



# Al-Azhār

Volume 8, Issue 2 (July-December, 2022)

ISSN (Print): 2519-6707



Issue: <http://www.al-azhaar.org/index.php/alazhar/issue/view/19>

URL <http://www.al-azhaar.org/index.php/alazhar/article/view/421>

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7549734>

**Title** Post-Independence Postcolonial  
Peripheral Permanence of  
Subalternity and Marginalization:  
Textual Analysis of Noor and  
British Graves

**Author (s):** Mudasser Khalid.  
Inayat Ullah

**Received on:** 26 January, 2022

**Accepted on:** 27 March, 2022

**Published on:** 25 December, 2022

**Citation:** Mudasser Khalid.Inayat Ullah  
“Post-Independence ostcolonial  
Peripheral Permanence of  
Subalternity and Marginalization:  
Textual Analysis of Noor and  
British Graves ,” Al-Azhār: 8  
No.2 (2022):42-54

**Publisher:** The University of Agriculture  
Peshawar



[Click here for more](#)

***Post-Independence Postcolonial Peripheral Permanence of  
Subalternity and Marginalization: Textual Analysis of Noor and  
British Graves***

**\*Mudasser Khalid**

**\*\*Inayat Ullah, PhD**

***Abstract***

*The Bangladeshi and Pakistani nationalist narratives with regards to the events of 1971 are manifestations of victimization/praise of the self and the vilification of the other. This dichotomous discursive relationship leaves out the people who do not associate themselves with any of the national groups, especially after the independence that was gained from the colonial raj in the name of a homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent. These marginalized people lack representation; hence, they always remain underneath the popular narrative. This research is an attempt to bring to surface the experiences of the marginalized people with reference to the events of 1971 in Sorraya Khan's Noor and British Graves, a short story, by Hassan Manzar using a combination of postcolonial and Marxist theories.*

**Keywords:** Bangladeshi, Sorraya Khan, Noor, British Graves,, Hassan Manzar

.....  
\*Department of English, National University of Modern Languages (NUML),  
Islamabad, Pakistan.

\*\*Department of English, National University of Modern Languages (NUML),  
Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: [inayat@numl.edu.pk](mailto:inayat@numl.edu.pk)

## **Introduction to the Study**

Although colonialism may have ended, yet the effects of imperialism still live on in various manifestations in the once colonized nations across the globe. The imperial reminiscences imply that though a nation may have attained geographical liberation from a foreign rule, yet within its schema their runs the imperialist blood that prevents the people from being truly free.

The conflicting narratives emerging from Pakistan and Bangladesh regarding the events of 1971 show that the marginalized people of the subcontinent failed to find a home in the post-independence postcolonial state that was established in the name of Islam and as a home for the Muslims of the subcontinent.

Pertinent to the fall of Dhaka or the coming into being of Bangladesh, there is the Pakistani narrative vis-à-vis the Bangladeshi narrative. These narratives serve the purpose of glorification of the Self and the justified vilification of the Other. The discourse of one receives the counter discourse of the other; hence, ensuring discursive nationalist narratives. Besides these dichotomous narratives, there is the ‘in-between’, the ‘un-heard, and ‘un-analyzed’ narrative of the people who had the same colonial experience as Muslims and as the people of Pakistani-Bengali binary prior to partition; however, post-independence in general and the events of 1971 in particular did not bring them into the national narrative of either side, consequently preventing them from enjoying the fruits of center. The problem this study analyzes and explicates is the experience of the people who firstly encountered the colonizer/colonized relationship, and once out of it, they were again pushed to the periphery despite all their contributions to the cause of freedom and the political struggle against the colonial regime. In this regard, this study analyzes novel *Noor* by Sorayya Khan and the short story *British Graves* by Hassan Manzar.

### **1. Research Questions**

With the backdrop and the context established, this research intends to answer the following questions:

- What causes the peripheral permanence of the subaltern, especially in the context of independence gained after the end of colonialism?

- What are the different strata in the lived subaltern experience in the backdrop of post-colonial independence?
- In what ways does the subaltern group contribute to the political struggle in the colonial as well as postcolonial context?

