



RESEARCH PAPER

**Post 9/11 War on Terror: A Study of Dynamics of Neocolonialism in
Aslam's *Thinner Than Skin***

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Neo-Colonialism is perhaps the most relevant issue in the present-day scenario in Third World countries. This research aims at analysing Aslam's *Thinner than Skin* in the context of post 9/11 War on Terror and American hegemony strengthening political, cultural and economic control of Pakistan. A conceptual framework has been employed to undertake this research with special emphasis on Nkrumah's concept of Neo-Colonialism along with supporting concepts of Said and Spivak. This study is qualitative in nature and the Textual Analysis has been employed to analyse the neo-colonial designs of the USA with special repercussions of the War on Terror in this specific region. The results show that the different forms of American neo-colonialism including political, cultural and economic are used to have an indirect control of the country. This study recommends that the contemporary power politics should be perceived from the perspective of Neo-Colonialism to have a true implication.

Keywords: American Hegemony, Neo-Colonialism, Post 9/11 War on Terror, Third World

Introduction

The structure of world power politics altered radically after the Second World War, and then, the Cold War leading to the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. further changed the web and woof of world politics turning it into a unipolar world. The emergence of the USA as the sole superpower brought a lot of challenges in the coming times (Nawab, et. al. 2021). The hegemonic designs of America can be best termed Neocolonialism which, according to Nkrumah, is "imperialism in its final and perhaps its most dangerous stage" (1965, p. ix). An instrument of Capitalism, it is aimed at strengthening a subtle form of political control, slavery, and cultural subjugation of the 3rd World countries, at the mercy and condescension of 1st World countries, especially the USA.

Direct control of the colonial powers of old times has given place to a new form of colonial exploitation, politico-economic control and repression of the neo-colonized states like Pakistan. Seeming freedom of the neo-colonized countries is just a myth as they are being controlled by the neo-colonizer states.

A very important stage in American neo-colonial designs started with the 9/11 incident. The whole structure of world politics went topsy-turvy after it. The American attack on Afghanistan and the resultant War on Terror had serious repercussions for Pakistan. The geo-strategic importance of Pakistan for America, its hegemonic designs, and its desire to control the world proved extremely destructive for Pakistan and for the world. Nkrumah called neo-colonialism "the question of power" and "a serious threat to world peace" (1965, p. x). Said pointed out that the foreign policy of the USA was a clear manifestation that it was following the legacy of old imperialists or orientalist (1978, p. x).

Pakistan faced horrible effects of this American neo-colonialism and is still facing the same. Extreme weakening of the economy, destruction of infrastructure, stigma of being a country with terrorist hide-outs, and loss of precious lives on a large scale are among the prices Pakistanis have been paying as a result of this neo-colonial venture of USA. Besides, our forces have been compelled to fight that 'foreign' war and remained the butt of the Taliban's anger and dislike, making Pakistan an arena of this disputed War. Many novelists and writers of Pakistan have tried to expose the Neo-colonial repercussions of the Post 9/11 War on Terror in their notable writings like Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, Jamil Ahmad and Uzma Aslam Khan to name a few. They have explored, in their novels, the destructive impacts of American Neo-Colonialism on the psyche, society, culture, economy and freedom of Pakistanis.

Uzma Aslam has beautifully depicted these impacts on life in Pakistani Northern areas in a highly realistic manner in *Thinner than Skin* (2012). She has presented the direct trauma and wilderness caused by the American War on Terror through an all-absorbing story of four tourists who make an explorative visit to the Northern areas during this time. The tourists are Farhana, an American national of Pakistani descent; her boyfriend, Nadir, a Pakistani professional photographer trying to thrive in America; Wes, Farhana's American colleague; and Irfan, Nadir's friend and their tour guide. Moreover, a Gujjar nomad family and their role in exposing the black side of American Neo-colonial venture are worth noticing. The narrative is full of shreds of evidence as to how the life of Pakistani nationals has been dehumanized and how their freedom and autonomy have been quashed by conducting the so-called War on Terror and fulfilling the hegemonic ends of American Neo-colonialism. This is aimed at exposing the true face of America, its mission of controlling the world, and playing havoc on Pakistan, thus fulfilling an artist's role to give a lens to the readers, and to enable them to see through reality and take corrective steps. This research is significant as it explores the Neo-colonial elements in the novel making Pakistanis aware of its drastic outcomes, and enabling them to come up with resistance which is necessary to come out of any yoke of slavery.

