

Literary Decoloniality: Claiming Pluriversality in Post-colonial Pakistan through the Works of Eqbal Ahmad



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Abstract: *The overpowering effect of Eurocentric intellectual imperialism continued to form and deform the cultural and geopolitical realities of former colonies through generating epistemology, devising discourses and narratives in post-colonial epoch. This study investigates Eqbal Ahmad's take on the Eurocentric discourse on contemporary Islamic fundamentalism and the role of Islam in contemporaneous politics. The concept of pluriversality in decolonial theory by Walter Mignolo provides theoretical framework to this study. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to a more nuanced interpretation and understanding of multifaceted dimensions of Islamic societies against those narratives rooted in Eurocentrism essentializing and generalizing the pluriversal and diverse phenomena of Islamic political and cultural values. The study emphasizes the need to highlight the critical thinking of Indigenous intelligentsia from former colonies to confront Eurocentric ways of constructing discourse in a post-colonial era.*

Keywords: Colonial difference, Epistemic coloniality, Literary decoloniality, Pluriversality

Introduction

Eurocentric intellectual imperialism continues to shape and often distort the cultural and political realities outside Europe, specifically former colonies in the post-colonial epoch (Imran & Wei, 2022). Former colonizers left the lands but kept occupying the minds of the people of former colonies by insisting on their epistemic patronizing (Haq, 2022; Siddique et al., 2020). On that score, the dominant discourses emancipated from Western academia tend to simplify and generalize the diverse and heterogeneous internal multifaceted phenomena of former colonies. Taking this into account, this study investigates the contemporary concept of fundamentalism associated with Islam by exploring Eqbal Ahmad's detailed discernment on this issue in the theoretical framework of decoloniality promoted by Walter Mignolo. This study questions the totality of knowledge that

centered on universalizing features of the people beyond Europe by neglecting the diversities, heterogeneities, or exceptions. It also dismantles linear historical or political deeply ingrained Eurocentric narratives that are devised about former colonies. This study contributes to literary decoloniality by deciphering Eqbal Ahmad's debates on the role of Islam in politics and the concept of fundamentalism yoked to Islam by engaging dominant discourse in dialogue, exploring various historical and political facts from an indigenous position to the former sub-continent. The objective of this research is to check the possibility of pluriversality against the universal hegemonic narratives that insist on the fixed role of Islam in the politics of its relevant societies, and to confront the concept of fundamentalism for Islam that eschew the dialectic possibilities of the aforementioned issues.

Literature Review

This section encapsulates a review of the major debates of this study and Eqbal Ahmad whose discernment on Islamic fundamentalism and the role of religion in politics have been deployed as the primary work for this research paper. Eqbal Ahmad, an Indian-born, however, later migrated to Pakistan during the partition of the sub-continent. He was a political analyst, an acclaimed professor, and a theorist whose reflections delineate his strong epistemic connection with Pakistan and India. The tragedies and traumas of decolonization deeply influenced him. Therefore, he articulates topics such as violence, separatism, and hatred that he witnessed during the partition. Barsamian (2016) accounts for Ahmad's approach to praxis as a theorist-activist who is entrenched in creativity, originality, and vision.

Many European scholars express multiple issues of the post-colonial epoch, including, in the case of Islamic states, Islamic fundamentalism from various perspectives. Iqbal (2024) states about the hybridity in a post-colonial epoch that colonial encounters between hegemonic epistemic claims and indigenous intellection of post-colonies have engendered. Davidson (2003) highlights perspective of Islamic fundamentalism based on history, bringing forward those specific socio-political contexts that engender such uprisings. Roy (1994) states that the failure of political Islam is rooted in its incapacity in suggesting practicable social and political options. Also, he examines the reasons of the discontent with Islamist movements. Ali (2016) brings forward how colonialism influenced Islam in Malaya and Indonesia explores pointing out the complex relationship between colonialism and religion of the colony. Santos (2017) edited a book comprises of essays advocating epistemic decoloniality by bringing into conversation academicians and institutions, promoting multiple sources of knowing and its significance in contemporary era. The collection illustrate various cases from multiple regions of the world to demonstrate that how epistemic justice can be redeemed through decoloniality. These case studies are significant for scholars since they

highlight contributions from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, offering multiple voices on how peripheral knowledge can be integrated into formal research and education. Mandaville (2007) offers a subtle analysis of political Islam, foregrounding its diversity in different regions and in different historical contexts. Mandaville (2007) focuses on the fact that a linear theoretical framework cannot decipher the political aspect of Islam, as it delineates a panorama of movements, praxis, and ideologies shaped by local socio-political locus.

