

Postcolonial Contexts and Gynotexts: A Comparative Study of Selected African and Pakistani Anglophone Novels



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Abstract: *Situating the argument within the postcolonial theoretical perspectives on agency, nationalist zeal, and subalternity, the article attempts a comparative analysis of two of the Anglophone novels produced in the former colonies: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz's *The Heart Divided* (1957). Adichie's is an African narrative of the post-independence predicament and Shah Nawaz's covers the culminating point of the collapse of the Raj from the Pakistani perspective. Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Elleke Boehmer's (2005) insights regarding the sociocultural and political perplexities associated with the conditions of subalternity, agency, and nationality have been used as the theoretical position for approaching the texts. The selected fictional narratives have been analyzed to unpack the textual currents manifesting the social problems, cultural tensions, gendered dimensions, and collective crises therein. The article explains how the novelists have thematized several issues responsible for creation of the crisis, especially for women, in the postcolonial Nigerian and Pakistani societies: colonial influence, social disintegration, economic uncertainties, patriarchal structure, linguistic disorientation, and sexual exploitation. All these unsettling factors depicted in the novels have been negotiated and explained. It is also discussed how the novels have taken up the theme of female agency by portraying resilient characters who struggle to compete with the coercive system. With its focus on the prevalent sociocultural problems found in the former colonies in the African and Asian regions, the study contributes to understanding of the colonial conditions and legacies.*

Keywords: Postcolonialism, gynotext, agency, subaltern, Anglophone fiction

Introduction

Amongst the spheres of human endeavour characterized by exploitation and sabotage, colonialism remains the most nefarious one. It has always had its obtrusive marks on the world as it has been a "widespread feature of human history" (Loomba, 2005, p. 8). Especially, it is one of the most manifest markers of the latter half of the last millennium. It stretched its reach unimaginably covering various continents—Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Ranging from

the political configurations and geographical demarcations to the social structures and domestic dynamics, all spheres of life have constantly been shaped by the formative influence of the colonial coercive apparatuses. Consequently, most of the countries across the globe have been evolving under the burden of colonial legacies.

The responses to these colonial legacies have been encapsulated in the term postcolonialism that connotes "insurgent knowledges that come

from the subaltern” (Young, 2003, p.20). The legacies shape and inform the postcolonial consciousness in many different ways: resistance, acquiescence, and complacency. By virtue of their colonial histories, the masses are still struggling with the ensuing crises that are ruining their sociocultural stability. However, majority of the postcolonial writers negotiate the questions of identity, agency, and freedom by indicting the colonial masters for the existential predicament enveloping the postcolonial world. Hence, anticolonial resistance and deconstruction of the colonial discourses are the representative formations of the writings coming from the former colonies of the western powers. Therefore, these discourses are replete with pejorative descriptors for the colonizers whose demeanour was typified by sheer savagery.

One of the perplexing social issues further aggravated by the colonial intervention is that of gender roles. The women of colonies become victim of “double-colonization” (McLeod, 2000, p. 175), that is, they are subjected to both the colonial and patriarchal suppression at the same time. The twofold exploitative structure keeps them oscillating between the institutional oppression and familial subjugation, thus turning them into puppets pulled by the stringent strings. The postcolonial women writers have intensively engaged with these hierarchies of exploitation and, therefore, their endeavours have resulted in an enormous bulk of theory and fiction in the field. There is a long list of the writers working on the interface of women’s studies, history, literature, and theory: Spivak, Mohanty, hooks, Minh-ha and others. Thus, the status of women in the former colonies posits a central question to the postcolonial study of power structures.

The texts selected for this article as the primary sources for development of the argument belong to the category of postcolonial women’s writings: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz’s *The Heart Divided* (1957). Adichie’s novel (2006) is set in the context of Nigerian Civil War and it narrates the prevailing uncertainties in the society resulting from the social discords and animosities. The novel portrays role of two of

the strong and resilient female characters, Olanna and Kainene. According to Eren Bolat, the novel is one of Adichie’s texts that delve into the modalities of “the condition of postcolonial women” (2022, p. 9). In short, the text thematizes the complex issue of women empowerment besides depiction of the overwhelming insurgencies.

