

Parallel Modernity and Indigeneity in Riffat Abbas's Namak Ka Jeevan Ghar

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Abstract: *Indigeneity is a powerful means of representation and also a contested idea in the modern postcolonial world; used as a tool of resistance and conscious socio-political strategy to express collective identities. The assertion of singularity is the starting point of the path to achieve identity rooted in unique history, distinguished culture, religion, art and fables. The paper aims to understand the concept of Indigeneity employing Mbembe's theory of decolonization by (re)visit to Loonri, a textual utopia created by Riffat Abbas in Namak ka Jeevan Ghar, the novel initially written in Saraiki. The paper reflects on identity discourses and native dialogue with power and governance structure as well as "other". The study unearthed how in a parallel modern world, the indigenous inhabitants of a region formulate subversive strategies over time to maintain a unique identity with their creative spirit and sturdy imagination to maintain Indigeneity as parallel modernity.*

Key Words: Parallel Modernity, Decolonization, Indigeneity, Sovereignty, Saraiki Literature

Introduction

Derrida's theory of deconstruction falls in the poststructuralist tradition of critical theory. Words in language consist of a combination of sign and signifier. The confusion arises when a sign can be assigned to more than one referents, so that the sign can invoke a chain of signifiers in the mind. Thus, language, for deconstructionists, does not consist of signs but a chain of signifiers. It is a play of signifiers causing a deferral of meaning, implying that meaning does not reside in language because language is 'non-

referential.' Another element of Derrida's theory is his scepticism of binary oppositions. Prevalent ideologies are embedded in language Traditional theory suggests that we understand a concept only as it being the opposite of something else. Deconstruction emphasizes ambiguities in language and, by extension, metanarrative or the dominant epistemes of a culture. It tries to 'improvise new ways of thinking by displaying the contradictions and ambiguities in language and binary opposites (Tyson, 2014). This study will explore how Riffat Abbas's novel *Namak Ka Jeevan Ghar* deconstructs colonial

narratives by showing that the world is not constituted by civilised and uncivilized, primitive and unsophisticated. It highlights the grey areas between the binaries. Riffat Abbas has become a voice of marginalised people and culture with all its dynamic elements. His poetry and writings offer a fresh perspective on indigenous identity. His work echoes with deep sadness over trees cut down, dried up rivers, migrating birds, inequitable and misogynistic folklores, and the dialectical relation of master and slave, the conquered and conquerer. His mastery lies in producing space for the native dialogue and creativity, where the common people have their own voice and representation, unlike colonial and autocratic regimes in which the sovereignty of the local political communities is crushed in pursuit of power and domination. As a story is the most valuable legacy of humankind ([Shah, 2009](#)). Riffat Abbas weaves his narratives and uses it as a laboratory to experiment with a new vision for the future. This time the story is from the perspective of native, "savage," and "uncivilised". [Nayyar \(2022\)](#) has pointed out that Abbas's narrative logic is closer to real life because it is ordinary and non-elitist. Hence, in creating a world infused with magical realism, we find expression of the individual and collective identity of the people. His work is resistant with conscious political and social efforts for indigenous identity. Writing originally in Saraiki language, his tool of resistance is his literature and poetry. [Farooq et al. \(2014\)](#) have pointed out that Saraiki literature, Saraiki proverbs and *vaars* (a ballad consisting of heroic tales of battles), for instance, is particularly replete with 'tears' because of 'the continuous violence of the invaders in the Saraiki region'. Abbas's oeuvre, however, is devoid of any self-pitying gloom and despondence. [Nawaz \(2021\)](#) observes that Abbas presents the native as being the true son of the land, the *adivasi*,

because he was here before any invaders. His claim in the land is undeniable.