European ingrained voices articulating contemporary debate of the role of Islam in politics and the issue of fundamentalism cannot fill the gap that is left due to the lack of indigenous voices from the former colonies of those theorists who are closely associated with Islam as well (Imran, 2019). Certainly, European perspectives offer considerable insights; they overlook the subtle intricacies and historical complexities, for instance, in the case of the subcontinent. Ahmad's original standpoint, entrenched in the indigeneity of South Asia, offers a deep analysis of these complex issues. By examining Ahmad's discernment within the theoretical framework of decoloniality, this study fills the gap, providing a critical and original voice that articulates the aforementioned issues.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The research deploys a qualitative research approach by engaging textual analysis methods. Walter Mignolo's discernment on decoloniality has been employed as the theoretical framework for this study. Furthermore, this research is centered on pluriversality as a fundamental concepts establishing the theoretical framework for the analysis of the chosen primary text of Eqbal Ahmad. Mignolo (2011) explains decoloniality encompasses not only political and economic coloniality that persists in post-colonial epoch, but it also emphasizes on epistemology or knowledge that is still under the colonial influence. Mignolo (2012, 2018, 2021) persuades that instead of universal, actually it is local that upraises critical thinking. The epistemology that asserts universality does not evolve; it becomes rigid. Pluriversality fosters

dialogue and epistemic disobedience to decolonize knowledge when Western epistemology is not entirely compatible with a specific locus of enunciation. To reject the traditional notion of universalism, Mignolo highlights the distinctions between truth without parentheses and truth in parentheses; while the former often leads to imposition, becomes a crusade, and turns dogmatic, the latter represents decolonial thought, a choice, and not an imposition. Pluriversality advocates for truth in parentheses.

Decoloniality promotes multiplicity, dialogism and pluriversality, whereas coloniality of power advocates dogmatic universality. On that score, pluriversality provides theoretical framework for this research promoting alternative knowledge claims from former colonies where, instead of decolonization, the coloniality of power persists to control the critical and original thinking of indigenous people by devising predetermined epistemology for them.

Analysis

In his overview of the function of religion in politics throughout history, Ahmad (2006) focuses on the connection between Islam, religion, and power structures. In order to understand this complex phenomenon, he takes into account social, cultural, intellectual, existential, economic, and political factors rather than retelling certain historical occurrences. By discussing the relationship between religion and power dynamics with the body of current knowledge, Ahmad presents an epistemic viewpoint. A prejudiced viewpoint that is frequently advanced by intellectuals in Europe is the portrayal of Islam as an extreme religion with fundamentalist beliefs. Ahmad steers between explanations and explorations, questions such generalizations, and finds a middle ground between modern orientalists and the Ulama. Through a rigorous investigation of the interconnections between religion and politics, furthermore the role of Islam in politics, he suggests a concise outline interlaced with the multifaceted historical and cultural realities of various groups of people.

First, he talks about the widespread belief that, in contrast to Christianity and other world religions, Islam is the only religion actively engaged in politics and state affairs. Second, he draws attention to the opposition to the inaccurate, frequently biased, fanciful, and legendary image of Islam that Western powers have created. It's ironic that Western-educated Muslim intellectuals who want to challenge the Eurocentric narrative and proclaim their pride and dignity often contribute to this misrepresentation.

By providing a decolonial approach that goes beyond basic viewpoints and approaches colonial legacies from a different angle, Ahmad's perspective overcomes these contradictions. The Bible is still cited, according to Ahmad (2006), to support Israel's territorial expansion into Judea and Samaria and the ongoing expulsion of Palestinian Christians and Muslims from their ancestral territories. He goes on to declare, amid the uncertain consequences of the power struggle in revolutionary Iran and the self-declared "Islamic" dictatorship in Pakistan, Israel and Saudi Arabia emerge as the only genuinely theocratic governments in the Middle East. Each displays contradictions: Saudi Arabia is an "Islamic monarchy," while Israel is a sectarian "democracy" where the legal system discriminates against its Christian and Muslim residents, treating them as second-class citizens.