Mumtaz Shah Nawaz’s novel (1957) takes as its milieu the pre-partition Indian scenario when the Raj was on the verge of collapse. It was the time of political tension and social segregation because of the simultaneous motilities of the freedom struggle and the partition plea. The narrative revolves around two sisters belonging to a conservative family, Zohra and Sughra. Both the girls are enlightened and educated representing progressive spirit of the society. Tariq Rahman, the historian of Pakistani Anglophone literature, has described it as “a political novel” (2015, p. 28). Precisely, both the novels narrativize the condition and consciousness of women in the turbulent times of political upheavals.

The article not only analyzes the selected novels produced in the African and Asian regions, Nigeria and Pakistan, but also draws comparisons between the texts. The comparative location of the novels helps to understand the broader parallels found in the various versions of postcolonial textual yields produced in different parts of the world. It also signifies a collective stance taken by the third world that is competing with the repercussions of the colonial enterprises and expansionist projections. Thus, the main contention of the article gains significance due to the analyses that have been developed and the comparisons that have been drawn.

The article addresses the following research questions: 1) in what ways do Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz’s *The Heart Divided* (1957) foreground the feminist panache in the post/colonial contexts? 2) what are the manifest parallels between Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz’s *The Heart Divided* (1957)? The questions framed are outlining the ambit of the study as both the novels and the

theoretical framework chosen for it are tentacular in nature.

Literature Review:

Lionnet (2018) pursues the feminist pathway and, also, uses relevant postulates of intersectionality to study the issue of representation of females in the selected literary works. By using an interdisciplinary approach, she attempts to bridge the gap between the academic priorities and the actualities encountered in the real life. She pays attention to postcolonial representations and their relation with hegemonic structure to expose the latent political choices governing the structure of the literary writings produced at the imperial metropolitan. She also studies the intriguing interrelation of “identity, sexuality, and criminality” (p. 154) to frame the complex positionality of the oppressed women.

Ocran (2022) approaches the African fictional narratives with a revisionist outlook to reconsider the burning questions of identity formation and gender stereotypes. The study has taken up Accad, Sadaawi, Nwapa’s selected novels as the primary sources for grounding of the argument. The study foregrounds the strong female characters who take inspiration from the western views about gender equality and challenge the local patriarchal clutch. Thus, study explains the positive role of the “western education” (p. 138) in bringing the marginalized classes to the frontline of the society and ensuring their upward mobility.

Mansoor and Malik (2022) have questioned the feminist rhetoric that qualifies the Pakistani females as mere puppets moving with the social currents passively, without attempting to voice themselves. Through triangulation of discourse of decoloniality and the theory of posthumanism, they have interrogated “the idea of ‘womanness’ in postcolonial Pakistan” (p. 440). The study stands out as an innovative work both methodologically and theoretically. And it accomplishes a convincing argument that dismantles the traditional western views about the issues of ability and agency with reference to the postcolonial women. In short, the article offers a more optimistic image of ‘womanness’

marked by the quest to participate in and question the so-called normative social practices.

Sengupta and Sinha (2023) specifically focus on the women voices devoted to protest against the hegemonic discourses and coercive cultures. By covering various versions of the protest found in South Asian women’s writings, ranging from personal to the communal, the study aims to introduce a “heterogeneous idea of protest” (p. 11). By so doing, the study attempts to cover the versatility found in these discourses of dissidence. It has also been explained that the variety of versions is resulting from the variety of the experiences—domestic violence, ethnic prejudice, economic exploitation, and so on. Hence, Sengupta and Sinha’s work gives a comprehensive account of the different dimensions of the contemporary debates about the gender and postcoloniality.