Literature Review

Postcolonial Pakistani writings in English, especially fiction, are closely bent on presenting the still-affecting remnants of colonialism. The most damaging among them is the indirectly subtle form of modern colonialism, an ongoing process, i.e., Neocolonialism, especially that of the USA. This phenomenon has put the modern world in direct conflict with the Muslim world, so this subject has great relevance. The key concept of this study, i.e., Neocolonialism was first presented by Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana after independence. He coined the term Neocolonialism which he introduced in the preamble of the Organization of African Unity Charter (1963) and then in his book of world acclaim *Neocolonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965). Sartre also pointed out this phenomenon in his *Colonialism and Neocolonialism* (1964) and warned against it. However, Nkrumah brought it to the limelight in the true sense of the word. Calling it the "worst form of imperialism" (1965, p. xi), he defines a neo-colonized state as "in theory, independent", but its economic system and political policy being controlled and "directed from outside" (p. ix). He further enumerates its various forms: the army of the imperialist neo-colonizer garrisoning the neo-colonized state and controlling its government; controlling with the help of economic means; compelling the neo-colonized state to purchase "the manufactured products of the imperialist power"; controlling government policy through payments, civil servants and "banking system controlled by the imperial power" (pp. ix-x). To this list, he adds 'Aid' which goes back to the neo-colonial master with "increased profits" (p. xv) and its last stage as military aid (p. xvi). About the economic means mentioned above, Nkrumah mentions the role of organizations such as the IMF to strengthen neocolonial rule over the subjected states (p. xvii). He clarifies that neocolonialism is not only the "African question" but is prevalent in almost all the Third World countries (p. xvii). Finally, he proposes that these countries can only develop when they come up with resistance against

neocolonialism, the chief interest of which is to keep them undeveloped. Secondly, he proposes unity of the affected countries to destroy neo-colonialism whose chief weapon has been “divide and rule” (p. 253).

To understand the proper working of Neo-Colonialism, it can be categorized into political, economic and cultural forms. Different other Postcolonial theorists have also identified these forms. Spivak (1991) has pointed out that after Gulf War, Neocolonialism got more and more political, ideological and military in nature. The West shifted their enmity from USSR to the Muslim world is also the same issue. They did so on an ideological basis first. Said (1997) exposes false Western projections of Muslims as potential terrorists. According to him, Fundamentalism has been deliberately attached to Islam through Western press and texts. The same ideological construct of Islam paved the way for a mad hike in Islamophobia after 9/11 and provided the Americans with an opportunity to attack Afghanistan and subjugate Pakistan and Afghanistan as neo-colonized states. Cultural neo-colonialism is very much connected with political one. As Said has linked culture with imperialism (1993), neo-colonialism is strengthened with the help of discursive practices of media, texts and other cultural manifestations controlled by the neo-colonizers. Another form connected with them is economic neo-colonialism. Althusser’s idea of the ideological state apparatus (1970) of the colonizers has been turned into a sophisticated one in neo-colonialism through a subtle system of control in the form of multinational corporations, WTO, World Bank, IMF, etc. It is also called “late capitalism”, the medium of “neo-imperial domination and of economic globalization” (Ashcroft et al., 2006, p. 148).