Ahmad (2006) makes the point that, despite the rituals and dominant symbols used to demonstrate religion deployed by different political parties in the modern era, religious ideals are not given the full respect they deserve. According to Ahmad (2006), the state and religion have remained distinct for eleven of the fourteen centuries of Islam. The Abbasid caliph and his dual function as the spiritual and secular leader of all Muslims worldwide were ended by the Buwayhid ruler, Muiz al-Dawla Ahmad.

However, to counter this viewpoint, more conservative Ulama hold that there was another kind of Islamic rule, ending in 650 A.D. with the Umayyads' acquisition of the state and authority, following the removal of the first four caliphs. This is not where it ends, either, for according to

Shiite Ulama, the Prophet's descendants or blood relatives are the only ones who can legitimately succeed him. In the end, they refuse to recognize Uthman and Muhammad as the rightful heirs. This internal conflict inside the Muslim world presents a serious challenge to the tendency of Western academics that devised a linear model of Islam as the only religion that influences politics at the state level.

The ideas of pluriversality and interculturality that decoloniality promotes can help us better understand these internal complexities. Unlike multiculturalism, which is a Eurocentric idea intended to eradicate original indigenous characteristics, pluralism is an ongoing process that celebrates diversity and uniqueness. Conversely, interculturality recognizes and honors these distinctions, promoting a diverse range of viewpoints and expertise from indigenous populations. Through embracing interculturality, indigenous peoples' varied wisdom and values foster cooperation, innovation, and cohabitation. Interculturality is the foundation of epistemic decolonization, also known as literary decoloniality in this study.

Ahmad uses his geopolitical context—which is characterized by colonial legacies—to illuminate these internal disparities. He emphasizes on the plurality and heterogeneities of Islamic civilization, and challenges the Eurocentric narrative that aims to impose a global homogeneity on Islamic politics, society, and culture. Furthermore, considering their differing perspectives on the idea of an Islamic state or government, common Muslims and Ulama from all over the world recognized ephemeral regimes centuries ago on the basis of popular consent and the essential values of justice, fairness, and order. Prominent Islamic theologians including Ibn Jama, al-Baghdadi, al-Mawardi, and al-Ghazzali represent the several doctrines that have explained, represented, and validated the historical compromise between the Islamic ideal and Muslim political realities. But this does not mean that Islam's role in governance is entirely rejected.

Ahmad argues against oversimplifying and broadly classifying Islam's historical significance without taking into account the

various cultural, social, and economic factors that have existed throughout history. Ahmad (2006) also emphasizes the contributions that other religions—including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity—have made to the Islamic world. Although there are examples of Muslim rulers using violence and tyranny against non-Muslim populations, there are also instances where non-Muslim communities play a vital role in Islamic kingdoms and administrations. These cooperative and inclusive relationships have given rise to the most wealthy civilizations. Furthermore, Ahmad (2006) describes two quite distinct facets of Islamic civilization: a blend of universality and particularism, homogeneity and heterogeneity. The Islamic community has lived under numerous temporal regimes, from modern democracies to tribal modes of government. Islamic civilization has experienced constant upheaval as a result of dynastic rivals, religiously driven reformist movements, and uprisings. The Islamic culture is subjected to an endless list of variations and heterogeneities, yet because of its structural homogeneity, it has a pattern like to a mosaic. Despite the plurality and heterogeneities of culture, language, and ethnicity these are the patterns of oneness that are discernible. Ahmad (2006) declares:

A shared devotion to laws (sharia), which were founded on the Quran, the sunna (tradition of the Prophet), and the ijma (community consensus), gave the divided and heterogeneous Ummah a certain structural unity. Generally, the sharia acted more as a code of conduct for society's property, business, marriage, and public morals than it did as a manual for governing behavior. (p. 172)