Taj (2024) negotiates the continuously evolving gender roles and rituals by studying Urduophone pulp fiction. He posits that the authors of the selected fictional narratives are fully aware of the social actualities of their times. Therefore, the narratives produced “by and for women” (p. 724) are representative of the social conditions in which they have been framed and read. The article discusses both the anxieties inflicting the South Asian women and the aspirations that are driving them. Moreover, the reading practices have been interpreted to draw conclusions regarding the influence of literary discourses on the women of the region. Thus, the article presents an encompassing argument about the production and reception of pulp fiction in South Asia.

Research Method:

The methodological approach is based on textual analysis of the selected novels and their comparison. The textual analysis relies on exploration of “themes” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278) and drawing of “inferences” (Kumar, 1996, p.20). And the comparative method facilitates to find, among other features, the “recurring motifs” and “recurrent situations” (Bassnett, 1993, p. 116) in the texts. The kind of comparative study of the

postcolonial literatures has also been suggested by Ashcroft et al. (2003). They recommend the study of the “thematic parallels” (p. 26) found in various versions of the postcolonial literature for development of “a genuine post-colonial discourse” (p. 18). Thus, the prominent thematic features of the texts have been compared to bring forth the existing similarities that, in turn, evince broader connections between various national versions of postcolonial literature.

Theoretical Framework:

Postcolonial thought provides the foundation for the theoretical framework formulated for the study. The framework is based on the postulates culled from the theoretical works of the leading figures in the domain of postcolonial theory: G.C. Spivak and Elleke Boehmer. Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) and Boehmer’s *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (2005) have been consulted for the conceptual framing. Spivak (1988) deconstructs the notion of agency by explicating the ways in which “the subaltern as female is” found “even more deeply in shadow” (p. 83). Boehmer’s argument (2005) is pivoted on the narratives that “inscribe gender roles in the nation” (p. 27). The hallmark of her theorization is the problematization of the fictional “versions of post-independence nationalism” (p. 207). In the light of these theoretical perspectives, the special focus of the study remains on the postcolonial perception of the issues of subalternity, agency, and nationality. Thus, the framework covers the individualistic, gendered, social, and national perspectives for development of a consummate critique with reference to the selected texts.

Dimensions of Gender and Postcoloniality in Adichie and Shah Nawaz’s Novels:

Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz’s *The Heart Divided* (1957) have been produced in the postcolonial contexts and, therefore, the texts resonate with thematic currents of the colonial influences and legacies. The question of nationalist confusions has also been represented in the novels. To depict the problems and particularities of postcolonial societies, the texts take up the

theme of gender roles and locate it within the broader sociopolitical conditions. Several other perspectives like mutual rivalries, language, and marriage have also been delineated with intensive focus on the underlying politicality of the matters. Therefore, the novels stand as the rich repositories of various conflictual discourses and combative perspectives.

Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) shows how the Nigerian nation is grappling with the post-independence crises resulting from the insurgencies triggered by the colonial legacy of disruption of political and social structures of the nation. The novel is precipitated by narrativization of the repercussions of the coercive colonial machinations. Adichie has set the postcolonial tone of the novel at the outset through Odenigbo, the professor. During a discussion about the possible solution of the Nigerian political crisis, he vociferously announces, “the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe” (2006, p. 19), he continues passionately, “I was Igbo before the white man came” (2006, p. 20). This expression of the anticolonial position and a strong wish for retrieval of the pre-colonial conditions is typical of the African political consciousness. Moreover, Odenigbo and Ugwu blame “America” and “Britain” (2006, p. 297) for creating problems for Biafra on the front of foreign affairs. The other novel, *The Heart Divided* (1957), takes the postcolonial struggle against the British rulers as the central theme of it. Most of the characters—Zohra, Sughra, Mohini, Habib, and others—are critical of the foreign rule in the region and they continuously keep on condemning the unwarranted colonial policies of the government. For instance, during a conversation about the sharp contrasts between quality of the life during the rule of Mughals and the contemporary predicament, Mohini indicts colonization for the prevailing degradation: “life and the good things of the life will come with freedom” (1957, p. 139). The words of a political activist and dissident, Mohini, encapsulate the collective sensibilities of the majority of the South Asian natives who disdain colonization and yearn for the self-rule. The kind of loud declarations of the spirit of resistance

pervades Shah Nawaz's historical novel. Precisely, both of the novels are replete with the instances of agitation from the natives against the foreign rule in the respective region perpetuated by the western colonial powers.

