

## The Pakistani English Novel: The Burden of Representation and the Horizon of Expectations

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### **Abstract**

Using a theoretical understanding of the role of the narratee and the horizon of expectations, this essay suggests a nuanced mode of reading the Pakistani Writing in English. The hope is that both Pakistani readers and authors will become aware of the possible ramifications of authorial intention and reader reception of the texts of the global periphery.

**Keywords:** Pakistani writing in English, postcolonialism, Pakistan, Reception theory

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the Pakistani novel in English has finally come of age and has garnered its space within and without Pakistan. In most of the cases, Pakistan as a subject of narration figures quite prominently in these works. In fact, in one of her interviews, Kamila Shamsie, one of the most celebrated contemporary Pakistani novelists, attempts to see a connection between the works of several contemporary Pakistani writers:

I don't know how you'd draw a line connecting me, Mohsin Hamid, Mohammad Hanif, Nadeem Aslam, Moni Mohsin in terms style or form—except we're writing about Pakistan. A lot of Pakistan's English-language novelists are looking at history or politics in their work, to a greater extent perhaps than Indian novelists. (Das)

Thus, no matter what these writers write about, their acts of artistic representation, it seems, are caught within the politics of the nation and national representation. This aspect of reception of Pakistani fiction in English became evident to me a few years ago during several exchanges with Pakistani audiences. During the summer of 2014, while in Pakistan, I

gave four public talks about the role of humanities in the twenty-first century. In all these talks, during the question answer session, the audience members insistently sought my views about the works of Pakistani writers writing in English. The questions, I must admit, were always about the issues of representation. In other words, the audience members wanted to know whether or not I agreed with the kind of representation of Pakistan that some leading Pakistani writers were offering at the moment.

Needless to say, it was hard for me to answer this question convincingly. On one hand, being a scholar of postcolonial studies, I understand the dynamics of postcolonial cultural production and am thus, like Aijaz Ahmad, very skeptical of what passes around as the quintessential postcolonial novel in the metropolitan cultures. But, on the other hand, I also wanted to defend the right of the authors to represent Pakistan as they deemed fit.

The purpose of this brief essay is to think deeply about this issue and to offer my views about this struggle between the authors' right to represent and the right of the represented to contest that particular representation. In the process of elaborating the 'response' from my auditors, I will also discuss the stylistic structuring of these novels and the question of representation as it pertains to the Pakistani novel in English as a genre of postmodern writing. While I am using Mohsin Hamid's novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, as my core text, I do not plan to provide a deep or detailed textual analysis of the contents of novel. I will, rather, use the novel as a point of reference to frame my discussion of the expectations of such novels with a hope that other scholars would then build on this preliminary discussion about the aspects of reception of the Pakistani English novel within Pakistan.

Having-reflected on this for some time now, I have realized that most of these questions were crafted, probably unconsciously, around the national expectations of the Pakistani authors. Thus, while the authors see themselves as cultural critics and tend to highlight the darkest and the most troubling aspects of Pakistani culture, the Pakistani readers, constantly under attack from various kinds of Western media, see such representations as a betrayal

and a negation of the richness and beauty of Pakistani culture. The questions posed to me, therefore, were primarily about the Pakistani readers' expectations and the role of Pakistani authors in representing Pakistan to outsiders.

I will rely here, for my analysis, on Kobena Mercer's take on the burden of representation and then use Mohsin Hamid's novel as a test case from the point of view of the author as well as his countrymen and women.

