

Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies Vol. 6 (2018)

Cultural Identity and State Oppression: Poetic Resistance to Internal Colonialism in Pakistan

By Dr. Qaisar Abbas

Abstract

Challenging the conventional wisdom, this article argues that colonialism never left South Asia as it transformed itself into internal colonialism after independence. Strong shadows of British colonialism can still be seen in colonial legacies of legal, administrative and economic structures of Pakistan and other South Asian nations. Within this conceptual framework, this study analyzes poetic discourse in Pakistan's native languages including Balochi, Brahui, Pashto, Seriaki and Sindhi as it resists forces of internal colonialism. The analysis demonstrates poetic resistance within the two major themes: A consistent quest for cultural identity in Seriaki and Sindhi, and a profound resistance to the state oppression in the Balochi and Pashto poetic discourse. This discourse demonstrates themes of cultural defiance with modernist, post-modernist, realistic and expressionist trends. Although resistance is not the only stream, it is a prominent theme with some similar and distinctive features specific to the nature of oppression to marginalize native cultures. The poetic discourse, along with the political and intellectual struggles, however, became instrumental in gaining some breathing space for native cultures although mechanisms of internal colonialism remain intact in Pakistan.

Keywords:

Cultural Resistance, Poetic Discourse, Internal Colonialism, Native Languages, Pakistan, Balochi, Brahui, Pashto, Seraiki, Sindhi.

Pakistan's ruling elites have carved out a unique system to govern and thrive which has been instrumental in sustaining their power and control during the last 70 years. The post-colonial history of Pakistan narrates dynamics of internal colonialism where a new kind of operational mechanism was introduced to maintain the colonial structure allowing for a heavy control by the centre to rule the peripheral areas. An unholy alliance of the landed aristocracy, army and bureaucracy emerged to colonize weaker provinces and communities, their economies, cultures, and languages. The landed aristocracy and army changed their seats as rulers and the bureaucratic establishment provided legal and administrative support to the alliance as needed. The so-called democracy, that was sustained off and on, became subservient to these political forces. The history of Pakistan, at the same time, reveals a cultural struggle against this system by intellectuals, writers, and poets. This article discusses internal colonialism as a conceptual framework for post-colonial Pakistan within the broader context of South Asia. Positioning the poetic discourse of native languages within this conceptual framework, it analyzes poetry written in the major native languages of Pakistan including Seraiki, Balochi, Brahui, Sindhi and Pashto. It further explores the broader role of this discourse in gaining cultural and political autonomies.

How the Pakistani literary discourse, mainstream and peripheral both, defies internal colonialism, is a neglected but fascinating topic to be explored. Poetics of resistance in native languages of Pakistan has rarely been explored as a research topic due to the lack of federal support and limited resources of the peripheral cultures. All available resources were used for this research including online and print material in newspapers, journals and books. The study also involved interviews with poets and writers and several visits to the Library of Congress in Washington DC.

First, this article offers an alternative conceptual framework within a broader context of post-colonial South Asia. The next section explores the concepts of cultural resistance and poetic discourse. After clarifying the dynamics of internal colonialism within the structural mechanisms in

Pakistan, the poetic discourse in the native languages is analyzed in detail. Major conclusions of the study are drawn in the last section within the political and cultural contexts of Pakistan.

Conceptual Framework

Political developments in post-colonial Pakistan should be viewed within the four historical phases of colonialism, internal colonialism, ad hoc colonialism, and terrorism in South Asia. The colonial period created a socio-cultural, economic and political vacuum in the subcontinent. By breaking down the traditional-communal social order, the British imperialism also created an additional class with indigenous skin and color but a mind of the ruling class. This group became proxy rulers to fill in the gaps where colonial rulers were not available. In their language, lifestyle and behaviour, they became the second line of local rulers with an imperialist mindset. The new administrative, political and economic systems remained as exploitative after independence as they were under the colonial setup. Internal colonialism was introduced by national leaders in the newly liberated nations making cosmetic changes in the system, not the colonial structure which remained intact. In the absence of a legitimate electoral process in most South Asian states, except India where it provided stability and legitimacy to rule, rest of the nation states were still hegemonic in nature. Probably that is why we still see the uneasy ruler-subject relationship in South Asian countries where masses seem to be in a perennial mode of agitation against their governments while the ruling regimes, most of the time, behave as oppressive rulers. This colonial legacy continues.

Additionally, this internal disarray in the region was further enhanced by the global tug-of-war between the capitalist and communist forces as part of the cold war introducing another phenomenon in the region what I call “Ad hoc Colonialism.” In the current geopolitical circumstance when a world power militarily occupies a country for a shorter period motivated by geopolitical conditions, national interest and economic benefits, ad hoc colonialism becomes a strategy to establish military bases in anticipation of

future manoeuvres or increasing political and economic influence. The concept is highly relevant to those world regions where modern-day colonialism continues for achieving military or economic goals through short term military invasions.

Geopolitical interests of the United States and Soviet Union accelerated internal conflicts and further deteriorated economic and social infrastructures of the whole region. The prolonged foreign intervention began when the Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan in 1979. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the remaining Jihadi groups under different umbrellas, armed with modern weaponry supplied by the United States, became a mighty force that led to the formation of another monster in the region commonly known as the Taliban (Goodson, 1998). These militant groups became so strong that they occupied Afghanistan and ruled it with a draconian hand until another superpower came in to oust them from urban centres.

This time, it was the United States that occupied Afghanistan in 2001 in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York. Continuation of this ad hoc colonialism in the region by two world powers for over three decades not only shook Afghanistan, Pakistan and neighbouring countries, it adversely affected the whole South Asia in one way or another. First, it introduced a new wave of terrorism which was never seen in the region before. Militant forces emerged everywhere in Afghanistan and Pakistan which not only targeted NATO and American forces, but also killed innocent citizens, destroyed the private property and infrastructural facilities.