As suggested by the de-colonial/ postcolonial theorists, resistance (Fanon, 1961), abrogation of Eurocentric discourse (Foucault, 1969), and writing back to the empire (Ashcroft et al., 2007) are the crucial ways of coming out of the yolk of slavery for the colonized/ neo-colonized nations. In this context, the work of Pakistani Anglophone fiction writers is crucial who have questioned neo-colonial trends. Mohsin Hamid’s *Moth Smoke* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *Exit West* (2017) are important illustrations. Moreover, Uzma Aslam has especially voiced that concern in her novel *Thinner than Skin* which is the subject of analysis in the present research. However, as it is a recent novel, limited research on some of the aspects has been undertaken on it. Makhdoom et al. (2019) have researched the link of identity with the landscape and environmentalism in the narrative. Rashid (2018) has employed discourse analysis to explore different aspects of the novel which resulted in Post 9/11 image-making of Pakistan. Tolle (2013) has explored various interlinked concerns in this novel including politics, feminism, religious tensions and environmentalism. However, no recognized research study has been made on Neo-colonial aspects of the novel up till now. Hence, the study, in hand, aims at exploring Neo-colonial elements in *Thinner than Skin* to bridge this research gap.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

As this research is based on the exploration of Neo-Colonial elements in Aslam’s 2012 novel along with repercussions of the War on Terror and Neo-colonial designs of the USA to get socio-politico-economic control on Pakistan, a conceptual framework has been employed by the researcher, which focuses on the concept of Neo-Colonialism. Nkrumah’s 1965 book, *Neocolonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism*, has been utilized for theoretical underpinnings along with related concepts of Said and Spivak. It is qualitative research and the method of Textual Analysis has been employed to analyse the data which, in the present case, are the text of the novel, *Thinner than Skin*, by Uzma Aslam Khan. The process of careful coding and then interpretation helped in meeting research objectives.

Results and Discussion

Aslam's *Thinner than Skin* is a post-colonial novel that is an impressive and effective illustration of the Neo-colonial hegemonic designs of America in the context of the post 9/11

War on Terror going in the Northern areas of Pakistan. Following is the in-depth analysis of various factors, events, situations, phenomena, processes and characters presented in the novel which illustrate different dynamics of American hegemony, and the repercussions of the War on Terror on the socio-cultural and political lives of Pakistanis.

The setting of the novel with a major part of the narrative in Kaghan at the time of the War on Terror is the first element that focuses on the theme of Neo-Colonialism. The mention of the military on ways and the CIA in the very beginning sets this tone. Throughout the novel, the readers are told that the Pakistani military and police are under the indirect control of the USA and its foreign policy. The occupation of the Northern areas of Pakistan by military, police, and CIA officials is shown in lurid light. People living in these areas are pestered by their interference in local life. The Uzbek rightly mentions the "Uyghurs in Guantanamo Bay, handed over to America by Pakistan" (p.146). The police break household items during the search for the terrorist suspects, maltreats Maryam's family and harasses them (pp. 215-216). The hatred of local people toward the militants, mafia, the government and America is shifted towards soldiers and the police. Ghafoor raises sarcastic questions on the presence of a convoy of military trucks and points out that despite their presence, the training camps of the militants were getting stronger. He answers this question by bringing out the American role in strengthening militants: "The mafia with the government, the militants with the mafia, the government with the militants" (p. 211). In the same vein, he satirizes the neo-colonized government of Pakistan selling its coast to China... Or giving it to America" (p. 211).