While discussing the first ever Black art exhibition in Britain, Kobena Mercer provides some incisive insights about the issues of representation involved in such a scenario:

When the artists are positioned on the margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production, they are burdened with the impossible task of speaking as "representatives," in that they are widely expected to "speak for" the marginalized communities from which they come. (235)

This imperative to represent and be representative of an entire culture is what Mercer terms the "burden of representation." I would argue that this burden of representation is two-fold: the metropolitan audiences and market force the writers to be "representative" of their culture and the primary culture also expects the authors to represent the whole of their culture. Thus, the diasporic author of English is in a double bind: he or she must meet the expectations of the metropolitan market and the pressures and pulls of their own primary culture. This further supports Mercer's claim that these "artists do not have the last word when it comes to the public circulation and dissemination of their work, because authorial intention alone cannot determine the contingent circumstances in which a work is taken up by different audiences" (43). Furthermore, I suggest, that the Pakistani authors working in English are already aware of these "contingent circumstances" of publication and thus an imperceptible idea of what to write and what to produce has already, in a way, become a part of their authorial intention. And this authorial intention is structured and enforced by the expectations of a postcolonial work of art in the metropolitan market.

By far the best account of this extra-authorial imperative comes from Aijaz Ahmad, who foresees this latest industry of metropolitan appropriation of the Third World issues for the metropolitan publishing industry. In fact, I myself have often relied on Ahmad's argument to discuss the nature of metropolitan influence over the creative texts of the periphery. In his groundbreaking work, Ahmad points to the very canonicity of the counter canon that must rely on certain accepted and valorized tropes about the Third World within the metropolitan cultures. For Aijaz Ahmad, there is a certain logic of expectations of the works of the periphery published by the metropolitan publishers. By and large these works must contain certain tropes highly expected within the metropolitan culture:

The range of questions that may be asked of the texts which are currently in the process of being canonized within this categorical counter canon must predominantly refer, then, in one way or the other to representation of colonialism, nationhood, postcoloniality, the typology of rulers, their powers, corruptions, and so forth. (124)

A critical review of works being published by the Pakistani authors testifies to Aijaz Ahmad's claim: most of these works do highlight the very tropes that Ahmad finds as the accepted and canonized tropes of the postcolonial novel. Thus, it is not hard to suggest that the Pakistani writers, in their zeal to address a global audience and to be relevant to the expectations of the metropolitan audiences, are at least unconsciously producing the kinds of works that are expected of them and that may sell better within the metropolitan cultures. It is this repertoire of postcolonial stereotypes, now authenticated by the authorial voices of the postcolonial writers themselves, that vexes and disturbs their Pakistani readers.

In other words, there is a conflation of two kinds of representation going on: Representation as "speaking for" as a proxy (*vertreten*), and representation as "re-presentation" (*darstellen*), the two shades of representation that Gayatri Spivak famously discusses in one of her most crucial and controversial essays.<sup>1</sup> While these authors claim the right to

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring to Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

represent reality in their chosen artistic forms, without attempting to carry the burden of representation, the readers also see this representation as *verteten*, in which the authors stand in as a proxy, as those representing Pakistan to the rest of the world. Furthermore, as Mercer clarifies, the metropolitan audiences also expect the diasporic writers and artists to be representative of their own culture. Thus, the limited authorial choice that these writers have is forced into a shape that can be palatable and acceptable to their metropolitan audiences. However, this transforms the mere artistic representation into a political representation. Thus, if the artistic representation is also a political representation, then the question of the nature of representation becomes foregrounded whether the writers like it or not.

In such a scenario, the Pakistani writers do not have the liberty of hiding behind their right to artistic license as whatever they write and proffer to the so-called West also happens to be more than just an artistic rendering: it becomes a political act of representation. Seen from this view, the concerns of the Pakistani readers seem sound and just. After all, why should they not object to the stereotypical renditions of Pakistan offered to an already prejudiced metropolitan audience? The writer's artistic and political roles are therefore inherently connected and the writers cannot claim any kind of artistic immunity for their authorial choices. In other words, Pakistani readers see the artistic representation of Pakistan as a symbolic act of hanging Pakistani dirty linen on a global clothesline. Time and time again, the audience members in my talks pointed out that already enough of negative things are being said about their culture by the Western media and this anxiety about their representation also underwrote their dismay and anguish about the works of their “own” authors.