This conceptual framework, besides analyzing the impact of colonialism in the region, also explains the historical milestones spanning over half a century in the post-colonial South Asia. This alternative approach argues that it is the continuation of colonialism, in the form of internal colonialism and then ad hoc colonialism that is still impacting South Asian societies as a major hurdle to democracy, peace, regional integration, and development. The next section will further explore the concepts of culture and poetic resistance within the context of South Asia.

Cultural Resistance and Poetic Discourse

If culture, as defined by Raymond Williams, is primarily a form of material production and a symbolic system depending on the field of study you are associated with, then culture creates a system of meanings through literature, music, poetry, and other forms of creative arts (Williams, 2002). Culture, no matter how you define, is deeply political and it is widely used as a means of social control by the dominant power structure. Cultural resistance in challenging this hegemony, can be “used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure” (Duncombe, 2002). According to this definition, culture, as an organized and planned activity is essentially political in nature but not a political activity itself, and cultural resistance provides a free space to create language, meaning and vision for the future.

Poetry has been a popular form of public expression in South Asia which has historically played a vital role against imperialism and internal colonialism. Benedict Anderson’s demonstrated correlation between the rise of modern nationalism and the form of novel (novel/nation) has become a predominant line of thought in post-colonial studies within the context of Europe (Anderson, 1991). Nazneen Ahmed, however, argues that poetry as a popular mode of communication in post-colonial societies, can also be a national “form” as in the case of Bangladesh where it became a highly effective tool as part the liberation movement in 1971 (Ahmed, 2014). To her, it is the poetic discourse, not novel, that is easily accessible and comprehensible to the masses in developing societies where oral traditions take a central role. In fact, social gatherings of poetry recitation and musical renderings of poems have been a popular public voice in all South Asian societies where low literacy rates limit reading capabilities. This argument is also highly relevant to native cultures of Pakistan where public gatherings of *Mushairas* (poetry recitations) are highly popular among the masses across social and class boundaries.

In *Weapons of the Weak* James C. Scott talks about the everyday cultural resistance as opposed to direct and open defiance (Scott, 1985). Thus, tactics of foot dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering or sabotage become strategies to avoid direct conflict with the powerful oppressor. Also, his concept of “public transcripts” as behaviour or speaking mode to defy the abuse of power is also related to poetic resistance. Within the context of poetic discourse, these transcripts tend to convey hidden meanings, linguistic tricks, euphemism, folktales and metaphors which are sometimes hard to detect as they are packed within the folds of symbolic gestures and multiple meanings. This notion of “public transcripts” perfectly resonates with native cultures of Pakistan where the poetic discourse of native languages, under the current circumstances, is not considered a serious threat to the system unless it directly challenges the powerful military establishment or religious orthodoxy.

Dynamics of Internal Colonialism in Pakistan

Scholars have discussed internal colonialism within racial or ethnic dimensions in England, Latin America, the United States, Canada, Australia and several European nations where dominant classes and majority groups tend to marginalize native populations and ethnic minorities (Hechter, 1999). The phenomenon, however, works with different dynamics in the former colonies in Asia.

Within the context of South Asia generally and Pakistan specifically, internal colonialism can be defined as a system of hegemony that works directly or indirectly with the patronage of the core within a nation state to exploit human, economic or natural resources of peripheral regions to bring them under the domination of a powerful central regime. The strong core in the system not only controls peripheral regions politically, it also undermines their cultural, educational, economic, and social spheres. It is the strong federal structure in Pakistan that exploits its weaker regions in coordination with the civil-military establishment and the landed aristocracy. Within the system, as Robert Blauner argues, beyond the natural process of

contact and acculturation “Rather, the colonizing power carries out a policy which constrains, transforms or destroys indigenous values, orientations, or ways of life” (Blauner, 1969).

Aijaz Ahmad argues that nationalism became the popular ideology to offset imperialism for the newly independent nations after world war II without comprehending the polemics and weaknesses of the concept (Ahmad, 1992). In fact, while nationalism was used as a major ideological thrust against imperialism, internal colonialism was the real strategy used by most rulers in the new nation states, who became agents of advanced capitalism. Internal colonialism in the form of marginalization of ethnic, cultural or regional minorities, became a predominant mode of governance in South Asia which still poses a huge challenge to development, peace and democracy in the subcontinent. Here, hegemony over the marginalized communities, mixed with the centre’s domination over racial, ethnic or religious communities, becomes a major tool for the ruling classes within nation states who try to mock their former colonial rulers.

Dynamics of internal colonialism in Pakistan, along with growing economic disparities, with variations, in the four provinces of Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, gave birth to an unprecedented trail of social unrest, anarchy and cultural discord. New social and economic realities found new avenues of religious, ethnic, geographical and even sectarian divisions. Hamza Alavi argues that it was the salaried Muslim class of India who was in favour of carving out a Muslim state as they were afraid of losing power and control in the postcolonial India (Alavi, 1989). These Urdu speaking bureaucrats became the main ruling class in the early post-colonial Pakistan, but their power considerably decreased as the Punjabi dominated ruling junta became the main beneficiary of this arrangement. The system of internal colonialism, thus, continued the legacy of the old British bureaucracy in the Indian subcontinent. The colonial structure of tax and tariffs, the legal structure, and the administrative institution of bureaucracy and military, remained intact in the newly created nation state

modelled on the ruler-subject relationship of the colonial period. Subtleties of this ruling structure established hegemony in economic, political, legal, cultural and educational institutions. The new nation state also continued the British legal system which was efficiently employed to exploit the peripheral areas and marginalize ethnic and religious minorities. The Indo-Saxon legal system was modified to suit the interest of rulers whenever needed. First, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto¹ used the same legal framework to declare the Ahmadiyya community as non-Muslim and then the military dictator Ziaul Haq utilized the same framework to legally outcast the community from the national scene imposing severe restrictions that limited their participation in business, academic, scientific and other professional fields. As a result, the community was not only declared non-Muslim, their status was also reduced to the level of minorities (Ahmed, 2010).