Another of the most evident postcolonial features of these texts is the choice of language. Validity of the choice of writing in English made by the postcolonial authors posits a "perennial" (Talib, 2002, p. 71) question in the debates surrounding the act of writing in the postcolonial societies. One section believes that it is tantamount to submission to the colonizer's cultural influence and rejects it categorically, whereas the other section proposes use of it as a tool of resistance against the colonizers and, therefore, approves it as a strategic option. In the texts selected for the study, both the novelists, Adichie and Shah Nawaz, have chosen the language of the master to write and, also, resist. Therefore, the discourse of the texts is in English, albeit with a colour of indigenous expression. This feature of the novels bespeaks the ambivalence that regulates the existential conditions, social practices, and the psychic splits of the people of colonies and former colonies. In short, in this context the choice of language is not merely a matter of communication, but instead it is a central factor contributing to the epistemic politics governing the relations of colonizers and colonized people.

The next significant aspect of the novels is that they have been produced by the female writers. Hence, they fall under the category of gynotexts, that is, in Barry's brief expression, the "book by women" (Barry, 2002, p. 122). Adichie, the Nigerian novelist, is one of the foremost feminist voices in the domain of postcolonial literatures. Her works intersect the perplexingly complex postcolonial perspectives with the challenging gendered discourses. And Shah Nawaz is one of the pioneering Pakistani writers in English. She is known for her active participation in politics and, also, for writing about the political realities of her times. Hence, it is obvious that these novels are gynotexts that portray the feminine sensibilities and the feminist sensitivities with panache. Their discourses correspond with Loomba's identification of the postcolonial

imageries that they are "profoundly gendered" (2003, p. 180).

Accordingly, Adichie and Shah Nawaz have created powerful female figures that subvert the structure of oppression with courage. Olanna and Kainene are Adichie's major female characters. They both have shown courage to question and challenge the mean demeanor of the males of the society. After betrayal of Odenigbo, Olanna is advised by her aunt Ifeka: "you must never behave as if your life belongs to a man" (2006, p. 225). She follows the advice and when Odenigbo attempts to restore their relation, she defies him and his claims. The other powerful character Kainene shows the kind of confidence that her father acknowledges: "Kainene is not just like a son, she is like two" (2006, p. 30). Shah Nawaz's Zohra, Sughra, and Mohini are also very powerful characters. From the outset, Zohra has been depicted a girl who has embraced "a life of independence" (1957, p. 1). The same momentum towards freedom in the patriarchal society has been maintained by all the girls. Education, politics, entertainment, life decisions—in all the domains they have aspired for freedom. In this manner both the novelists have created powerful female characters to counter the pressures coming from the oppressive patriarchal societies.

The question of nation always resides at the heart of the postcolonial consciousness and literary writings. *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) is pivoted on the very idea of nation and national affiliations—Nigeria and Biafra are at war to determine the question of the national belonging. Odenigbo, one of the leading voices of the novel, challenges the national lines demarcated by the western colonizers. He is proud of his affiliation with his tribe and considers the national identity as a fake marker created by the colonizer: "I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity" (2006, pp. 19-20). He also calls it a "stupid" (2006, pp. 110) approach to believe in the political identities imposed by the colonizer. Also, Olanna is described as "a nationalist and a patriot" (2006, pp. 46). She speaks passionately about her proud affiliation with the "great nation" (2006, pp. 293). The text also contains