These readers wanted their Pakistani authors to go beyond the usual stereotypes and to represent the kind of Pakistan that is unduly silenced in the metropolitan cultures. One could say that the Pakistani readers were saying, *a la* Edward Said, that there is “more going on” in Pakistan than just the issues of women oppression, terrorism, socio-economic injustice etc. As for me, this is a just and honest expectation of the Pakistani authors, for

since the Pakistani writers have access to the metropolitan audiences, they should use this global reach not just to sanctify the pre-existing stereotypes but to also challenge and complicate the stereotypical views of Pakistan. Thus, within the politics of representation, if one were to think only in national terms, this sounds like a natural and valorized task. After all, those of us who work in the cross cultural field do so every single day and challenge all unjust representations of Islam and Pakistan from our varied places of enunciation. Why should the native Pakistani writers not do this? This is the question that ultimately lay at the heart of the concerns raised by my Pakistani auditors.

However, since the objections to these representations mostly came from the students and professors of literature in my audience, I thought it important that they should mobilize their criticism of the works with due attentiveness to the stylistic aspects of the novels. In other words, the response must be shaped through a thorough understanding of where the postcolonial novel is at the moment within the symbolic and material economy of global production of art. A mere assumption of what constitutes a good Pakistani novel and what is truly “authentic” about the Pakistani narrative and storytelling cannot be the ultimate grounds of assessment.

The question of authenticity and the permission to represent, so to speak, was also one of the issues. Most of my audience members believed that since these novelists do not live in Pakistan, their representations of Pakistan could, therefore, not be authentic. While I do consider location of the authors important in dealing with the issues of the periphery, I think to ascribe a certain degree of authenticity to those living full time in Pakistan in opposition to the diasporic authors is a sort of over emphasizing of the role of lived experience over imagination. Besides, and I pointed this out to my audiences, those living in Pakistan can also not carry the burden of representation of their entire nation. After all, a novelist living in Islamabad cannot claim to be the true representative of the people of Chitral or, for that matter, of people of Gilgit. This, however, takes us back to the debate so thoroughly rehearsed by Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak." Most critics miss that the main question in that essay was not whether the subaltern can

speak, but rather about the nature of representation itself, and the risk being that if the critics, scholars, and writers assume that the people can speak for themselves, then their responsibility of representing the unrepresented is effaced and that, for Spivak, is a great loss and an abdication of our responsibilities. The Pakistani writers in English perform this task of representation and for them, no matter what their grounds for justification, this critical function is important. Otherwise, one would fall prey to what Ngugi Thiong'o so expressively suggests in the beginning of *The Devil on the Cross*, where the narrator provides a justification for the critique of the nation:

Certain people in Ilmorog, our Ilmorog told me that this story was too disgraceful, too shameful; that it should be concealed in the depths of everlasting darkness.... I asked them: How can we cover up pits in our courtyard with leaves and grass, saying to ourselves that because our eyes cannot now see the holes, our children can prance about the yard as they like?

Happy is the man who is able to discern the pitfalls in his way, for he can avoid them. (7)

Thus, it is imperative on the Pakistani authors to point out these "pitfalls" in our paths; it is in fact their responsibility to the nation in particular and the humanity in general. And if in the process they are blamed for embarrassing their nation in the public arena, then that is the risk worth taking for the purposes of representing the subalterns of their country.

However, the Pakistani writers writing in English find themselves in an impossible position: they are expected to produce works that are specific to their region but contemporary in form and style, while at the same time carrying the burden of representation of an entire nation. This burden of representation, of course, cannot really be understood without delving into the expectation of such texts by the Pakistani readers, thus forcing us to account for the very consciousness of the reader and the narratee of these works. For Gerald Prince all narration, whether it is oral or written, whether it recounts real or mythical events presupposes not only at least one narrator

but also (at least) one narratee, the narratee being someone whom the narrator addresses. (7)