Because the new political system in Pakistan was also borrowed from the British rulers, the colonial pattern of ruler-subject relationship never changed. The Basic Democracy system introduced by the first military dictator General Ayub Khan² to use the rural majority against the metropolitan elite-was the same strategy the colonialists used in the undivided India (Sayeed, 1967). However, it was not only military dictators but also the elected political leaders who behaved like colonial rulers. Bhutto, the popular political leader and founder of the Pakistan People's Party, also brutally suppressed the labour movement of 1972 in Karachi after coming to power (Ali, 2010).

This domination and marginalization of peripheries was more vibrant in the cultural domain than any other sector as argued by Langah (2012). In her research on the Seraiki poetic resistance, she talks about the system of lingual hierarchy devised by the colonial rulers. The ruling alliance in

¹ The popular political leader and founder of Pakistan People's Party who was prime minister during 1973-1977.

² General Ayub Khan was the first military dictator who ruled Pakistan during 1958-1966.

Pakistan has also devised a five-tier system of lingual hierarchy assigning a specific role to native languages. In this system, English has assumed the status of a royal language of brown rulers in the post-colonial Pakistan. Although spoken by a small educated class, English not only has become the official language in federal and provincial governments, it has also become a language of communication for the army, bureaucracy and the educated aristocracy as they speak and write in this language.

Urdu, on the other hand, has become the second-tier language which has been transformed into a predominant language of most middle and lower classes as national language. On the other hand, major native languages- Sindhi, Balochi, Brahui, Punjabi, Pashto, and Seraiki-have been conveniently relegated to the third place by downgrading them as “regional” languages, limiting their advancement and influence. These indigenous languages have been highly marginalized based on the theory that Urdu as Lingua Franca has a magical power to unite the nation. Nonetheless, the four native languages represent 77.24 percent of the total population where Punjabi is spoken by 44.15 percent, Sindhi 14.10 percent, Pashto 15.42 percent and Balochi 3.57 percent of the total population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2001).

Some languages, thought to be “insignificant” have been assigned to the fourth place in this lingual hierarchy as local languages while other “irrelevant” languages, already at the verge of extinction, have been placed at the bottom of this totem pole. About 50-90 local languages are rarely considered relevant. Based on this discussion, the following section offers analysis of the poetic discourse in the major native languages of Pakistan.

Poetic Discourse: Cultural Identity and State Oppression

Writers and poets who dared to challenge the system of internal colonialism were traumatized and harassed by the state through internment, torture and economic deprivation in the early years of independence. Faiz

Ahmad Faiz, the popular poet, was arrested in 1951 for “plotting” a coup along with a group of military and civil intellectuals. He was tried for treason with a possibility of death penalty but later released. Other poets including Habib Jalib, Ahmad Faraz and Ustad Daman were also arrested and harassed for their poetic resistance to civil and military dictators.

Excluding the stalwarts like Faiz, Jalib and Faraz, however, it is not the mainstream Urdu verse but the poetic discourse in native languages of Pakistan which exposes cruelties of internal colonialism in the post-colonial Pakistan. Undoubtedly, it is the Sindhi, Pushto, Seraiki, Brahui, Punjabi and Balochi poetry that vigorously and boldly challenged and even rejected the system of internal colonialism. The poetic discourse in these languages offers a unique imagery, metaphorical finesse, and fresh lexicon dealing with postmodernist themes depicting societal agitation, miseries of the poor, insensitivities of the ruling elite and gender issues, both in its manifestation and structure. Besides the poetic resistance against the system at large, each language has its unique poetic expression depicting their specific socio-political environment. These streams widely exist, among others, in the poetry of Sheikh Ayaz, Janbaz Jatoi, Tanveer Abbasi, Imdad Hussaini, Sehar Imdad and Pushpa Vallabh (Sindhi); Hasina Gul, Ghani Khan, Amir Hamza Khan Shinwari and Samandar Khan Samandar (Pushto); Ata Shad and Gul Khan Naseer (Balochi); Noor Khan Mohammad Hassani (Brahui); and Ashiq Buzdar, Mohammad Ayub and Abid Ameer (Seriaki). Any analysis of the native poetic discourse remains incomplete without discussing the two distinctive thematic streams: A persistent quest for cultural identify and state as a symbol of oppression.

Quest for Cultural Identity

The province of Punjab, with its demographic majority, economic power and the military might (Siddiq, 2007) is the major beneficiary of internal colonialism in Pakistan. While in the Indian Punjab, land holdings were substantially reduced through reforms after the independence, the

feudal system is still intact in Pakistan which is a major ingredient of the recipe for internal colonialism. This social reality emerges again and again in the Punjabi poetry of Pakistan (Rammah, 2006).