Moreover, political neo-colonialism is time and again referred to in a sarcastic vein in the novel. "CIA condemning some dead soul to hell" (p. 26), persons handed to CIA (p. 72), and Americans "killing Muslims in Afghanistan and Pakistan..." (p. 261) are examples in this case. American interest in the oil of Kazakhstan and its order to Pakistan to have "no pipeline" through Iran (p. 328) show how politically they control this country. Irfan rightly lashes back at Wes when the latter praises India for being the friend of America: "Though it's us (Pakistan) who fight its (American) wars" (p. 236). When Wes insists and calls it democracy, Irfan exposes American political neo-colonialism saying, "Third-world military dictators are especially popular with free-world democracies" (p. 236). At another juncture, he satirizes the American War on Terror calling it "your teeming war" and linking it to missiles and drones being dropped on Pakistanis. Furthermore, Irfan points out the use of Shamsi Airfield by the US Special Forces as a base to perform their military operations, not only in Afghanistan but also in Pakistan. In many places, the novelist lets the readers know a common fact that the militants, their extremism, and the war against them were backed by American consent. When Nadir refers to the bloodshed and trouble in Waziristan and the hunt of the Pakistan army for Baitullah Mehsud and his companions, he ominously remarks that nobody believed that "the drone attacks were launched by Pakistan, at least not only by Pakistan" (p. 102). Likewise, the unchecked activities of the so-called militants/Taliban are also questionable. Their forced recruitment of the local youth; reference to "Sunni Jihad" against "allies of the infidel" and government (p.260) and local people's reservations against it (p. 263); ironical treatment of the extremist mullah in Narran, who fought America in Afghanistan " cursing the radio he was in" and who required local boys to fulfill his dream of making Pakistan "a country of God" (p. 300); boys kidnapped for getting 'information' about "enemy suspects" by men from camps, "smuggling trees, in expensive slippers" and turbans (p. 305); are all details which Aslam has provided to satirize political neo-colonialism of America in Pakistan. Bomb explosions killing innocent Pakistani people in great numbers is another hint at the bloody repercussions of American hegemonic Neocolonialism in Pakistan.

Apart from political Neo-colonialism, Aslam has also pointed out cultural neo-colonialism being exercised by America for its vested interest to subjugate Pakistan culturally. This is made possible usually through Western media and its discursive construction of Pakistan. The American at the photo agency tells Nadir not to bring the

picture of the Pakistani landscape rather he asks him to "show us the dirt. The misery" (p. 13). Farhana, totally influenced by American propaganda, declares Pakistan a place where women couldn't survive" by referring to the hideouts of al-Qaeda, "bearded fanatics" and suicide bombers (p. 104). Pakistanis have been so influenced by Western cultural subjugation as when Ghafoor talks of Kiran's murderers and thinks of taking revenge on them, he says one of them is American, "We cannot touch him". The other is also untouchable because "she is with the American" (p. 228). In the same way, when the tourist party is about to return from the northern land, the mental slavery of the local people is exhibited when they bless Farhana and embrace Wes because of their American nationality despite their role in an innocent death, but show hatred for other two Pakistanis (p.206). The dotting attitude of Nadir's father towards the foreigners brings home another form of cultural subjugation. He is presented as a brown man" in the presence of a white man and his white 'sister' (p. 286). Wes' watching only BBC for news is also a hint at a crucial tool of cultural neo-colonialism.

The subtlest and corrosive form of neo-colonialism, i.e., economic neo-colonialism is also traceable in the narrative. Its most striking example is presented through a newspaper cartoon. It shows, in a panel, a "white hand" of a white man giving money to a brown man in tattered clothes, who out of delight starts sewing a doll. In the second panel, the white hand gives this tailor double money and this brown man "tears apart" his doll. The caption goes: "Pakistan spends billions of dollars destroying what it spent millions of dollars creating" (p. 30). The role of military aid, IMF and the World Bank has also been highlighted in weakening of Pakistani economy to keep it dependent. Nadir reviews that 75 per cent of Pakistanis are living on less than 2 dollars a day, 40 per cent have no access to drinking water and 50 per cent live in utterly unhygienic conditions with no facilities for sanitation. The 'late capitalistic' neo-colonial exploitation of the USA and other powers is also criticized when the novelist points out that despite the traffic of oil through the Silk Road from China to Pakistan to Iran, the people living in Pakistan are kept poor.

Conclusion

This is how Aslam becomes one of the effective writers who are 'writing back' to highlight the issues affecting their country. Characters' reactions to the dynamics of American hegemony have been aptly brought out by her. She has artistically disclosed Neo-colonial designs of the USA in the wake of the post 9/11 War on Terror scenario along with its serious repercussions in connection with socio-cultural, economic, political, and geographic aspects of the state of Pakistan. Through their analysis, rendered in this study, the objectives have been fulfilled and justified. Its significance can be seen in rendering the basic forms of Neo-colonialism and the factors responsible for it to make the neo-colonized nations identify the enmeshing chains of slavery and get rid of them.

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