It is also important to understand the crucial function of the narratee within the narrative logic of a particular work. The narratee should neither be “confused with the virtual reader” nor with the “ideal reader” (Prince 9), for “if it should occur that the reader bears an astonishing resemblance to the narratee, this is an exception and not the rule” (Prince 9). Needless to say, “the portrait of a narratee emerges above all from the narrative addressed to him” (12). Prince also argues that there are always certain signals in the narrative itself that allow us to recognize the specific narratee of a narrative, and these could include “all passages of a narrative in which the narrator refers directly to the narratee” (13) or “passages that, though not written in the second person, imply a narratee and describe him” (13). In all these modes of representation, the narratee does perform certain important tasks and understanding these functions is crucial to understanding the main thrust of a narrative work of fiction. Some of these functions include:

He constitutes a relay between the narrator and the reader, he helps establish the narrative framework, he serves to characterize narrator, he emphasizes certain themes, he contributes to the development of the plot, he becomes the spokesperson for the moral of the work. (Prince 23)

As is obvious from this brief discussion of the functions of the narratee, it is important to understand these functions especially if one wants to read a novel not just as the direct addressee of the novel but as someone who is a reader reading the interaction between the narrator and the narratee, thus enabling the narratee to perform his or her function of being a relay. Thus, *à la* Prince, one important reason to study “the narratee is because it is sometimes crucial to discovering narrative’s *fundamental thrust*” (23, My emphasis). I think a lot of problems and a lot of questions that are being posed about the nature of representation of Pakistan arise because most readers find themselves to be the narratees of these works and thus feel obliged to contest their own invocation and representation.



So, in order to really understand the dynamics of the burden of representation, one must account for the expectations of the general narratee of the works and then also, must, delve into a clear understanding of the nature of representation offered and the kind of representation expected. I think Mohsin Hamid's novel can be a wonderfully didactic text to learn about the burden of representation and the nature of expectation of Pakistani readers.

This didactic function of the novel becomes quite obvious from the very first lines of Hamid's novel, which employs the most conventional mode of narration to a narratee: second person narrator, a narrator who addresses a YOU directly. The most important strategy here is to define this YOU as this YOU is the ultimate narratee of the novel and it cannot certainly consider all Pakistanis as this YOU of the narrative. Thus, a clear understanding of the narratee would go a long way in reception and understanding of this novel.

It would be apt to dwell on the title first, for the title already develops a sort of "horizon of expectation"<sup>2</sup> about the novel. One cannot help but assume that there is something playfully ironic about the title, for being "filthy rich" and the term "Rising Asia" are already two most prominently mobilized tropes about the current global economy and no matter how one slices it, being filthy rich cannot just be read as a positive, unmotivated term. This implies that the novel must be read with due attention to its tone, and that irony happens to be an important aspect of this tone. Needless to say, irony and parody are two of the most important aspects of the postmodern novel. The novel is, in a way, a wonderful example of "a kind of seriously ironic parody that often enables the contradictory doubleness: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the 'world' and literature" (Hutcheon 124).

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<sup>2</sup> A brief discussion of the term "horizon of expectations" is provided in the ensuing pages of the essay.

These two aspects of the postmodern parody apply to the novel in two ways: in terms of form and in terms of the reworking of a classic narrative of upward mobility. In terms of its narrative structure, Hamid is offering us a rags-to-riches story, but with a certain twist: it is a Cinderella story in the world of neoliberal capital and thus relies on the extralegal means of upward mobility available to those on the periphery of global capital. In terms of its generic form, the novel is an ironic parody of the self-help book genre, which happens to be one of the best-selling genres of writing in the United States. Thus, there is, in a truly postmodernist sense, a layered degree of sophistication of narrative techniques involved here. The narrative also highlights the kind of amoral and ambivalent subjectivity needed to succeed in the current regime of capital, which, in turn, makes the novel a trenchant and refreshing critique of the global division of labor.

The term global division of labor is crucial in understanding all writings of the global periphery, for if one effaces the existence of such a division, then there is no room left to critique the metropolitan. In fact, highlighting the global division of labor was another important point in Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak," which most readers of her text fail to acknowledge. One cannot go far in cross-cultural contact without plotting one's place within the global division of labor and despite the tall claims of the proponents of the neoliberal capital, the world is now drastically divided between a sort of universal elite—universal in the sense that they all share certain privileges in common—and the marginalized and localized masses of people. For Zygmunt Bauman, for example, the world already has a sort of elite which shares the same ease of travel across the globe in opposition to their less fortunate counterparts who cannot escape the specificity of the local (Bauman 6-26). Thus, the narratee, YOU, of the novel is one of the natives who has been left outside the promise of neoliberal capital, the one who is from what George Manuel calls the "fourth world."