Whether explicitly or implicitly, Muslim culture is characterized by diversity and homogeneity. But there is a creative tension that coexists amongst the particularist and universalist identities, allegiances, or possessions of Muslim people and cultures. Generally speaking, every Muslim possesses two types of identities: one is intellectual, historical, global, and cultural, while the other is spatially specific, instantaneous, and social. In the Muslim community, new political combinations are

created by the conflict and compatibility between these two types of identity. Furthermore, the stability and quality of Muslim life are guaranteed by the reconciliation of the particularist and universalist identities. The great accomplishment of Islamic civilization is the reconciliation's realization, which fosters decentralization of power, tolerance of plurality, and further blending of differences. For Muslims, the present period is especially perplexing like never before. One of the biggest obstacles to uncovering the truth about the current political crisis in the Muslim world is misrepresentation. Islam as a religion has come to be associated with the word fundamentalism. Since the early 2000s, Western academia has maintained that Islam is fundamentalist and terrorist in nature, without exploring the underlying causes, the true meaning of the term, or its particular associations with certain groups. Eqbal (2006) explores the whole issue by exposing the prejudices, historical realities, and misconceptions of both extremes rather than merely providing explanations and clarifications of a single dichotomy. Understanding the colonial setting in which Islam and the West clashed is essential since it was the first time the former had been colonized and severely dehumanized and alienated. Civilizational hierarchies were being translated from simple distinctions by colonialism. According to Mignolo (2021), colonization freed societies from the oppressive effects of Western Christianity and left behind distinct civilizational hierarchies. He asks:

The coexisting sixteenth-century sultanates, such as the Mughal, the Ottoman, and the Aztec Tlaxtonate, did not understand the connection between capital accumulation and the devaluation of human life, and subsequently of life in general with the introduction of the concept of "natural resources." as well as in the rising Russian tsarate and the Chinese dynasties (Mignolo, 2021, p. 108).

This does not imply that before colonialism, all people lived in perfect equality. The distinction lay in the type and extent of inequality. The global institutions of imperialism and the political economy, which were led by Western

Christianity and prescribed political theory and political economy to racialize people, places, languages, memories, cultures, and knowledge, did not support or foster the domestic distinctions and inequalities that existed. This is what Mignolo calls the "colonial matrix of power," which started out as a worldwide system to rule the world and is ongoing with no end in sight. The argument centers on what motivates and how global control is implemented. It distinguishes itself from other coexisting home hierarchies of civilization by demeaning and dehumanizing the realities of other regions of the world. In the end, it elicits responses and reactions from the people it aims to subjugate. The dominant story that allowed colonialism of power to function was modernism. Moreover, colonialism and imperialism stand for the darkest side of modernity. It is used as justification for the West's supremacy over other civilizations. Colonialism is perpetuated by the global myths that were invented by outsiders to colonize and maintain imperial hegemony even after it was decolonized in different parts of the world. Examples of these myths include the Renaissance, Enlightenment, Modernity, and the White Man's Burden, which date back to the fifteenth century. This is how the limited boundaries of the colonial power structure forced pluriversality and dynamic cultures to stay stationary.

Mignolo (2013) states that decoloniality promotes pluriversality as a platform for claiming justice and balance, disconnecting from the homogenizing tendencies of the coloniality of power. Before delving further into the idea that religion influences politics, it is important to clarify what modernism is and how it relates to imperialism. According to Ahmad (2006), modernism is a process that involves switching from one form of production to another. The interaction of many social, cultural, ideological, and political forces changes the way capital, land, and labor are related during a transition. Although adaptation occurs, it typically comes at the expense of dismantling more traditional norms, structures, and the connections that exist between people of different genders, classes, and social groups. Any kind of imperialism combined with this

mutation is dangerous. This is the situation in the modern era, where modernism and colonialism work together to suppress native traditions, values, and claims to knowledge from the preceding century. The cooperative nature of modernity and colonialism in the contemporary era is a completely different scenario that defies simple historical explanations that paint Islam as the religion of fanatics who have perpetually meddled in state affairs. As a reaction to the destruction and crisis of modernity in search of identity, it gave rise to what is incorrectly referred to as "fundamentalism." Ahmad references significant secular leaders of the 20th century who headed political movements founded on contemporary and Western ideology as opposed to religion, such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Habib Bourguiba, Ahmad Sukarno, and Kemal Ataturk. Ahmad highlights the various ways that religion has influenced politics, challenging the Western perception of Islam as fundamentalist in nature. He disproves the notion that Muslim states' politics are always dictated by Islam by pointing to examples of secular administration throughout history. According to Ahmad (2006) public support for religious and political cooperation fluctuates depending on the social and political environment.