The same system, however, also promotes the worst kind of marginalization of the Punjabi language. The lack of patronage on part of the government and the social trend of the Punjabi speaking population to shun their mother tongue, have been the two major reasons of this marginalization (Rammah, 2006). As a result, Punjabi was never recognized as a literary or academic language after independence which otherwise has a long and rich history of folk and Sufi poetic traditions. The scare of the vanishing mother tongue often appears in the Punjabi poetic discourse. For Mazhar Tirmazi, a known Punjabi poet who lives in London now, winter brings back memories of the motherland where the people “who have no words” becomes a nostalgic reference to his fading mother tongue (Tirmazi, 2004):

Don't worry about me, I can exist in my words
But what about those who have no words
For them the world is a bread-loaf lying in a chhaabba³

What do they know of the art of living who are scared by
the sadness that stares from the eyes of others⁴

Charagh Din, known by his pen name of Ustad Daman (1911-1984) was another critic of military dictators and the ruling class of his time through his fearless Punjabi verse. For Zubair Ahmed “The most persecuted poet was Ustaad Daman who was put behind bars not only by the military dictators Ayub Khan and Yayia Khan but also the elected prime minister, Z. A. Bhutto.”⁵ A common man himself, he opposed corruption and

³ A bread basket.

⁴ Translated by Amin Mughal from Punjabi.

⁵ Email interview by the author with Zubair Ahmed, April 2, 2015.

exploitation of the poor throughout his life. His highly satirical poem “My Country, Two Allahs” represents a bold example of his vigorous opposition to the military dictator General Zia:⁶

What fun for our lovely land,
Wherever we go armed forces stand.
It happened only yesterday,
And will again another day,
A hundred thousand quit the field,
To give up half their country’s land.
Three cheers for General Zia!
*Bravo! Bravo! General Zia!*⁷

However, the Seraiki speaking population in the southern Punjab, with its rich literary heritage, considers itself a cultural and lingual group, separate from rest of the Punjab province. Their language has been marginalized at three levels. First, Seraiki as a language has been side-tracked by the state that did not allow its growth at literary and cultural levels. Second, it became target of the mainstream Punjabi establishment that does not accept their claim of a separate identify. At the third level, their culture has been exploited by the mainstream and their own landed aristocracy. Against this backdrop, there has been a strong movement demanding to carve out the Seraiki province from Punjab. To the late Seraiki nationalist leader Taj Mohammad Langah:

More than 90 percent of the poetry produced by Seraiki poets is about resistance. And there is a reason behind this. The Seraiki belt has been slaves for more than 5,000 years and they have expressed the tyranny

⁶ General Ziaul Haq was the most brutal dictator of Pakistan who also institutionalized militancy imposing legal and administrative mechanisms. He ruled the country as president during 1978-1988.

⁷ Translated by Waqas Khwaja from Punjabi.

of oppressors and their own helplessness through literature —whether it is poetry or prose (The News, 2015).

The Seraiki poets who became part of the movement and actively integrated this dream into their poetic expression, have become immensely popular. Sain Ashiq Buzdar, with his bold manifestation of political discontent against the provincial authority, became a popular poet as part of the movement for the Seraiki province. His poem *Asan Qaidi Takht Lahore De* (we are slaves of the Lahore's throne) recreates the capital of the Punjab province as a symbol of oppression (Buzdar, 1986). After paying glowing tributes to his motherland, the poem narrates tyrannies of the Punjabi rulers boldly and intensely:

This land of faith, today
Weeps a thousand tears.
Its face is under the Punjabi jackboot
On its back, the whips are singing
Every vein has a thousand wounds
And we, the village lads,
See what happened to us
Of rings, pendants and bracelets
Of our comely adornments,
We have been disposed.

Our eyes are dripping blood
Our beings have been demolished
Our lips have seals of tyranny
Our hands are bound in shackles
We're slaves of Lahore's oppression
We're slaves of Lahore's oppression.⁸

⁸ Translated by Athar Saeed from Seraiki for this article.

Abid Ameer, a Seraiki poet and professor of English, also challenged the cruel dictatorship of General Ziaul Haq and was jailed for his audacity. In Mahmood Awan's words: "Ameer has artistically used a conversational style to convey simple messages through his poetry" (The News, 2014). Author of two poetry books, Abid opposed discrimination against his culture and language bluntly (Ameer, 2000). One of his poems reflects depth of his disillusionment over marginalization of his cultural heritage by the powerful:

How come our ponds dried
our herds and belongings destroyed.
Come and take our pictures,
write features on us,
*Rohi*⁹ is a heaven,
portraying us like a circus.¹⁰

Mohsin Naqvi (1947-1996) was a popular Seraiki and Urdu poet with a unique poetic talent who himself became target of violence and lost his life. In a constant state of fear, he often creates an unparalleled imagery that is full of mysterious silence enveloped in the darkness of his surroundings (Tahir, 1995):

Robbers, thieves and bandits
Making holes in the roof.
And foundation of my home
Asks the milky-white dove
Again and again,
Sitting on the beak of word's spade:

⁹ Cholistan desert in the Seraiki area.

¹⁰ Translated by Mahmood Awan from Seraiki.

“What’s going to happen now”?¹¹

Besides traditional poets, the new generation of Seraiki poets is widening its canvas using the contemporary modes of poetic expression. Mohammad Ayub, a published Seraiki poet of the younger generation, who currently resides in Canada, has published an anthology of his poems. Ayub’s poem “For Nazir Abbasi” pays a glowing tribute to the young martyr who became victim of the military dictator’s brutality:

O hanging noose,
be gentle
we toiled our life away
to bring up sons
they had a sheltered life
they didn’t face the elements.

O hanging noose
when everyone was prostrate,
their brows were aglow with defiance
when no one braved the torrid sun
they spread their hands for shade
and never gave in to tyranny.¹²

Seraiki poetry offers multiple voices of resistance with several themes that include protest for marginalization of their language, economic injustice, settlement of native people on their land, bureaucratic exploitation of their resources, brutalities of ruling elites within the broader context of Pakistan, and the demand for a separate province (Tahir, 1995). As part of the movement for the Seraiki province, the verse became a protesting voice of the people to demand autonomy and respect for their culture. Seraiki

¹¹ Translated by Tahir Tonsvi from Seraiki.