Abbas's discourse of Indigeneity is inclusive and open. Those whom the colonists portray as outcasts, the idiot and the joker of their stories, the monsters, prostitutes and hijras, are our allies. They were sympathetic to the marginalised and thus declared pariahs by the invaders. The many-headed Ravan, who dissented against the usurper and sided with the local man, is depicted as a villain. Centuries of internalisation of our stories told from the mouth of the colonists, the colonised fail to recognise their heroes. Abbas attempts at reclaiming those heroes and paints them in favourable colours, as friends of the downtrodden and the common man. Even god, whom the ruler misrepresents for his own interest, is accomplice in the struggle of resistance. The birds and the trees become the common man's strength. He is enervated by the stories of his forefather, the sun alights on his people to provide sustenance. He is a native of the city. The peacocks and the cranes dance; the dance of resistance because they, too, hold the right to the land as much as humans. The sunflowers and petunia albas waft fragrance that revives the spirit. In short, all creation is merged in this new tale which is new but old because it has sprouted forth from this earth, because it only requires the native to see that his eyes were blinded by the narrative of the coloniser. All he needs to do is unearth his own story, lying in wait for him for centuries. That is why Indigeneity is 'man's contemplation with Nature,' ([Abbas, 2017](#)), a quest for personal identity in the collective identity of man on a larger scale. Abbas repeatedly identifies the modern man's condition with solitude (*hijr; tanhai*). A sense of belonging can mitigate the profound solitude that the state—especially when it oppresses its own subjects—and the indigenous man experiences in today's world. Severed from the past, disconnected from the fellow men, and dissociated from the earth,

the aborigines and their despotic governments wallow in a melancholy (*moonjh*) that can be alleviated only by reconnecting with the local myth and embracing the past, a journey which the natives of all regions must take up together. State can be rescued from this condition if it camps with its subjects. Weaning the native off from melancholy and loneliness is the aim of Abbas's idea of indigeneity. [Hussain \(2004\)](#) is of the view that local culture endows national existence with an organic, living essence of life. Without local culture, national existence is like refrigerated food, with only a semblance of life.

Abbas holds no grudge for the invaders who have left. As the land that carries the bodies of invading soldiers in its lap, this modern idea of indigeneity is capacious enough to allow the rueful oppressor in its folds. 'If Alexander of Macedonia promises not to invade again, we can revoke the arrow shot from our bow,' ([Abbas, 2017](#)). The love of the land connects them with the soldiers of the invading country buried here. The man who stayed after his countrymen left for the love of the land and its people is welcome here. He is one of us and we will plant flowers on his grave, says Abbas (*ibid.*). Their war is with the aggressor, not with the common man, with anything that is detrimental to his well-being is inimical to indigeneity. The earth and its lores possess assimilative power and repel only that which tries to violate its sanctity. The lantern may be an arrival from a foreign land but the local culture has absorbed it as its own. Continuity, in time and space, is the strength and also a form of resistance of native culture. Originating from the earth, finding its expression in the words and lives of the inhabitants, it develops into a force connecting people of one part with those of another, garnering strength from the same people, proving that culture is not a fixed entity, rather a dynamic phenomenon. Fighting with the weapons of art, theatre, and culture, the heroes of the land appeal to the

art, theatre, and culture of the enemy's country. Abbas calls it dialogue with the myths (*asaateeri mukaalema*). The second thing that needs to be done to free the native from seclusion and oppression is a dialogue between the conscience of the other land. [Nawaz et al. \(2021\)](#) are of the view that despite being a poet of 'slave generations', the works of Riffat Abbas are full of hope and optimism for the future.

Literature Review

Beginning with writers like [Fanon \(1961/2007\)](#) and [Wa Thiong'o \(1986/1992\)](#), decolonization in the modern world has taken on a multi-faceted shape. On the one hand, it is an endeavour to reclaim the lost identity by a thorough break from the colonial period and its legacies, invoking precolonial memories and archives, discarding Eurocentric epistemologies and patterns of thought—which [Mignolo \(2009\)](#) and [Mignolo and Walsh \(2018\)](#) call decoloniality—on the other hand, it can take on the form of a merging of the past with the present, seeing history as a holistic experience rather than a disjointed one, envisioning a future with rethought structures of power and social order. Decolonization, to [Mbembe \(2021\)](#) is not the binary opposite of colonization. The same thought has been expressed by [Daoud \(2018\)](#), who sees colonization and decolonisation as part of the continuous histories of colonized nations, and not as an isolated incident. [Mbembe \(2021\)](#) sees decolonization as an opening to an infinite number of future possibilities and sets out in search of an indefinite, unpreplanned future, 'one that would mix together received or inherited traditions with interpretation, experimentation, and new creation to leave this world and go toward other possible worlds.' Mbembe envisages an organic global order with its modernity that is nondiscriminatory and sustainable for its inclusive and liberated approach without

slurring over the colonial past, focussing on the relational and dialectical discourse and the details of the space where the relations between coloniser and colonized evolve with the passing time. Transformation through historical consciousness and embracing of the tortured and unjust past is necessary to supplant the established 'imagined realities' ([Harari, 2014](#)) with inclusive alternate realities to configure the native space and expressions as diverse forms of identity and recognition disregarded hitherto.

