

## **Neoliberal Epistemology in Pakistani Anglophone Fiction**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper is an attempt to offer textual readings of two works by Pakistani writers: Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Musharaf Ali Farooqi's *Between Clay and Dust*. It offers readings of these texts from the perspective of neoliberalism, especially with an accent on epistemological factors. It explains how as a zeitgeist of our times, neoliberalism controls, dominates and trespasses personal domains, favours the moneyed class and necessitates an epistemology that governs relationships within a human society, whether it is the first world i.e. the US or a South Asian city. Educational and cultural institutions, whether in the US or in Pakistan, the paper argues, are meaningful, according to the neoliberal epistemology, as long as they have their monetary or exchange value.

**Key Words:** Neoliberal epistemology, Pakistani Anglophone Fiction, Pakistani culture, Courtesans, Wrestling

### **Introduction**

Neoliberalism, “an overarching dystopian zeitgeist of late-capitalist excess, ” (Venugopal 2015) is defined as a politico-economic theory in which “the real matters of resource production, distribution and social organization should be determined by market forces” (McChesney in Chomsky, 2004, 9 ). “In practice”, according to Colin Crouch, “it is concerned with the dominance over public life of the giant corporation” (Crouch 2011, p vii). Mostly, neoliberalism is discussed in journals on politics and economics and is considered to have a colossal influence on human beings living in any society. Expressions like “we live in the age of neoliberalism,” are common (Saad-Filho and Johnson, 2005, p05), but, in literary studies, its influence is not widely discerned and discussed in texts that are studied and written upon. Impact of neoliberalism is huge. According to Saad-Filho and Johnson:

it is not difficult to recognize the beast when it trespasses into new territories, tramples upon the poor, undermines rights and entitlements, and defeats resistance, through a combination of domestic political, economic, legal, ideological and media pressures, backed up by international blackmail and military force if necessary (Saad-Filho and Johnson, 2005, p02).

The neoliberal canons realize the epistemological need to sustain this unfair and “doctrinal system” (Chomsky 2004) which ensures a permanent tilt in favor of the moneyed class. It ensures, with the power of the capital, that the powerful machinery of the state is always at its back. It “shape(s) individual desires, behaviors and institutional practices according to market principles, while it simultaneously creates a desired market through those individual and institutional desires and behaviours” (Walonen p.12). Huehls quotes Foucault’s naming of the neoliberal individual as *homo economicus* (p.3) and avers that it “nicely captures “how the pervasive insinuation of a specific rationality—an epistemology grounded in free-market competition, entrepreneurialism, and profit-maximization—impresses itself ontologically” (p3). This paper is an attempt to discern this “grounded epistemology” (p3) through the works of two Pakistani novelists.

Neoliberalism’s anonymity is considered one of its greatest strengths. Many critics believe that neoliberalism’s greatest strength is its ideological inconsistency and its pragmatic ability to be whatever it needs to be in a given situation (Heuhls, 2006, p 66). When it comes to exploration of literary texts in critical works, neoliberalism seems to sustain its invisibility. While the impact of encroaching urbanization is often discussed in critical works on literary texts, the verbiage that is required to expose and critique is hardly discernible. In the context of the first world, there have been conspicuous efforts in this regard. Mitchum Huehls’ *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (2016) is a case in point but its locale is the United States. In the context of Postcolonial societies, especially Pakistan, there are hardly any studies available that look at literary texts produced by Pakistani authors from this perspective. This paper attempts to do precisely that.

Mohsin Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is set during the following years of the 9/11 Terrorist Attack. Most of the critical acclaim that the novel received has been for offering a nuanced reading of the way immigrants in America came to terms with their precarity during the proliferation of the state’s security narrative. Critical reception of the novel has mainly focused on social, racial and cultural disorientation faced by the immigrant, especially the Muslim, community in the US after 9/11. However, this paper studies the novel from the perspective of neoliberalism and tries to identify its impact on characters present in the novel.

Musharaf Ali Farooqi’s novel *Between Clay and Dust* (2012), with its setting of post-partition South Asian city, records the human plight in the wake of neoliberal encroachment in post-partition South Asia. It also takes into account the tragic fall of historical and cultural cognition in the wake of neoliberal onslaught.

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* begins with Changez interacting with an unnamed American in Old Anarkali and recounts his relationship with the US. He had worked in New York, the city, which ensconced the Wall Street and was the global center of capitalism. He highlighted his competitive spirit, the most touted

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virtue in the neoliberal age, as he reached his “senior year without having received a single B” (TRF). Students like him from all around the globe were co-opted in the powerful system to serve it (P). His college, a major educational institution of the US is a cog in the colossal capitalist juggernaut, which “raised her skirt” annually, “for the corporate recruiters” to “show them some skin” (P). Changez was “a perfect breast—tan, succulent, seemingly defiant of gravity” (P). The sexualization of the process of recruitment accentuates the transactional value of education as it is purchased by the industry.