## **2. Research Objectives**

In answering the questions, the research is undertaken to fulfil the following objectives in the considered works:

- To examine the ways in which people are marginalized and kept at peripheries
- To analyze the struggle put by marginalized people to come out of the peripheries and the subsequent success or failure of it

## **3. The Subaltern in a Postcolonial Space**

For the Pakistani readers of the research the study will highlight the ways in which a stratum of the society is marginalized to an extent that it revolts against the government, as experienced during the events of 1971. For the non-indigenous readers, the research brings to light the ways of othering a racial group, who once worked for the same postcolonial agenda of getting rid of the colonial rule, and their marginalization at an administrative level.

Gramsci referred to the unrepresented people as the subaltern. Morton (46) comments that the words ‘proletariat’ and ‘marxism’ were under censorship by the state, therefore, Gramsci used ‘subaltern’ for the former and ‘monism’ for the latter. As they lack representation, therefore, the subaltern are the subject of the hegemony of the ruling elite. Gramsci was primarily interested in the history of the subaltern group in a socioeconomic structure. For Gramsci the history of the subaltern was as complex as the history of the dominant group, but due to the hegemonic supremacy of the latter, the former never gets to be the ‘official’ version of history and is lost in obscurity. The primary reason the subalterns fail to rebel against the ruling class is because of the social, economic and political institutions that can give their presence a voice and make them heard (Ullah, 6). The only way that the subaltern can subvert their position is if they

initiate some revolution that can shift the class structure, yet the consequences cannot be attained immediately.

The introduction of the term 'subaltern' to the postcolonial niche is accredited with Ranajit Guha who established the Subaltern Studies group of historians (Aschcroft 216). The group, with its particular focus on South Asian historiography toiled to bring forward the subaltern version of history. The group believed that the Indian history had been primarily dominated by the ruling elite; hence the subaltern version of it is never brought forward, resulting in the permanence of their subalternity. Such historical writings by the ruling elite eliminate the chances of establishing a narrative of the people in terms of the resistance produced against colonialism and or against the colonial elitism (Ullah et al 07).

The critique of the Subaltern Studies group came in the form of *Can the Subaltern Speak?* by Spivak. She argues that in the postcolonial context, the subaltern cannot speak, because there is no subaltern conscience in history (287). The epistemic violence committed by the ruling elite on history, does not leave any detail of the conscience of the subaltern. The subaltern, who does not know how to speak, can never be heard. By saying that the subaltern cannot speak, Spivak does not deny the lived experience of the people, rather what she implies is that the way the subaltern speaks is not heard by the researchers, hence the voice of subaltern remains a noise and is unable to trigger any serious chain of effects.

The research is qualitative in nature as it tries to explore the ontological and epistemological concerns associated with subalternity. Furthermore, under the qualitative research umbrella, the research is also phenomenological in design as well, as it tries to explore the phenomenon of subalternism against the cultural backdrop of colonial and postcolonial independence. As a tool for analysis the study relies on textual analysis as a method of decoding meanings. According to Belsey (169), "a text is made up of multiple writings entering into mutual relations" therefore, the researcher will try to bring to surface such multiple writings. Due to time constraints, the textual analysis will be delimited to Marxist, postcolonial and psychoanalytical perspectives.

#### **4. Subalternity and Marginalization in *Noor* and *British Graves***

The short story *British Graves* by Hassan Manzar published in *Fault Lines* written in the context of the fall of Dhaka. The protagonist of the story is Noorul, who is a Behari settler, once in East Pakistan and then in Pakistan after the independence of Bangladesh. The story chronicles the experiences of him and his relatives firstly pertinent to the partition of subcontinent, and then with regards to the fall of Dhaka. The story of his and his people is one of a marginalized group, subjugated by different people at different times and places, hence a recreation of subaltern in them.