By remodelling the governing structure and relation between power and sovereignty, he empowers every segment of the society, instead of promoting segregation and orthodox limitation on certain sections. His idea of sovereignty is to challenge the system that exploits its people where they are not autonomous, rather controlled and ordered for the so-called civilised agenda. [Mbembe \(2019\)](#) notes that the idea of sovereignty resides in an external dictating power of 'who may live and who must die.' For it is the state of exception that permits and legitimises state violence, there is no such state of exception that facilitates the process of exclusivity in his dialogue.

The defining policy of the colonies has been to promulgate a governing apparatus based on fear, stripping the dignity of the people by forcing them into submission ([Jan, 2021](#)). The independence of colonised societies provided a chance of transformation towards self-decolonisation. Predominantly, these chances were utilised to produce rather a different form of supremacy. That was the domination without hegemony ([Guha, 1997](#)). The pusillanimity over the political legitimacy in such postcolonial societies have been witnessed historically where the power circulates only in few elite hands. This ruling elite with the oppressor's ideology has behaved as if 'a body politic, a social body, is cutting itself off from something important, something creative' (Eqbal Ahmad in [Barsamian & Ahmad, 2017](#)).

Mbembe emphasises the urgency of inventing a new mode of critical thinking that facilitates the path of harmony and coexistence. In order to progress, postcolonial societies should learn from their erstwhile colonisers, i.e. western countries, instead of being myopic and nostalgic about the past. Such societies can play their role in coexistence by letting go of grudges and facilitating the process of mutual respect and harmony. As colonisation was unattainable without joint contribution by coloniser and the colonised, the decolonisation should also be a co-production of the past coloniser and the colonised ([Mbembe, 2019](#)). The social is more about the experiments involved in the formation rather than a contract or order. The attitude of societies is based on the historical beliefs of the past responsible for identity. The realisation that an organic culture and society keep producing and accommodating new thoughts and ideas within established social and conceptual structure is contingency of social theorising (Mbembe in [Shipley, 2010](#)).

[Hardt and Negri \(2009\)](#) put emphasis on a revolution based on a politically developed idea of love, creative tendencies as a robust expression and resistance of the common and a shared history. Proposing a new form of democracy, they say that this democratic experimentation begins with a dismemberment of the old forms in order to reform them. The outdated concept of sovereignty and the notion of people, including the manipulative family structure and nation, is discarded. Hardt and Negri (ibid.) replace them with a communal and political structure based on love, forming a global citizenry. Globalisation as a power dynamic has surrounded everything but there are indigenous communities who continue to persist and hold onto their native identities. These 'outside' of globalisation are a hope towards revolution.

Problem Statement

The clash of identities is very problematic in nature in the age of fundamentalism, racism and pluralism. The goal of coexistence between the natives and the foreigners is pleasant to know but the modern greedy agendas of modernity, globalisation and capitalism proposed by the White World Order does not encourage unprofitable goals to turn into a reality. Secondly, the idea of recognition by the natives and coexistence has been considered a form of subjugation of natives by the white agendas of human liberalism. The assimilation leads to constructing a new identity based on two different identities where the old or actual identity is compromised. The nature of asymmetrical relations too is disturbing and an authentic self can face a danger of a transformation resulting into a different alienation through manipulation.

Research Objectives

With the help of Achille Mbembe's theory of decolonisation, the paper aims at

1. Tracing the limited scope of the established concept of sovereignty with discriminatory and unsympathetic nature,
2. Exploring the scope and impact of the idea of indigeneity on identity formation in Riffat Abbas's *Namak Ka Jeevan Ghar*,
3. Riffat Abbas's way of tackling the modern question of the Other in postcolonial societies, and
4. The manifestation of native identity in *Namak Ka Jeevan Ghar* through resistance to grand narratives.

Research Questions

The study will aim at answering the following questions drawn:

1. How does indigeneity allow the natives of Loonri in *Namak Ka Jeevan Ghar* in

establishing their unique identity and retaining individual supremacy?