Education is important because it has exchange value. One could get a job with a “base salary of eighty thousand dollars” after studying at Princeton, the college where Changez studied, and can in turn get accepted at the Harvard Business School (Hamid 3). He gets selected in the interview because he is categorized as “hungry” (5), someone with a strong appetite for success, which simply translates into one’s ability to make more money and to be able to afford greater luxuries. In Changez’s “shame” emanating from his not being able to afford his education, his interviewer, Jim, “saw an opportunity” (p 6). Back home in Lahore, Changez envies “the rising class of entrepreneurs—owners of businesses legal and illegal—who power through the streets in their BMW SUVs” (6). The whole idea of life is one centered on how much money one could earn so once Changez had the offer, he knew that his employer “had the potential to change [his] life, ..., making [his] concerns about money and status things of the distant past” (8).

In the era of developing neoliberal capitalism, the epistemic understanding of what is fundamental is crucially connected with monetary gains. Jim, Changez’s employer, advises him to “focus on the fundamental”(s) (Hamid TRF 66). The expansion of capitalist fervor has affected a world-wide shift in sensibilities. Changez senses that it is by adhering to the fundamentals of the capitalist society that his world would also be transformed (Hamid TRF 51). Changez’s observes that the socio-economic changes in Pakistan cushion the ideologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’s worldwide neoliberal interest. He holds the “Western imperialism and American capitalism” (Hamid TRF 100) responsible for the decline in his family’s fortunes. What he implies is that the neoliberal system operates in an imperialist manner. The imperialists exercised tremendous geopolitical control over colonized nations. He states that in Pakistan the cycle of power dynamics that once commenced during the colonial regime, is still alive. In many ways, the local elite that once dominated Pakistan, are gradually losing their power and influence to businessmen by getting employed in American companies. Pakistan as a growing capitalistic country shows a relatively declining ratio of the middle classes.

*Between Clay and Dust* is a novel that revolves around two characters and two places: Ustad Ramzi and his *akhara*; Gohar Jan and her *Kotha*. Both these characters live in a pre-neoliberal epistemology. They are children of their tradition. The novel is a pensive story of the waning significance of their respective establishments. It throws light on the manner cultural heritage, *akhara* and *kotha*, are stripped of their cultural significance and are only as valuable as the

land they are located on. The *kotha* is finally sold and Ustad Ramzi stands desolate in the *akhara's* cemetery attached to Kotha as the pressure is built on him to sell his land to encroaching builders who have the municipal department by their side.

Ramzi won the title of Ustad-e-Zaman not for any monetary gains but to “fulfil the coveted dream of his clan elders” (p12). “The *akhara* was a hallowed place for him, where a man made of clay came in contact with his essence” (p.13). He had made the “*pahalwan's* traditional pledge to strive for the perfection of his body and soul until he returned to earth upon his death” (p.13). His relationship with his *akhara* is not negotiated monetarily. For him, it is the honor that comes with the title that his clan has won which matters. As he struggles to retain his title in the wake of his physical ailments and increasing worries of *akhara's* succession, he begins to hear the footsteps of the approaching beast of neoliberalism, in the shape of governmental coercions to sell his property after municipal tactics are employed to ensure that he vacates *akhara's* lands for corporate interests.

The government is partisan and is no longer custodian of the old heritage which the *akhara* represents. Within the spatial boundaries of the “Inner City” a few buildings such as the *akhara* (Place to practice and wrestle) and *kotha* represent old cultural spaces. These spaces are named as “forgotten” sites. The caption, “Inner City”, of the novel’s first chapter draws attention to (Farooqi BCAD 10) the remnants of the “last of a few enclaves” that have “continue(d) to exist”, but now have “been left on their own and forgotten” (Farooqi BCAD 10-11). Relative to this percept, the cemetery situated adjacent to the *akhara* and the *kotha* is also like a “relic of the past” (Farooqi BCAD 14). The private cemetery signifies a space where Ustad Ramzi’s ancestors and other *pahalwans* (wrestlers) lay buried. They represent those memorable figures of the past who for centuries had “upheld the tenets” of art and culture (Farooqi BCAD p.14). The dilapidated conditions of the old cultural architectures in the novel show that the proponents of the neoliberal capitalism do not consider it obligatory to preserve the cultural sites as the nation’s historical monuments.