¹² Translated by Athar Saeed from Seraiki.

poetry, along with its resistance and protest to the prevailing system, seems to be in a constant search for its diminishing cultural identity.

While resistance to the provincial hegemony remains a significant theme in the Seraiki poetry, a profound quest for nationalist identity, becomes a prominent theme in the Sindhi poetic discourse, besides other themes such as resistance to the establishment. The Sindhi poetic discourse strives to re-establish the cultural identity which seems to be threatened by the political developments within the Sindh province. Sindhi language as a medium of early education in schools has been the norm in the Sindh province unlike the other three provinces where Punjabi, Pashto and Balochi never achieved this status. This allowed a comparative growth of their literary activities, journalism and publishing. However, in the wake of a large immigrant population arriving from India after independence, the native Sindhi population became minority in the two large urban areas of Karachi and Hyderabad (Kennedy, 1991). The fear that their resources and homeland was being invaded by outsiders led to a consistent quest for nationalist identity which also emerged prominently in their post-colonial literary discourse. Sindhi nationalism was at its height during the Zia dictatorship and resistance to the military domination became a forceful metaphor in the Sindhi literature. It was the time when “writers and poets like Rehmatullah Manjothi, Naseer Mirza, Tariq Alam, Niaz Hasmayooni and Adal Soomro challenged Zia’s ideological state” (Talbot, 2015).

Against this political backdrop, the Sindhi poetic discourse signifies dissent and resistance to the Pakistani establishment. Shaikh Ayaz (1923-1998), a leading Sindhi writer, always challenged hegemony of the state for which he was often arrested by military dictators. Not only a short story writer, he was also a prolific Sindhi and Urdu poet who wrote more than 70 volumes of poetry, short stories, memoirs and essays: “Shaikh Ayaz is one of the major voices of the twentieth century poetry. His literary career spanned about six decades and displayed an amazing variety in poetry and prose” (Farrukhi and Pirzada, 1999). In one of his poems “Snake-Charmers”

Ayaz metaphorically summarises his anguish over devastating onslaught on his cultural identity:

White snakes ran back to their hidey-holes
In the name of freedom
We got black snakes.
The same hiss, the same sting,
The same onrush of snakes
On our fertile land.
Snake charmers come this way
They can turn nectar into poison
Fair of face black deeds
They have made our home their own
From morning to night, they pretend
To recite spells for catching the snakes.¹³

His poetic genius touched universal and local themes of freedom, death, beauty, and brutalities of dictators, condemnation of war, and celebration of the folklore. A master of satire, he made fun of autocratic regimes of his time who always claimed to be the guardians of freedom:

Who can say there's no freedom here?
Jackals are free,
Flies are free,
Here the intellectuals are free.¹⁴

Imdad Hussaini (born 1940), with his modernistic poetry, became a trendsetter of the Sindhi poetic discourse. He “precipitously changed the

¹³ Translated by Asif Farruki and Shah Mohammed Prizada from Sindhi.

¹⁴ Translated by Asif Farruki and Shah Mohammed Prizada from Sindhi.

milieu of Sindhi poetry from rural to urban and from communal to individualistic expression” (Sindhu, 2013). His verse added a new chapter to the Sindhi literature where his bold metaphor and new themes gave him a prominent place as a top-notch Sindhi poet. His classic poem “Roots” draws parallels between the worldwide civil rights movements and the struggle in his own motherland of Sindh:

Speak Truth, drink poison by becoming
Socrates of Athens;
Christ for the cross;
Hussain for Yazid;
Mansoor for the gibbet;
Dado and Darya Khan;
To lay down life for Sindh!¹⁵

Among the contemporary poets, Sehar Imdad (born 1951) stands tall for her avantgarde poetic style. As she published an anthology of Sindhi poems, she is also known as a published Urdu poet. Her poem “Acid” eulogizes the nameless martyrs of Sindh using her unique imagery of the agony that they went through:

Needles stabbed in eyes,
some pleasant dream
Turns to stone.
The jugular severed in the slit throat,
some melodious song
remains trapped in the heart.
Acid poured
over hennaed hands,
slowly skin crinkles and dies.
The sun’s hot rays
prick like daggers.

¹⁵ Translated by Saleem Noor Hussain from Sindhi.

Night, like poison,
Runs through veins.¹⁶

For another Sindhi poet, Pushpa Vallabh (born 1963), darkness and restrictions on freedom of expression become opportunities to find avenues for human freedom. Professionally a physician, she writes poetry in Sindhi, English and Urdu. Her poem “Light a Lamp and See” conveys a message to keep the hope alive despite the darkness that prevails:

So what if the tongue is silenced?
Let your fingers speak, and you will see.
feelings will repair
the broken words.

There is absolute darkness,
the eye cannot make out the hand’s shape.
Light will catch at light and grow-
it may be small,
light a lamp and see.¹⁷

From systematic marginalization to a profound message of hope and equality, the Sindhi verse appears to be in a constant search for ethnic and cultural identity. It boldly challenges the establishment for abrogating civil rights of the people and marginalizing their cultural heritage and history.

State as a Symbol of Oppression

As we have seen, both Seriaki and Sindhi verse become a strong voice of their masses who mourn the loss of their nationalistic heritage and resist their cultural annihilation at the same time. For other native languages

¹⁶ Translated by Azmat Ansari and Waqas Khwaja from Sindhi.

¹⁷ Translated by Azmat Ansari and Waqas Khwaja from Sindhi.

such as Balochi, Brahui and Pashto, however, the state appears to be a powerful symbol of oppression at several levels.