As an insider, Ahmad sheds light on the nuanced exceptions and subtleties that colonial actors and experts are unable to see from the outside because colonial discourse about Islamic nations insists on the global myth of fundamentalism that Islam fosters. For example, he quotes the views of the eminent philosopher and theologian *al-Ghizzati* as well as his successor, *Ibn Jamaa*, who propose the Doctrine of Necessity, which supports following even unjust laws in order to prevent chaos. We discovered that, in this philosophy, which comes from a widely accepted school of thinking among Muslims generally, secular politics is given more authority than religion.

Ahmad (2006) makes the link between the modern Islam that is accused of being fundamentalist and modernity, which is one of the guises that imperialism or colonialism uses to control the world. He broadens his approach

to include the reasons behind fundamentalism's emancipation and its influence on Muslim politics. This, like many exceptions, is an exception and the decision of a select few; historical, economic, cultural, political and social, circumstances must be taken into account in order to fully depict Islamic civilization from its inception to the present. He claims to embody all of the ideas that Islam propagates and uses the concept of *jihad* as an example, which has been connected to the modern fundamentalism of Islam as a religion. On the one hand, certain groups within the Muslim community are misrepresenting Islamic concepts through the concept of *jihad*; on the other hand, the West has developed a comprehensive discourse to undermine Islam as a religion based on this premise. He clarifies that the word's origins are in the Arabic word *jehd*, which has several meanings. It encourages, for example, fighting, intellectual and spiritual pursuits, volunteering, social or humanitarian activities, or making a sincere and concentrated effort to achieve a worthwhile goal. A *mujtahid* is someone who tries to understand religious laws in light of contemporary circumstances. The word *mujahida* refers to engaging with oneself to accomplish greater intellectual and spiritual aims. Jihad was equated in the early Islamic history with fighting to protect and expand the Muslim population. But throughout time, conflicts arising from personal aspirations, disagreements, and a rearranging of alliances and interests between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as inside the Muslim community, lead to several wars referred to as jihad, harb, jung, muqatala, or qital. Even now, the word "jihad" is frequently exploited in direct opposition to its actual meaning in order to further modern imperialism. Ahmad (2006) recommends that undoubtedly, contemporary Muslim extremists and ideologues have oversimplified the multifaceted concept of jihad to simply mean waging war. The most eminent instance of *jihad* in the 20th century was the struggle against the Marxist government in Afghanistan and its Soviet ally, despite being supported and armed by the United States, a non-Muslim superpower. In the present day, acts of terrorism, sectarian violence, and the

targeting of innocent individuals are all justified as acts of holy war. This simplification is not exclusive to the Muslim community.

Conclusion

Ahmad (2006) makes points that are consistent with Mignolo's theory of the colonial matrix of power (CMP) that persists into the post-colonial period. Islamic fundamentalism is one example of a universal narrative that ignores the various political and cultural facets of Islamic civilization in order to maintain power dynamics. According to this story, Islam has an impact on state politics in order to support fundamentalism. Ahmad attributes the rise of current fundamentalism to Western meddling in Islamic world, which resulted in the imperialist use of the *Jihad* concept. Islam does not participate in politics as the Eurocentric discourses state, Ahmad (2006) explores how religious fanaticism gave rise to many solutions, such revival, reconstruction, or pragmatism, inside the collapsing Islamic society. Imperialism in and of itself was the one that charges restorationists of being fundamentalists and terrorists after using them strategically to further its own agenda. He also brings up the crucial points of conflict, deception, and debasement stemming from the idea of the Other. An ideology of superiority underpins the concept of distinction. Religion and history organize and legitimate violence, which is fueled by the Other, a source of insecurity. Whether they are Muslims, Christians, Hindus, or Jews, they all eventually misrepresent historical events and religious beliefs. Religious-political movements are primarily motivated by worldly hatred and insecurity toward the Other; nonetheless, no faith condones the slaughter of innocent people. Therefore, religion doesn't always inspire people to act in their own best interests. Greater power dynamics and political goals are at play when religion is implanted to engage people.

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