Rapid urbanization of the cityscape renders many of the cultural epistemes meaningless. The rationale grounded in the episteme behind the erasure of it is seen that the state builders want to replace the old cultural architectural sites with new commercial buildings. No measures are taken to withhold this process. Such measures underline a neoliberal governance which alters the states’ policies whenever it is desired. The transformation of these “forgotten” (Farooqi BCD p.10-11) and inoperative sites will be substituted into spaces that could generate money and safe guard the monetary pursuits of the state’s eminent capitalists. Owing to poor sewage and heavy rains the condition of these places has worsened. Farooqi explains that the “graveyard” has been “inundate(d) with sewage” and “dirt” (Farooqi BCAD p.194). To avoid further loss Ustad Ramzi sets off to pay a visit to the Municipal Director”. The purpose of his visit is to seek his help to rid the cemetery of the sewage water. Interestingly, the Municipal Director is aware that “whenever it is required” it is the state’s responsibility to “provide assistance”

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to maintain and restore these sites (Farooqi *BCD* p.196). However, he informs Ustad Ramzi that due to the expansion of commercialization, the area of *akhara* and the cemetery has been now “taxed as a commercial property”. It has in fact been the builders who conspired to divert the sewer water to Ustad Ramzi’s enclosure (Farooqi *BCAD* p.194). The Municipal Officer claims that no assistance could be provided due to “constraints” in “the resources”. He tries to persuade Ustad Ramzi to “move the graveyard and the *akhara* elsewhere” (Farooqi *BCAD* p.196) knowing full well about the offer Ramzi received from the builders to sell his land to the builders and yield to the new construction plan.

Like *akhara* and cemetery, *Kotha* (red light area) is also marked as a valueless place because it serves no purpose to bring any monetary gains for the policy makers of the government. It stands alone as a useless waste; therefore, it ought to be erased from the state’s present topographical structure. The ruins of *Kotha* run parallel to the dilapidated condition of the inner city. There are “small cracks in” the “roof” that ‘need to be repaired’ (Farooqi *BCD* p191) but Gohar Jan, the owner of the establishment, is unable to even get them plastered due to her financial state. It was constructed “ninety-five years ago”. The suggested year means that this building was constructed during the colonial reign in the subcontinent, and thereby it should essentially be marked as a cultural heritage (Farooqi *BCAD* p.194). Over the years, the epistemic understanding of *Kotha* has been monumental of rich culture in the field art and dance. In the past, *Kotha* had once brimmed with cultural fervor (Neville 2009 ). Like Ustad Ramzi, Gohar Jan also anticipates that these historical-cultural percepts about state’s heritage and its cultural epistemes should carry onto the generations to come. Unfortunately, after Gohar Jan meets the Municipal inspectors, she realizes that the officers have no respect for her art. Bandey Ali, Gohar Jan’s assistant, begs of the officers to “at least make a note that the roofs will be plastered in a month’s time” (Farooqi *BCD* 193) to avoid a looming evacuation order but instead of making an immediate note about the building’s repair, the Municipal Inspector dismissingly inquires the time of the “mehfil (a congregation of suitors who come to attend Gohar Jan’s musical session) scheduled for the night” (Farooqi *BCAD* p193). Now from the state’s neoliberal stooges *kotha* should have some quantifiable value. Hence, with no monetary transactions and revenues nullified the empty space of the *kotha* is seen as an economic waste.

Lefebvre would translate Municipal inspector’s actions synonymous to a juncture when the significance of a space is reduced to a mere “place” (Lefebvre 28). He refers that the twentieth century ideologies that see the space and its relationship to the prevailing economic and political ideologies as value-oriented. Here “value” is termed to see what necessary actions could be allowed within a space to justify the ideological needs of the present times. In its ideological associations many societal assumptions about the place of human individuals in space and time can vary (Deeds 3). Here, the epistemic knowledge of a space concentrates on what Lefebvre constructs his theory that human beings with their thinking and ideologies enter into relationship with each other through their

activity and practice, by which they could exhume maximum social production (Lefebvre 29). Here social production strictly restricts its meaning with monetary productivity.

