuously resisted by the protagonist and some other characters of the novel. For instance, Mary loves Mohsin by breaking the barriers of the binaries such as colonizer/colonized and white/colored. Mohsin leaves the peaceful life at his feudal father's home, joins the anti-colonial struggle and goes to jail and then works for the socialist cause giving away the whole of his property to the young socialists.

Another question may be: Does the subaltern speak through the text? Though almost all the main characters Mohsin, Marry, Manorma and Rashida originally belong to the bourgeoisie background, they do not represent upper class and have been portrayed as resistant figures. On the other hand all the major characters, except Mary, are colonized and the anti-colonial oration and actions of the protagonist are given due space in the text. So, in Marxist terms, the subalterns have little voice but in anti-colonial terms subalterns have been given enough space in the text.

Proletariats, though unable to qualify as the novel's leading characters, are part of the action: Nooru attempts to kill the *Seth*; Naju bravely speaks against the *Seth* in the court, breaking the imposed silencing. Diljeet survives against all odds and does not marry the wicked Rajindar; and Mohsin spits on the face of the wealthy *Moulvi*—who might harm him owing to his power to issue a *fatwa*—for not helping the starving girls living in his neighborhood. Thus the ideological positioning of various characters in the novel reveals the Marxist politics of the writer.

Dickens (1999) in his *Great Expectations* deals with a basic question which is whether it is possible for an individual to ever comfortably change his/her

identity along with his/her class. Yes, *Tishnagi*'s protagonist undergoes such a transformation as he regresses from a bourgeoisie social state to a proletariat one. However, this transformation comes at the cost of his personal happiness and life itself: Mohsin has to lose Rashida and two other girls who truly love him. The protagonist's social regression, in terms of social classes, changes economic position too as he leads an ordinary worker's life in Rangoon. However, it is interesting that his struggle for revolution is matched by his fascination with romance as he falls in love at least three times in the novel, mostly with rich girls, though, all of them stand by him and support his socialist cause, as well.

Nadvi has constructed a narrative where various social classes clash: it is also a negotiating staircase (Bhabha, 1994) which provides a third space to those living on the upper and lower floors. Here, while on one hand, Mohsin shows a downwards mobility by stepping down from bourgeoisie position, on the other hand, the poor girls residing in Mohsin's "Friends' Hostel" have climbed a few steps upwards, as now they are seen playing lawn tennis and enjoying the living conditions that are not less than those present at the Government College Hostel. So, this neutralization of social polarity creates a liminal space, a kind of comfort zone for those indulging in anti-colonial socialist struggle.

The author of *Tishnagi* considers "economic base" as an important factor and criticizes the existing superstructure that consists of law, politics, philosophy, religion, etc. However, the writer does not like following socialist manifesto blindly. Even the hero of *Tishnagi*, who idealizes Russian socialism, declares:

I do not oppose any religion of India. I am against those people who do wrongs and are prejudiced. These people exploit religion in order to deceive others. (Nadvi, 2007, p. 353; translated from Urdu by authors)

Here, the protagonist departs from the dominant Marxist thought which condemns all religions since it believes religions have always been in connivance with the forces of oppression and exploitation.

Hans Bertens (2001, p. 84) states, "For Marxism the basis of any society is its economic organization, which then gives rise to certain social relations." This is true of *Tishnagi*. The so-called friendship of Rashida and Fakhra is based on the economic conditions. Then Rashida leaves Mohsin and goes on to marry an I.C.S., who is the son of a feudal lord of India, thus choosing money and status over love and revolution. So, in the novel, human relations are determined on

the basis of economic conditions. In this way, the writer has expressed his social realism and has refrained from creating any idealistic plot situations. His characters are very human as they range from the altruistic rebels like Mohsin, the protagonist, to Rashida who cares more for her own wellbeing.

Freedom is an important theme in the book. The word *azadi* has been used for about forty five times in the novel referring not only to 'freedom from' but also 'freedom to': freedom from colonial oppression, freedom from gangster capitalism, freedom from social and caste disparities, as well as freedom to speak, and so on.

The writer has mixed this anti-colonial struggle with the theme of romance as the socialist protagonist is depicted as a romantic figure who falls in love with a number of women. Most of them happen to belong to rich families, except Soshi who is of humble background and, fails to win his attention. The writer has not followed the usual formula of a young, angry man of poor socio-economic background falling for the lure of socialism and beautiful, rich girls; rather, it is the socially privileged characters who espouse the revolutionary cause.

#### **4. Conclusion**

*Tishnagi* reveals a face of British India where capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, social inequality, economic disparity, exploitation and oppression were at work. The voices of resistance, irrespective of their ideological affiliations and social background, were united in their journey against the colonial project. However, the text shows that originally Marxism provided the required impetus to organize people against the colonial rule. But the politics of the writer is tinged with the local sensibility which is shaped by the religious ambience of the Indo-Pak Subcontinent. Therefore, one may concur that the subsumption of Marxism with religious instinct has further sharpened the anti-colonial credentials of the protagonist.

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