Balochistan has been the target of military and civil oppression more than any other province in Pakistan. Rich in natural resources including natural gas and petroleum, the area has witnessed insurgencies in 1948, 1958, 1962, and 1973, and more recently in 2002. It was General Pervez Musharraf¹⁸ who killed the senior Balochi leader Akbar Bugti in an air attack in 2006. Since then the movement for autonomy within Pakistan has been transformed into a freedom movement (Fazal, 2012).

Scars of this violent history can be seen in Balochi and Brahui poetry, the two major languages of Balochistan that have been exposing rulers' atrocities in prose and verse. This outcry for freedom has also found its way into the poetic discourse of the province. Gul Khan Naseer (1914-1983), a firebrand Balochi nationalist, political leader and activist, was also a revolutionary poet who challenged this onslaught on his people. His long-fought political struggle against the ruling alliance and his daring poetic posture remain a signpost of his literary discourse.

Declaring himself a rebel, he appears to define his ideological commitment to freedom and equality in his poem "I Am a Rebel:"

I fight for rights
I color my land with my blood
I squeeze my enemy
I tell the truth
I am a rebel, I am a rebel

Fettered, they, but I am free
Not the rule, I am the ruler
not deceitful, I bring relief,
not a thief

¹⁸ The army dictator who ruled Pakistan as its president from 2001 to 2008.

I am a rebel, I am a rebel¹⁹

His fiery poetic style and his denunciation of the state apparatus often sent him to jail. One of his poems “Towering Ramparts” (Arif and Khwaja, 2011) narrates his firm belief that resistance of the poor can topple the powerful one day. The first two stanzas reflect his defiance against the tyrannies of the state:

Towering ramparts of stone and brick,
with strong doors and chains of steel-
jails and prisons have been created, but nothing
can confine high ideals.²⁰

Ata Shad (1939-1997) was a poet of mass popularity who conveyed intricate subjectivities of romanticism and social tragedies of his Balochi nation to his audience. As a versatile poet, Ata Shad was also known for his Urdu poetry published in two anthologies besides three books in his mother tongue. He raised the Balochi poetry to a new level as “symbolism, imagism, and dramatism were main themes of his poetry, which he brought into Balochi poetry, just to test the reader’s feedback” (Buzdar, 2012).

In his poem “In the Hour of Death” he grieves bereavement of a freedom fighter, whom he calls the son of the homeland:

This son is the spirit of friendship; he loves hope of tomorrow,
good tidings of the defeat of the doom.
You cannot kill life’s ideas by plucking flowers
nor, in this way, prevent the diffusion of his scent.
If you wish to destroy me, kill my soul first
if my death is your desire, first hang love’s hope on the gallows
and if you wish to annihilate me, first tear out beans of the

¹⁹ Translated from Balochi by Azmat Ansari and Waqas Khwaja.

²⁰ Translated by Azmat Ansari and Waqas Khawaja.

dwelling of place of thought.²¹

One of his popular poems “Shah Kundan” sums up his interpretation of immortality of soul after execution:

Thoughts cannot be killed by mass killings
scent cannot be killed by pressing the flower
if at all you want to kill me, kill my soul.
For eliminating me
Sacrifice the love I have
For killing me
Kill my conscious
Destroy my thoughts
But killing me is not possible
I am love
Eternal till the end
My prints are there forever
Till the time I have life and blood in my veins
If I die, so will you
Till the time you are alive
So am I. ²²

Noor Khan Mohammad Hassani is a journalist and poet who writes in his mother tongue Brahui. His work has been published nationally and locally. His poem “Freedom” recounts the history of his motherland in a metaphorical way:

Then we have to begin from the beginning
Uproot suppression, disunity, despair and exploitation

²¹ Translated by Azmat Ansari and Waqas Khwaja from Balochi.

²² Translated by Wahid Bukhsh Buzdar and Shafiq-ur-Rehman Buzdar from Balochi.

And sow seeds of love and affection
In soil to harvest the flowers of freedom
But continue to sow weeds and thorns of
And wait for a harvest of sorrow and strife.²³

Federal policies of internal colonialism have been as strong as their resistance in Balochistan which is also reflected in the native languages of the province. From Gul Khan Naseer to Ata Shad and Mohammad Hussaini, this poetic protest has been very direct, bold, and intense. While poetry of Gul Khan Naseer is candid, Ata Shad talks in highly metaphoric and symbolic way as he is also known as a popular romantic poet of the region in Balochi and Urdu both.

While resistance to the establishment in Balochistan comes with a rebellious tone because of its ongoing insurgency, freedom has also been a hallmark of the Pashto poetic discourse. The Pashto cultural heritage that revered freedom as one of the most important virtues of their tribal society opposed the British imperialism and later the autocratic rulers after independence. Always suspicious of the centre, state becomes a consistent symbol of oppression in the Pashto poetic discourse.

Traditionally, Pashto poetry assumed the structural form of Ghazal as a major influence of Persian poetry. Khushal Khan Khattack, Rehman Baba, Amir Hamza Shinwari and other poets mixed Ghazal with musical renditions in social and literary events to popularize it. Pashto intellectual and researcher Dr. Qabil Khan Afridi gives credit to Amir Hamza Shanwari to nurture and promote Pashto literature, especially the verse, among the public (Afridi, 1998).

Ghani Khan (1914-1996), who was considered as one of the leading Pushto poets of the 20th century, challenged the system through his poetic discourse. The artistic son of the known activist and leader, Khan Abdul

²³ Translated by Noor Khan M. Hassani from Brahui.

Ghaffar Khan²⁴ (1890-1988), Ghani was jailed for 6 years in 1948, just one year after the independence for his political activities and poetry.