In this connection the Municipal inspectors and the private builders join hands and motivated by their private backers, look at the *kotha's* place as a mere commodity. With the expansion of capitalism and urbanization the Municipal committee views these cultural spaces (akhara, private cemetery and kotha) reduced to mere "valu(e)"able places as explained above by Lefebvre. The Municipal Officer turns down Ustad Ramzi's plea for reconstruction of the graveyard and *akhara* and claims that no assistance could be provided due to "constraints" in "the resources". He persuades Ustad Rumzi to "move the graveyard and the akhara elsewhere" (Farooqi BCAD 196). He wonders by declining builder's offers, how Ustad Ramzi ceases to acknowledge the importance of monetary values associated with the site (Farooqi BCAD p.196). In the same Gohar Jan's "all efforts" and her "contacts with the city administration" (Farooqi BCAD, p31) could not deter the demolition of *Kotha*. Many critics argue that the proponents of neoliberal ideologies could bring in monetary gain through any unfair financial channel. For the newly appointed officials the epistemic value of the cultural-architecture is that of unwanted ruins. For them heritage means a devalued past and; thus, such spaces should be commoditized for monetary gains. Hence, the evolving epistemes about the devaluation of cultural architect and art eventually brings about the demolition of the Kotha and other cultural architects in the inner city.

The novel further explores how human beings are also viewed as mere commodities that can be sold and bought. Tamami (Ustad Rumzi's brother and the assumed successor of akhara) is easily replaced by Gulab Deen's disciple, Sher Ali (the contestants who fight for the winner's title). It is presumed that he has a better understanding for the values of money and the importance of the commercial image of a fighter in the industry of fighting (akhara). Althusser asserts how ideology is "above all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals and its relations of production" (Leitch 133). In the light of Althusser's suggestions it could be seen that in the novel the market becomes important and advertisement is the only way to achieve fame. This can be seen as Gulab Deen (a match fixer at the akhara) insists on promoting and advertising Tamami. Neoliberalization in its most bare form means the "financialization of everything", even "human relations and human existence" (Harvey 32). Neoliberal tenets emphasize that the relationships are formed on contracts in the market place. Everything ranging from social goods to human actions are drawn into the domain of the market (Harvey 2). The true essence of cultural and aesthetic is seen fading. Gulab Deen suggests to delay the bouts through match fixing. The longer the fight, the more money will be generated. On Gulab Deen's further suggestions Tamami indulges himself into drugs to prolong his fights. As long as Tamami gives his best, he would be on the top and he would give more chance to the match fixers to gather money. And the

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moment he stumbles, he is discarded. He has become a comic entertainer to generate money by inventing a new flavor of entertainment (Farooqi BCAD 180). The focus on the cultural activity of wrestling lies remote from any genuine cultural associations. In fact: the act of wrestling, *akhara* as a space and the wrestlers, all are viewed as commodities feel the pressure to be transformed into places of generation and consumption. This is what could be termed as a neoliberal synchronization with the world.

The expansion of neoliberal economic ideologies also brought a shift in the epistemic interpretation of *Kotha* and its inhabitants. In *Between Clay and Dust* (2012) the people associated to the *kotha*, are also eyed as spectacles of ridicule and unwanted economic wastes. Through Gohar Jan's character the novel explores how in the past courtesans were considered as connoisseurs in the "art of music and entertainment" (Farooqi BCAD p21). Like old times Gohar Jan has maintained her *Kotha* where "trainee girls or nayika received instructions in the arts and music entertainment" (Farooqi BCAD, 21). In contrast, now, they are viewed as "a universe of failed unions, dreams, and abandoned hopes that started in the *kothas* and trailed off into the anonymity of the city's dark alleys" (Farooqi BCAD, 21). Many courtesans had left to join the film industry which explains that those who had joined the commercial lime light, survive and those who decline to become a pawn to monetary transactions, perish, like Gohar Jan. She states that only the "fiddle survive(d) in the *kothas*, and only the pitiless prosper(ed)" (Farooqi BCAD p.21). They are now a spectacle of ridicule and disgust who have been compartmentalized towards the periphery of their society. Gohar Jan (the courtesan) was "once" a celebrated beauty and was "known for her haughty airs and capricious treatment of her lovers" (Farooqi BCAD p.21). Pran Neville in his nonfiction book *The Nautch Girls of the Raj* (2009) also records the accounts of a unique class of courtesans who played a significant role in social and cultural life of India in the late 18th and 19th centuries. *Nautch Girls of the Raj* traces the emergence of the nautch girls in the Mughal era when they enjoyed an ultimate glory. Their popularity, however, declined in the later Pre-partition years of the sub-continent. Bakhtin in his book *The Dialogic Imagination* (1979) criticizes the process of separating out and detaching individual life-sequences from the whole. This reaches its highest point when financial relations develop in slaveholding society under capitalism (Bakhtin TDI 258). In the light of this statement the novel registers that "a growing sense of frugality in all affairs" of life had "affected the fortunes of the tawaifs" (Farooqi BCAD p.27). There are authorial murmurs that "the radical turnabout in life after the partition had created a deep feeling of uncertainty" (Farooqi BCAD p.27). Gohar Jan has been "quietly selling her gold since the previous year to maintain the *kotha* on the same lavish scale as before" (Farooqi BCAD p.29). She confesses that she feels "restive and disoriented. Sometimes the walls, the furniture, even the Music Room where she had performed for decades, appeared unfamiliar" (Farooqi BCAD p.74). The whiff of new social ideologies has also dented the "stately" and "austere" (Farooqi

*BCAD* p.27) stature of courtesans; so much so, that their lives are thrust into the most private crevices of the society.