2. What are the constitutive elements of the idea of democracy presented by Abbas in the novel?

Methods

As has been mentioned above, Derrida's deconstruction is a major tool in looking into discourses and dominant ideologies. His work can be seen as a critique of a unilateral view of things and concepts. As Eurocentrism is a one-sided, fixed ideology, considering the native culture as the binary opposite to European culture, his theory is applied in contemporary studies ([Syrotinski, 2007](#)). Using Derrida's deconstruction as a toolkit, the study will unearth the ambiguities and contradictions in postcolonial discourse of democracy, nation, and sovereignty, and equality. The study aims at exploring Riffat Abbas's idea of Indigeneity (*maqaamiyat*) as manifested in his novel *Namak Ka Jeevan Ghar*. The novel was published in 2021, initially in Saraiki, later translated into Urdu by Munawar Akash. The study will employ Mbembe's (2011; 2021) idea of sovereignty in an organised community where each individual holds equal rights and none is demonised into monster, slave, or subject. In such a democracy, no peripheries exist; the centre is everywhere. Using the theoretical framework, we will try to find out elements in the novel in conformity with Mbembe's idea of an organised community and how this novel attempts to decolonise the metanarratives of class, state, and religion.

Loonri as an Eternal, Universal Domain

The setting of the novel is Loonri (House of Salt), a fictional place which existed long before the creation of Time. Space is malleable and yielding to the inhabitants of this city. They are a free people, and their sovereignty lies not in any idea or attachment to an idol or heroic figure. The source of their

sovereignty is their belief that sovereignty is not engendered from an idea, person or an established order, rather from the supremacy of the individual. Every inhabitant of the city enjoys equal rights. The *naatak ghar*, or the eternal theatre, where life is enacted and tapestries of dreams are woven, is a place where discussions are held and decisions about grave matters are taken by competing at play. In a later development in the novel, it becomes their parliament and every citizen who was born in Loonri was a member. The political model of the Loonri is not based on any divisions because any difference will contradict the concept of universal equality. The simple ratiocination of unification of the society prevails. Their history and story is their strength. Like Mbembe's idea of connecting to the past to evolve socially and politically, Abbas's emphasis here is on the value of connecting to their roots through their shared historical journey that is responsible for their identity and also prevents oppressors from mutilating it.

The people of Loonri fight without ammunition. Their weapon is their art and power to create (*jeevat kaari*). Art lies at the centre of their resistance and retaliation. In Riffat Abbas's Loonri, art is the way to development and for the progress of human civilisation. 'They have abolished the difference between art and flesh.' They are the creators of the universe itself, as Loonri is without a divine Creator. The story of Loonri is the story of evolution of art forms from their crudest, most primitive forms to the more sophisticated ones; but the newly developed forms are not given precedence over the older ones. Theatre, and by extension language, holds sway over the lives of people. It is a domain where the drama of their lives is enacted. 'With each new play, Loonri met with new possibilities.' Neighbouring cities boast of other forms of art and literature, *dastan* for instance. They create Time and Space, birds and trees, defy Death, they meet each other in multi-tiered

dreams, and tie up bundles of clouds to sell. Their lovers find nooks to love on stars and other planets. They are in communion with forces of Nature. Interestingly, the story of Loonri revolves around the search for Loonrka, who leaves the city before the beginning of the tale. His absence serves as a motive for the inhabitants's existence. The quest is the means and the end. However, Loonrka never returns, like Godot in Beckett's play. It is his loss that kick-starts Time. The months are named after twelve people of Loonri. Time is 'their own man.' This rejection and indigenising of Time and Space embody the spirit of resistance and the supremacy of the individual prevalent in the whole novel. Abbas advocates the separation of art from creation of gods, religion, and war. Outside Loonri, people are busy carving out gods for themselves, being war and destruction in their wake. Loonri, while respecting and understanding these ideologies, stubbornly refuses to allow any figure of supreme authority to rule them. An objective observation of the world outside reveals to them:

1. It is custom with the usurper to demean and denigrate the land they occupy.
2. With the creation of an idol, an immense number of people become untouchables.
3. Sita was not the only motivation behind war (economic concerns being the chief but implicit motive).

They reject outright the art forms conducive to the manufacture of idols and divinities. They honour Shiva, the god who sided with the *adivasis*. Here, a god is turned into a man and revered for that. They realise that Brahman (religious cleric) manipulates even gods and creates a barrier between the common man and gods. Acting as the mediator gives him power over people. They readily accept and assimilate the knowledge from the world outside to their own

repertoire but refuse to be swayed by any authority or force. Loonri found its strength in refusing to imbue one man with immortality and condemning to mortality every other being. Worshipping gods was contiguous with dogma; and there is death in dogma. [Nawaz et al. \(2021\)](#) sum up Abbas's idea of immortality, saying that man becomes immortal because he is alive in Nature. He is life itself. The concept of *vahdat ul vujood* present in Abbas's works and poetry is similar to pantheism: all animate and inanimate matter constitutes the human body and is inextricably linked with human existence.