Besides the romantic strands in the forms of Ghazals and poems, his politically motivated pieces become satirical odes to ridicule power, powerful leaders, and kings. Expressing his hatred toward “King” as a symbol of power, the poet contemplates that if you cannot guarantee justice, you should not lead. Later in the poem, he contrasts the luxuries of kingship with the people’s sufferings and poverty and asks:

What would such life mean
That you either kill or die?
Where are your fruits and roses?
You keep a garden and kill the *bulbul*?²⁵

The poem ends in asking the creator: “How can I curse and tyrannize, the spring and crimson flowers.”²⁶

Exposing hypocrisies of leaders of his time, another poem “Leader” appears to be his continued satire on the dynamics of power and control in the newly liberated state:

Take a crow’s beak,
A snake’s tongue,
A chicken’s brain,
And the heart of a rambler,
A dog’s throat

²⁴ Also known as Bacha Khan, Abdul Gaffar Khan led the nonviolent, grassroots freedom movement against the British raj whose struggle for autonomy also continued after the 1947 partition.

²⁵ Bulbul, the singing bird or nightingale is widely used in Urdu, Persian and Hindi poetry as a symbol of love and melody.

²⁶ Translated by Taimur Khan from Pashto.

That barks well,
A mule's stubbornness,
And deck it pride,
Mud from the village,
And the city's dunghill;
And then befriend
A blind potter,
Who will prepare a new leader for you.²⁷

Exposing moral and intellectual absurdities of leaders, the discourse reflects the poet's dislike towards politicians and their powerplay, probably the reason why he left politics in the later part of his life.

Hsina Gul (born 1966) is a known Pashto poet of the younger generation. With two published anthologies of poems, she works as broadcaster for Radio Pakistan in Peshawar. Her poetry offers a critical view of the prevailing social order and its contradictions. Invoking women's suffrage against the backdrop of political suffocation, this poem creatively identifies both issues in her surroundings:

Excellent it is, a free thinker I am
Though there are numerous restriction upon me, my hands are
fastened, my lips are locked, my eyes are taped, yet I am proud of
being a thinker.
I condemn all restrictions because I compose odes, write poems,
create songs, and I have to engage myself in every fruitful activity.
I want to be free therefore I love freedom, if anyone is hurt and wishes
to capture me

²⁷ Translated by Taimur Khan from Pashto.

he should do it with pleasure, but my art will never be chained.

It's excellent that I am a thinker and I am proud of it.²⁸

Pashto and Balochi poetic discourse exposes intensities of the state oppression with different contextual frameworks. While the Balochi poets more often appear to have a rebellious tone reflective of their specific political dynamics, the Pashto poetic discourse invokes the philosophical intricacies of power and powerful leaders in the post-colonial Pakistan, along with the gender and social issues of its own society.

Conclusion

Poetry, with its popularity among the literate and illiterate masses in Pakistan, has been a strong tool of resisting the prevailing socio-political structure. As poetic resistance has been a predominant theme from the beginning in the subcontinent, it became a popular voice against powerful emperors and rulers who tried to silence local uprisings through force. Shah Hussain, the Sufi poet of Punjab, along with the freedom fighter Dullah Bhatti, became a symbol of local defiance against the Mughal Empire in the mid-16th to early-17th century. Khushal Khan Khattack (1613-1689), the Pashto warrior-poet, also used his poetry to raise voice against the mighty Mughal empire of India. Although respected widely by the masses of all faiths, some of the Sufi poets were persecuted for their intellectual resistance to brutalities of rulers. Deeply rooted in the folk heritage of native languages, Sufi poetry also became a message of human tranquillity and cultural diversity mostly in Sindhi, Punjabi and Seraiki languages.

This trend continued during the colonial period when popular poets, who supported the freedom movement, became national heroes. Even after

²⁸ Translated by Professor Dawar Khan Daud from Pashto.

independence, the tradition was sustained as an unrelenting wave of expression challenging the system of internal colonialism in Pakistan.

The above analysis demonstrates strong poetic resistance to the establishment in Pakistan within the two major themes: A consistent quest for cultural identity, and the Pakistani state as a profound symbol of oppression. As we have seen, both Sindhi and Seraiki discourses strived to preserve cultural identities. While the Sindhi discourse represented a struggle to keep their cultural and ethnic identities within the province, the Seraiki discourse reflects a political movement demanding a separate province. Besides these distinctive streams specific to each province, several parallel themes also appeared in the native poetic discourse including resistance to the federal establishment, revolt against military dictatorships, and an outcry against social, cultural, economic, and gender inequalities.

Although it is important to note that resistance has not been the only stream in the native poetry, it has been a prevalent form of poetic expression along with other trends of Sufism, realism and romanticism. Sufism has been the early trend in all native languages, more so in Seraiki and Sindhi than Balochi, Brahui and Pashto languages. Romanticism has also been the popular trend in all native languages although more often it intertwined with the Sufi philosophical renderings so deeply that it became difficult to distinguish between humanly romanticism and the divine adoration as it became a symbol for both.

In terms of content and structure, the poetic discourse of native languages offered multiple trends and styles. While expressionism, imagery and symbolism became the hallmark of poetic expression in Sindhi and Seraiki poetry, the content of most Pashto, Brahui and Balochi poetry more often remained pragmatic, direct and motivational. While Sufi poetry used the multiple structural formats, borrowing from folk-poetic traditions in native languages, more recent trends are transforming these styles from the traditional Ghazal to modern blank verse and meter based lyrical structures. Traditional and contemporary, both forms have become a popular mode of

poetic discourse in these native languages. Content wise, while the traditional poetry was limited to romanticism and religious themes, modernist and post-modernist trends are common in the more recent native poetry. Miseries of the poor, small tenants and workers, and gender-based marginalization are the popular themes of today's native poetry in Pakistan in addition to the voices of discontent against the feudalistic social order.