Similarly, Ustad Ramzi as a veteran wrestler is a symbol of cultural significance. But he lacks any market value to the eminent stake holders of the government, therefore, the Municipal feels no reverence for Ramzi or his cultural achievements. He is left waiting for hours outside Municipal Officer's office and is later ill-treated in a "humiliating interview" (Farooqi *BCAD* p.196). Danial Butler quotes that for him the most important aspect about neoliberalism is, "that it doesn't manage directly; it manages from within the soul." That is to say, it makes each of us into specks of human capital who must appreciate their value in order to survive, and by "appreciate" I mean "increase." Here, if Ramzi needs to get his voice heard, he needs to increase his capital value. Otherwise, his "starched turban", "all his decorations and medals" and his ensembles that signify the accolades won in during these cultural activities, would not mean anything.

Furthermore, all human relationships have been surrogated to capital pursuits. It could be analysed how the social consequences of neoliberalization extend to an extreme degree. Gohar Jan's past relations with the influential people could not help her find the mother of the baby whom she found lying at the kotha's entrance. Subsequently, the "orphanage" refuses to take in "the child" because it was sent to them from a "tawaif's enclave" (Farooqi *BCAD* p.31). The episteme associated with courtesans and Kotha is that of humiliating "objects". The last chapter "Passing" points her adverse status in the present times. Despite having a legal possession of a plot "in the municipal graveyard" (Farooqi *BCAD* p.211-2), Gohar Jan is denied a decent burial. The society imitates all neoliberal ideals by forgetting moral norms. Harvey avers that neoliberalism is a way to monitor all human actions and substitute all prior held epistemic beliefs of ethics and morals (Harvey p2). According to the standardized economic ideals the socio-moral epistemes designate her erasure from the social milieu. Gohar Jan symbolizes those courtesans who are what Steven Wallace affirms as "mere Being" (Leitch. 192). Gohar Jan confesses that her world is transformed into "broken whispers" (Farooqi *BCAD* 13). Inhumanity lays bare in the capitalist society and within it all ethical systems, flawed. The neoliberal capitalism had claimed to invent a utopian form of living at its earlier stages of development. However, they ended up valuing every entity in capital terms. Daniel G, Butler emphasizes that under the neoliberal pressures "Humanity is perverted to become an entrepreneurial species" (p.35). He further states that Individuals are valued as business entities and corporations are enfranchised as citizens. Subjectivity is measured with cost-benefit logic that aggressively molds when, where, and how one experiences the world. Learning and knowing become means to the end of "making it" rather than emotional experiences as ends in themselves (p.35).

The research has tried to show how the political (neoliberal) ideologies and colonial economic ideologies affect the epistemic understandings of socio-cultural spaces, human beings and their relationships of love. The influence of money has



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led to the disintegration of all previous human relationships and spaces. It is explored in David Harvey's words that the process of neoliberalization has entailed much "creative destruction", not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers, but also of divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, ways of life and thought and the attachments to the land and habits of the heart. David Harvey further states that

In so far as neoliberalism values market exchange as "an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs", it emphasizes the significance of contractual relations in the marketplace. It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market (Harvey p.2).

The paper has highlighted how, despite being at two polar ends of global development, New York and the unnamed South Asian city in Farooqui's work are both the operating terrains of neoliberalism and whether it is Changez's Princeton or Gohar Jan's Kotha, the governing episteme regarding both assesses them on the basis of their respective monetary value. The motive behind the arrival of corporate recruiters at Princeton, or Municipal inspectors at Gohar Jan's kotha remains the same. Both have money in their pockets, and want a return on their investments. Underwood Samson hires the "perfect breast" that Changez is, while the Municipal inspectors offer to pay money for "the show." Princeton is able to "show some skin," while at Gohar Jan's kotha, the show has come to an end. It is the death of Gohar Jan, and with her, the death of an anachronistic epistemology, which Ustad Ramzi clings on to until the end of the novel despite the falling apart of his world around him. It is just a matter of time, we are made to believe, that the akhara, the spatial icon of a pre-neoliberal age, will be acquired by commercial builders and turned into a business enterprise.

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