British colonialists in India furthered their imperialist ventures by establishing a binary of colonizer/colonized, self/other, the civil/barbaric, the cultured/uncultured so on and so forth. For the binary to have an effective manifestation, it is imperative that the being on the other side of the binary considers itself as inferior. This inferiority complex was not intended to the native elite because as Sartre in Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* remarks that the native elite was handpicked by the colonial regime in order to further their cause of subjugation of the economic base. The native elite was trained by them, educated by them and made cultured in the English ways of doing things, implying that they, though native, yet were a part of the colonial regime. The people of the bourgeois class who are closer to the colonizer end of the binary become termed as the other, while the subaltern group pushed to the periphery becomes the Other that cannot speak. In the story, the notions of British Provincial officer, F.R Bush establish the fact that for him, as a representative of the British, the concern was the elite of the newly formed land with no regard for the subaltern; “At times, he starts talking about its political leaders as if he and they had been playmates as kids!” A subaltern like Noorul has nothing to say to such boasting of Bush, as he has no affinity with the people that Bush would comment upon.

The hegemonic dominance that the British maintained over the subaltern was not merely discursive, rather it was implemented pragmatically to ensure that it manifested thoroughly in the colonized culture. As mentioned in the story, regarding the event of renovation of the graves of British soldiers and nationals, the author comments: “...the British Government was not interested in those of

British origin who were buried in the Christian cemeteries here.” They were only concerned with the people who were purely British and did not have any relationship with any of the native people. This leaves an imprint of difference on the mind of the native, establishing its subalternity.

The project of Manichean treatment is to make the lesser being in the binary realize its inferiority, ultimately establishing the superiority of the colonizer. In this Us vs. Them relationship, the US accepts the fact that They are superior in every way of doing things. As Noorul remarks about the British treatment of graves:

“We on the other hand, don’t know how to preserve anything, neither house nor grave. Only they know how to die and how to burry the dead, not us.”

As Fanon said:

“In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich (31).”

This points towards the inevitability of white race being right in the mind of the subaltern. The idea of white supremacy is imprinted so strongly in the minds of the subalterns that they never begin to question it or to challenge it, consequently, the colonials and later on the compradors enjoy unquestioned authority.

As Spivak remarks that the conscience of the subaltern is missing and it cannot effectively speak for itself. The attitude of F.R Bush towards the indigenous people establishes the fact that the subalterns of first degree ‘do not know’ how to preserve their living identity, let alone the identity in memoriam. The researcher contends that such people are the subalterns of first degree, who experienced the colonial regime whilst remaining at the periphery of the socio economic structure.

In addition to being the subaltern of first order, the immigrants of Behar, like Noorul, experienced another order of subalternization as well. They, within the newly formed Pakistan were trying to get out of their state; however, the fall of

Dhaka within 24 years resulted in another shift of state for them, resulting in a state of marginalization in the newly formed Bangladesh. The geographical as well as linguistic displacement for them at the time of partition of subcontinent and the consequent migration to Bangladesh had already pushed them to the boundaries of the social structure, where there was none to assimilate with them. Noorul notes, "...while others after moving found themselves among people who spoke a different language altogether." The sense of alienation was not that grave for the people who came to East Pakistan knowing Bengali, however people like Noorul, with no knowledge of indigenous language, were destined to be marginalized in the social dealings of the newly formed Bangladesh.

These signs of subalternization were further cemented with the fall of Dhaka, where people the likes of Noorul once more had to face displacement, resulting in a loss of any sense of social identity or cultural affinity to the indigenous environment. The author comments: "In the blink of an eye, in an extinct East Pakistan, Noorul Imaam's people once more lost their country and their identity." Hence, unlike their Bengali local counterparts, the immigrants like Noorul got to face subalternization of the second order, where this time it was people like them that had pushed them to the peripheries.

When speaking of this experience of second order subalternization, Noorul remarks about this entire experience elucidate the way displacement from one place to another and then a sense of alienation in the very same place contributed to their further subalternization. He says:

"Everyone got the same treatment that jamans get before you eat them, when you put them between two dishes and shake them up violently, so that their skins burst and the inside gets pulpy and comes out. Life shook us up too, just like the jamans."

The two dishes, in the first experience being the creation of India and Pakistan, and the second time around they represent the conversion of East and West Pakistan into Bangladesh and Pakistan. Noorul and his relatives were the ones who were pulled apart in all this experience, primarily because they were more at the peripheries of the social strata.