Can poetic resistance become a major catalyst for socio-political change in the society? The above analysis reveals an interesting scenario within the historical context of Pakistan. It would be wrong to consider the poetic discourse as a catalyst for socio-political change as it can only provide an effective mode of communication from opinion leaders and intellectuals to the masses. Poetry, nevertheless, has its role in raising social and political consciousness among the masses when it becomes part of journalistic, political and activist movements. Poets, however, as part of these movements can also become political activists (Langah, 2012).

Learning from the past, ruling elites have adopted sophisticated tactics. They tend to abide by the constitutional and legal frameworks while the real exploitation comes through selection and exclusion of federal assistance to peripheral regions, administrative policies and economic marginalization. With the same token, cultural resistance also uses refined tactics for avoiding direct confrontation with the establishment. Thus, the poetic discourse adopts a middle way between direct confrontation with the power structure and passive acceptance of oppression in the Pakistani setting.

Although the nature of internal colonialism has not changed much, its strength has been curtailed, thanks to the long struggle at intellectual, political and journalistic levels. Only future can tell if these gains can be further sustained and transformed into a more egalitarian, democratic and just society in Pakistan.

References

Afridi, Qabil K. (1998). *Literary Heritage of Khyber: Past and Present*. A Research Project Presented to Peshawar University, 25 April. URL (Consulted May 23, 2015) from <http://www.drqabilkhan.com>.

Ameeq, Abid. (2000). *Tal Watni*. Lahore: Sachet Ghar, Shirkat Press.

Ahmed, Asad. (2010). The Paradoxes of Ahmadiyya Identity: Legal Appropriation of Muslim-ness and the Construction of Ahmadiyya Difference. In Naveeda Khan (ed.), *Beyond Crisis, Re-evaluating Pakistan*. (pp. 273-314). New Delhi: Routledge.

Ahmad, Aijaz. (1992). *In Theory, Classes, Nations, Literatures*. New York, London: Verso, p. 41).

Ahmed, Nazneen. (2014). The Poetics of Nationalism: Cultural resistance and Poetry in East Pakistan/Bangladesh, 1952-71. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. 50(3). pp. 256-268.

Alavi, Hamza. (1989). Politics of Ethnicity in India and Pakistan. In Alavi and Holiday (eds.), *South Asia*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

Ali, Asdar. (2010). Strength of the State Meets the Strength of the Street: The 1972 Labour Struggle in Karachi. In Naveeda Khan (ed.), *Beyond Crisis, Re-evaluating Pakistan*. (pp. 210-244) New Delhi: Routledge.

Anderson, Benedict. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.

Arif, Iftikhar and Khwaja, Waqas. (2011). *Modern Poetry of Pakistan*. Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press. p. 88.

Blauner, Robert. (1969). Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt. *Social Problems*. 16 (4), p. 396.

Buzdar, Wahid and Buzdar, Shafiq-ur-Rehman. (2012). A Trend Maker in Modern Balochi Poetry. *Balochistaniyat, Annual Research Journal, Balochi Academy, Quetta*. Volume 01.

Buzdar, Ashiq. (1986). *Qaidi Takht Lahore de*. Zila Rajan Pur: Seraiki Lok Sanjh.

Duncombe, Stephan. (2002). *Cultural Resistance Reader*. London, New York: Verso.

Fazal, Jalal. (2012). Nature of Education in Balochistan. *Balochistaniyat: Annual Research Journal of Balochi Academy*. (1): pp. 30-52.

Goodson, Larry. (1998). Fragmentation of Culture in Afghanistan. *Alif, Journal of Comparative Poetics*. (18): pp. 269-285.

Hechter, Michael. (1999). *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.

Kennedy, Charles. (1991). The Politics of Ethnicity in Sindh. *Asian Survey*. (31)10: pp.938-955.

Langah, Nukhbah. (2012). *Poetry as Resistance: Islam and Ethnicity in Postcolonial Pakistan*. New Delhi: Routledge.

Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (2001). *Population by Mother Tongue*. URL (Consulted May 23, 2015), from <http://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/population-mother-tongue>.

Rammah, Safir. (2006). West Punjabi Poetry: From Ustad Daman to Najm Hosain Syed. *Journal of Punjabi Studies*. Spring-Fall, 13 (1, 2): pp. 205-228.

Sayeed, Khalid B. (1967). *The Political System of Pakistan*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Scott, James. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Resistance*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Siddiq, Ayesha. (2007). *Military Inc. Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Sindhu, Amar. (2013). Imdad Hussaini: A Vagabond Poet. *Dawn*, January 13.

Tahir, Tonsvi. (1995). *Seraiki vich Mazahmati Shairi*. Multan: Seraiki Literary Board.

Talbot, Ian. (2015). *Pakistan: A New History*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The News. (2015). *Literature of Resistance*. March 1.

The News. (2014). *A Symbol of Freedom*. March 10.

Tirmazi, Mazhar. (2004). This Winter. *Modern Poetry in Transition*. March, King's College London. URL (Consulted November 6, 2016)
<http://poetrymagazines.org.uk>.

Williams, Raymond. (2002). Culture. In Stephen Duncombe (ed.), *Cultural Resistance Reader*. London, New York: Verso.

Farrukhi, Asif and Pirzada, Shah. M. (1999). *The Storm's Call for Prayers*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

About the Author:

Qaisar Abbas

After working as faculty, director and assistant dean for several American universities, Dr. Qaisar Abbas currently leads a consulting firm in Washington D.C. on Media Strategies and Grant Development. His research interests are South Asian politics, mass media, and poetic discourse. He has also worked in Pakistan as PTV News Producer, and Information Officer for the government of Punjab.