the rhythm of “the Biafran national anthem” that declares it “Land of the rising Sun” (2006, pp. 279). The nationalist quest guides also the narrative structure of Shah Nawaz’s *The Heart Divided* (1957). The Indians are resisting the colonial rule and demanding freedom from the colonial rulers who are inflicting severe cruelties on the natives. An extreme instance of it is found in the event when the protesting girls, including Mohini, are arrested and jailed. This shows the reach of cruel clutch that does not allow the peaceful protest by the innocent college girls. The nationalist passion is also manifest in the dialogue between Mansur and Sughra at the end of the novel. When Sughra gives way to her enthusiasm by showing her determination, “henceforth we shall go forward together hand in hand, towards our goal” (1957, p. 481). And Mansur reciprocates with equal passion, “towards Pakistan” (1957, p. 481). All these instances taken from the novels evince how pervasive the nationalist questions are in the fiction of postcolonial nations.

The mutual rivalries and rifts also punctuate the postcolonial social formations. These novels have represented these in-group conflicts of the colonized people thoroughly. *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) narrates the events and background of the war between two of African parties, one supporting Nigeria and the other advocating secession of Biafra. In the novel, the people are shown celebrating secession of Biafra from Nigeria. They are marching zealously holding placards inscribing slogans and “carrying a coffin with NIGERIA written on it” (2003, p. 163). Whole of the narrative is moving on the pivot of this conflict between Nigerians and Biafrans. The kind of conflict is also found at the heart of Shah Nawaz’s narrative. *The Heart Divided* (1957) placed the Muslims in a position where they are fighting with both the foreign rulers, the English, and the local majority, Hindus. The Muslims are struggling to ensure the safety of their future generations through creation of a separate country, Pakistan. The ideal of Two-nation Theory is spirit of the Muslim movement as shown in the novel. To culminate the conflict, the Muslims and the Hindus have been shown to have aligned

themselves with their representative political parties—the Muslims are with “the All-India Muslim League” and the Hindus are with “the Congress” (1957, p. 333). The gap between the two groups has been symbolized through depiction of impossibility of marriage between Habib and Mohini. Thus, in both of the novels these social disruptions have been shown to be an essential part of the colonial legacy.

There are some other similarities that are found between the female characters depicted by Adichie and Shah Nawaz. For instance, the major female characters of both the novels have received the western education. They appreciate the enabling power of the kind of education since it creates awareness among women regarding their rights. Moreover, the matrimonial matters of all the leading characters have been shown to be in crisis: the love affairs fail and marriages are dissatisfactory. This hints at lack of acceptability of the independent female partners in the traditional patriarchal societies. At both these points regarding women, Adichie and Shah Nawaz’s fictional versions are in consummate correspondence.

Conclusion:

The comparative analysis of the novels in the light of the selected postcolonial theoretical postulates has made the relevant textual dimensions manifest. It has become evident that Adichie and Shah Nawaz have depicted and denounced patriarchal societies in their respective contexts. Focalizing from the feminist perspective, they have represented how the male chauvinism expects surrender from women and how women resist the unwarranted demands to make their free choices possible. It has also been brought to the surface that ramifications of the colonial conditions and politics have further aggravated the predicament of the native women. Furthermore, the existing parallels between the discourses of the novels—feminist élan, nationalist zeal, use of English as medium, and representation of mutual rivalries—have brought the broader similarities between the African and South Asian versions of postcolonialism to the limelight. The comparative analysis has shown that these complex discourses of dissidence have the same

essence and their shared spirit of resistance is yoking them together. Hence, the analysis evidences transcultural connections between different postcolonial societies. However, it also shows the differences existing between the fictional narratives. For example, Adichie is more open with reference to description of sexuality, whereas Shah Nawaz's discourse is marked by a visible touch of modesty. To conclude, the novels become the sites for enactment of a plethora of charged issues, ranging from the domestic problems and gender roles to the political upheavals and national crises.

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