The Pakistanis who can read the novel in English, however, are predominantly from the middle or upper middle classes of Pakistan, and they are therefore the implied readers of the text, but not the narratees, for the narratee is not likely to be able to read the very text that addresses her. The

implied reader, however should not be confused with the ideal reader, for the ideal reader would understand the subtleties of a postmodern text: The implied reader reads the novel as a Pakistani and instead of seeing it as an indictment of global capitalism, reads the novel as yet another derogatory representation of Pakistan.

Here is how the novel, written as self-help book, invokes the narratee:

This book is a self-help book. Its objective . . . is to show you how to get filthy rich in rising Asia. And to do that it has to find you, huddled, shivering on the packed earth under your mother's cot one cold dewy morning. (4)

Thus, from the very start it is a self-help book masquerading as a novel and one cannot help but see the irony in the narrative. Coming to the narratee, one can safely assume that the narratee is the quintessential rural peasant of Pakistan. So, the book is not just about how to get rich in rising Asia, but a sort of manifesto for the most disenfranchised and the most exploited constituency in Pakistan: the rural poor, or what are called the *muzara* or the *haris*, in other words bonded labor, in the local languages. That Pakistan has never really attempted a land reform and that a large segment of its rural population, at least in Punjab and Sindh, is still employed in this slavery-like labor process is pretty obvious and does not need a novelist to bring to light. The novel, therefore, is an ironic didactic text aimed at the most oppressed and provides a strategy to our narratee for escaping the given culture that he was born in, but by using the very free market that creates and sustains these global inequalities.

But since the narratee cannot read English, the narrative addressed to the narratee thus becomes a sort of didactic tool for the implied reader of the novel, the Pakistani middle class reader who can read novels in English.

So what must our narratee, who is also the protagonist of the novel, do to rise in rising Asia: the novel explains this in a chronological sequence and the chapter headings provide a clear indication of the suggestions. Note that the solutions are about changing the material circumstances and aim at creating the ideal conditions to be successful within the neoliberal economy. There is no moral lecturing or other moral didactics involved here. One can

guess that the ultimately successful subject of neoliberal capital has to be at best, amoral.

Naturally, in order to construct this narrative of upward mobility, Hamid must start at the very bottom, for the novel is not written as a self-help book for yuppies but for the most vulnerable and least vocal population of Pakistan. It goes without saying that in this narrative strategy the very given of their lives—the part that they must escape to be rich—must also be represented and taken into account. It is this description of the lived conditions and its ramifications that our protagonist must escape that forms the raw materials for the novelistic imagination, but it is the representation of these conditions that is likely to make our middle class Pakistani readers uncomfortable. To the middle class readers, this harsh representation of the realities of life in Pakistan offered to a global audience is likely to come across as a betrayal, for it fixes and sanctifies the preexisting negative image of Pakistan. It seems that the Pakistani novelist writing in English is in an impossible position: he or she must carry the burden of representation regarding the hopes and expectations of Pakistanis but also must meet the demands and imperatives of the metropolitan publishing market.

The same inequalities that create the global division of labor also create the very dynamics in which the Pakistani writer, masquerading as a native informant, must peddle his or her wares. Thus, what gets written and represented is shaped by the imperatives of the market and not necessarily by the demands and claims of the native culture. The question of an autonomous authorial intention, thus, becomes moot as the intention is already laden with the unconscious and unacknowledged dictates of the metropolitan market. The case is similar to any other material forms of international trade, in which the developing nations have to meet the trade criteria already set by the developed nations. Take, for example, Pakistani export of mangoes: Even though Pakistan produces the best quality mangoes in the world, that alone does not promise open access to the metropolitan markets. In order to be sold in Europe and North America, Pakistani mangoes must meet the rules created and implemented by these economies. Similarly, within the material economy of international publishing, the

symbolic aspects of the texts must correspond to the conditions and imperatives of the market; Pakistani writers offering their artistic wares in the symbolic economy of literary production must also, thus, package their goods according to the expectations and imperatives of the market within which their ware are judged and consumed.