According to Morton (2), Spivak in her essay emphasizes that the anti-colonial nationalism instigated by the colonized nations, after the departure of the colonizers, changed into a bourgeois rule, which eventually adapted and manifested the same inequalities as were experienced by the indigenous people during the colonial rule. It implies that the subalterns of the first order like Noorul, got the second order treatment at the hands of the bourgeoisie class of their countries, primarily in terms of economic marginalization.

“...having lost their houses, jobs and source of income in Bangladesh, were now languishing in Red Cross camps. Before one had a shop, another a clinic, one was a master tailor, another a school master.”

People from Behar like Noorul, who had the chance of climbing up after the partition and get out of their state of subalternization were once more throne to the same disparity as they were before the partition. With their effort they were able to become parvenu in the economic order of society, however, they were pushed into the same peripheral state of subalternization with the fall of Dhaka. The subalternization this time caused such an economic drawback for them that, “After that they had become dependent on zakat.”

It can be argued that people undergoing turbulence might experience financial or economic marginalization, however, it seems to be that it is only applicable to the already subaltern people, and the people that already belonged to the bourgeois were least affected by the political instability during the creation of Bangladesh. Noorul narrates:

“Those who were in high positions, who were in the army, or who had played with millions, who owned hotels or cinema houses, had come out of there in a trice and got settled in the secure environment of West Pakistan which grew into Pakistan.”

It was the already subaltern people who experienced it in the second order during the fall of Dhaka and creation of Bangladesh. Hence, there already present

economic depravity resulted in further marginalization and pushed them to peripheries even more.

The third perspective in which the already subaltern can be seen to be further subalternized is the political domain. The subalterns in pre-partition lacked any political representation and similarly during the independence of Bangladesh they would still have neither any kind of political power or agency to speak for them. The author narrates about their docile plight: “They could not harm anyone before and they could not do so now. Only they can get their work done who have the power of inflicting harm on someone.” The people of Behar were never able to gain political power of any kind during the 24 years they spent in Bangladesh because they were denied it the first time before partition.

The unavailability of political agency, pushed them to the peripheries the second time, not allowing anyone to speak for them, let alone they themselves speaking for their kind. When Noorul receives a letter from one of his relatives in the Red Cross camp, who proclaims the deplorability of their plight by saying, “Let’s see how long we continue to be stuck here, ignored and abandoned.” There were the Bengalis, and the people from West Pakistan, both had their political representation and the respective governments were fighting for their retrieval, however, the Beharis, who were as Bengalis or as Pakistanis as they could be had no representative to fight for them, hence they were left unspoken of – outside the political hegemony.

The subalternity of the Behari people is more grave and serious compared to the first order subalterns because for them after the end of colonization life became even more deplorable and they were pushed to the extinct boundaries of the socio, economic and political hemisphere. The plight of theirs is best encapsulated in the concluding remarks of F.R Bush:

“This is the difference,” he said “between you and us. When you leave a country, you forget the living who are left behind. We don’t even forget the dead who fell for the sake of Great Britain. There will always be England...”

*Noor* is a novel by Sorraya Khan written in the context of the events of 1971. The protagonist, Noor – a down syndrome kid, serves as a healing bridge between her Army Officer grandfather and her Bengali mother adopted by her grandfather during the war days. The novel gives the account of the events of 1971 from the perspective of Sajida, a Bengali, and Ali, a Pakistani soldier. The novel is a trip down the memory lane of the atrocities of the war committed, in the name of religion (Islam, Hinduism and/or others) and ethnicity, intentionally or unintentionally and the inevitability of the suppression of such events.

Although Sajida (a Muslim woman) was considered a crucial member of the Ali sector, however, in her unconscious there was always this difference which she maintained, even with her husband who loved her so dearly, “Nonetheless, there was a part of herself she didn’t share with him. Long ago, Sajida had learned not to engage him in her dreams” (13). Despite being socially welcomed, Sajida was never willing to share her dreams – the unconscious reflection – with her husband, primarily because of the cultural difference and the less value given by her husband to importance of dreams as compared to her home culture.