Going back to Hamid's novel, there are two main characters in the novel: our rural entrepreneur and the pretty girl. They are unnamed, and hence may be considered character types rather than individual characters, but that is consistent with the style of the novel; it is, after all, a self-help book and thus must address a certain type and not just a couple of individuals. The two main characters, a rural kid in the city and a girl born in the urban poor class, find their own ways to upward mobility in "Rising Asia." There is a certain mobilization of the stereotype here, for the girl uses her beauty and sexuality to advance, but she is nobody's pawn. There is a certain degree of resilience in her character, for she uses what she has within the logic of the market of desire. The boy, the main subject of the story, in a way epitomizes what one must do to offset the advantages of those above you in a free market. It seems, however, that being as unscrupulous and aggressive as possible is the key to success.

Read as a postmodern parody in form and in content, the novel becomes a sophisticated critique of the global division of labor as well as a scathing critique of the Pakistani native elite, who, let us not forget, are more like their global counterparts than being close to every day Pakistanis.

Now, to answer the question of reception of this and other such novels, especially concerning the auditors in my public talks in Pakistan, I will briefly explain the epistemological gap between the avowed aesthetics of these texts and their creators and the horizontal expectations of these middle class readers. In order to do justice to this very complex inquiry, I will rely on Hans Robert Jauss's theorization of the "Horizon of Expectations" and its impact on understanding literary texts. Jauss introduces the crucial role of Horizon of Expectations as follows:

The coherence of literature as an event is primarily mediated in the horizon of expectations of the literary experience of contemporary and later readers, critics, and authors. (22)

Note that for Jauss, a literary work is not “an object that stands by itself” (21) and similarly “the historical context in which a literary work appears is not a factual, independent series of events that exists apart from an observer”(21). Thus a literary text “becomes a literary event only for its reader who reads this last work”(21) of an author with a “memory of his earlier works and who recognizes its individuality in comparison with these and other works that he already knows” (21). Thus, obviously, the literary text as an event presupposes this dialogic dance between the reader, the text, and the specific and general contextuality and contingency of the text. A horizon of expectations is, therefore, dependent upon this dialogic engagement with the literary text. But sometimes there is a gap between the aesthetic value of a literary text and the horizon of expectation. Jauss calls this “horizontal change” (25). This change occurs when a literary text exceeds the expected horizon of expectations and it is at this time that the act of interpretation and understanding must account for the “horizontal change.” Thus, the “difference between the familiarity of previous aesthetic experience and the ‘horizontal change’ demanded by the new reception of the new work determines the artistic character of a literary work” (25).

I think in terms of reception of Pakistani writing in English, the Pakistani middle class readers need to be aware of this horizontal change: they are expecting a kind of writing that they are used to, a kind of writing that relies on the myths of the authentic and provides, or ought to provide, some form of a national narrative. The Pakistani writers of English, however, are already working in a more complex literary arena where they are expected to carry the burden of representation as shaped by both ends of the global division of labor.

In such a scenario, both readers and writers will have to revise their strategies of engaging in the practice of reading and writing. The readers will have to keep in mind that no single text can carry the burden of an entire nation and that it is salutary, and sometimes necessary, to mount a literary

critique of one's own nation. The Pakistani authors in English will also have to decide whether they really want to be slightly independent or just continue to be naive cultural informants who produce works, *a la* Aijaz Ahmad, that continue to perpetuate the metropolitan myths about the periphery.

**Note:** This is a revised version my essay entitled "Pakistani English Novel and the Burden of Representation: Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*." *The Ravi* Vol. 150, 2014: 81-89.

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