Furthermore, the peripheral presence that she has in the overall setting of the novel is not just because of her realization of the fact that she belonged to a different place, rather the experiences she had in Pakistan also cemented her otherness and marginalization. Due to her colour, the school fellows would tease her, “...Kohl-ki-larki and she sometimes fell asleep thinking it would be best if she could bury herself in a mountain of coal and become their insult” (19). This discrimination on the bases of color created a sense of otherness in Sajida is created because of the lack of social representation. All due to the fact that there were no people like her around, she was pushed to the peripheries of the social stratum.

Furthermore, at a political level as well, Sajida was missing representation. When she was brought to Pakistan from Bangladesh, upon inquiring of Ali’s mother, “Cyclone, he’d said, as if her presence could be summed up in a simple word” (22). Due to the lack of political representation of the subaltern, only a word

sufficed for her existence. Neither did Nani Jaan ask any further question, nor did Ali give any further explanation.

Although the novel gives a very little account of the marginalization of the people of East Pakistan, however, the bread crumbs spread randomly induce the fact that they Bengalis were economically and socially marginalized in their own land. “The one Hussein heard Ali share was that the explosion of the depot was the first time the country sought to evenly distribute its wealth” (119). The unequal distribution of wealth, as a historical reality, was something that became the primary cause of confrontation between East and West Pakistan. The unequal distribution of wealth marginalized the people of East Pakistan that lead to their revolt against the center that controlled all the wealth and the power that it comes with.

Similarly, in the process of othering, the people of West Pakistan created and propagated stereotypes that resulted in social marginalization of the Bengalis. As Ali narrates while telling different jokes to Noor, “Bengalis smell. Bengalis are women with small penises” (156). The effeminate-Bengalis is the same kind of stereotype that the colonialists developed for the oriental people in order to marginalize them. Such stereotypes only lead to further marginalization and their constant reinforcement and reiteration results in peripheral permanence of the subaltern.

## **5. Conclusion**

Spivak remarks that the subaltern cannot speak and the subaltern women (including Muslim women) are doubly marginalized compared to their male counterparts. The researcher contends that the subalterns that Spivak speaks of are the first order, whereas, there are the subalterns of the second order, who in addition to experiencing the first order subalternization during the colonial regime, got to experience it once again even with more severity during the fall of Dhaka. Furthermore, this second order subalternization spurs from the same causes as is the first order, where the people are not allowed any economic, political or social representation. This deprivation in social, economic and political sphere results in further expulsion of the already marginalized people to

the outer edges of the peripheries where there is no voice of theirs and no representation.

## Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. "Subaltern." *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, 2003, p. 216.
- Belsey, Catherine. "Towards cultural history — In theory and practice." *Textual Practice*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1989, pp. 159-172.
- Fanon, Frantz, and Constance FARRINGTON. *The Wretched of the Earth. Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. Translated ... by Constance Farrington*. 1965.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin Modern Classics, 2001, p. 31.
- . *The Wretched of the Earth; Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre; Trans. from the French by Constance Farrington*. 1965.
- Gramsci, Antonio, et al. *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. 1971.
- Khan, Sorayya. *Noor*. U of North Carolina at, 2006.
- Morton, Stephen. *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Routledge, 2003.
- Nelson, Cary, and Lawrence Grossberg. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271-313.
- Spivak, Gayatri C. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 1988, pp. 271-313.
- Ullah, I. (2020). War Memory, Psychological Trauma, and Literary Witnessing: Afghan Cultural Production in Focus. *SAGE Open*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020961128>
- Ullah, I., Ahmad, S., Qazi, M. H. (2021) ESSENTIALIST BORDERLANDS, MONOLITHIC OTHERING AND MIGRATED LOCALES: ANALYSIS OF H. M. NAQVI'S HOME BOY . (2021). *Pakistan Journal of Society, Education and Language (PJSEL)*, 7(2), 22-35. Retrieved from <https://pjsel.jehanf.com/index.php/journal/article/view/441>
- Ullah, I. , & Rahman, S. . (2021). Essentialist Stereotyping of Muslims/Islam, Self-Othering and Neo-Orientalism: Selected Cultural Production in Focus. *Al-Azhār*, 6(1). Retrieved from <http://www.al-azhaar.org/index.php/alazhar/article/view/30>
- Zaman, Niaz, and Āṣif Farrukhī. "British Graves." *Fault Lines: Stories of 1971*, 2008.