[Mbembe \(2021\)](#) has noted that the first step towards destruction of a culture is the destruction of a language. The language of the invading power replaces the native languages. It is imposed on them as a means of creating and maintaining the coloniser's cultural hegemony. Mbembe (ibid.) has observed that 'there is always a linguistic equivalent to physical force.' It is impossible to gain complete liberation and autonomy without the liberation of native cultures and languages of the colonised region. Hence the first step in decolonisation is cultural and linguistic liberation. The people of Loonri have resisted any attempts by external powers to subdue them either culturally or politically. They have their own crafts, and they resist any temptation of foreign 'civilised agendas'.

Democracy-to-come and New Question of the other

[Mbembe \(2021\)](#) argues that for a just and peaceful future, possibilities of recognition, identification and assimilation must be encouraged. The republic of the future can no longer govern without guaranteeing these tenets of universal civil rights. Acknowledgement of the differences and 'sharing of singularities' is a prerequisite of the 'politics of relation'. Singularity is what is distinguished and also shared. The assertion

of singularity is a starting point of a nation. He says that differences in being does not necessarily lead us to separation from one another. There is a huge deficit of representation by dint of this misperception. Refusal to give space for representation begets animosity and differences in a society leading to exploitation and violence. Foundation of democracy-to-come will be based on finding answers to questions like 'how to deal with foreigners, how to face an enemy and how the appearance of the other is going to affect us by being exposed to one another.' He says that it is inevitable for democracy-to-come to affirm and take account of the collective identities for a progressive social order. A citizen is someone with self-consciousness and who can respond in the first person. The democracy-to-come ensures his representation that is not allowed if he is a subject of an oppressor, who uses power to conquer, to assert his superiority. A new fashion of imagination, consideration and representation is necessary. The prevalent social order of discrimination lacks 'mechanisms of hospitality' that puts the damper on the growth of communities living side by side. Expressions in their native language and dreams of the future make a major force in the novel. The unique practices of existence based on a nuanced historical process is the strength of his city.

Although Loonri is a place almost hidden from the outside world, they welcome their guests who come with no hostility. They indulge their guests' curiosity and take them on a tour of their magical world. In Loonri, the citizens bestow due consideration to their foreign guests, whether they come with friendly intentions or with an intention to invade, as their way of hospitality. They do not take foreigners as enemies at first. Their intentions of negotiations are conducive to establishing a world peace order. They negotiate with due consideration for the sovereignty of the other party because only then does 'conversation assume equality'

(Rodrigues & Wa Thiong'o, 2004). After the ceding of the Subcontinent to the British, Loonri remains the only place still outside their clutches. Curious as to how such a potentially lucrative region escaped their notice, the Englishman offers them subjugation or war. They choose neither because of their unfamiliarity with arms and ammunition. The negotiations fail, the only way out for the invaders is to assault the city. The tenderhearted native language and humanitarian motives of the people of Loonri earn them their right of choosing their own battlefield, and they decide on a theatre. Theatre, Abbas (2017) argues, is a place of resistance and political protest where they confront their opponent through their art. Both cultures confront each other on stage. Mbembe's vision of the future is reflected in the ending of the novel, which is unresolved. The story ends in an undecided battle, the third day is yet to come but the narrator takes his leave.

Conclusion

The study attempted to understand Riffat Abbas's novel as a form of resistance and decolonisation in light of Mbembe's theory using Derrida's deconstruction as a toolkit. The novel presents a powerful image of the indigenous aesthetic of the Saraiki region. It is a document in postcolonial literature of indigenous expression. Its ambitious take on the grand narratives of colonisation breaks orthodox schemes of thought. It draws the picture of a parallel modernity and democracy unlike any form of democracy implemented in the world today. Human supremacy in Loonri prevails. There is zilch of any centralised power. Political structure of power and sovereignty in Rifat Abbas's world is not to suppress or exploit its citizens', rather the governing structure is by the people and for the people. Loonri bestows equal rights on all citizens, women and men, eschewing war at all costs, and finding their best expression in theatre.

The strength of the novel is its emphasis on local, native dialogue and indigeneity. They have their own language in which they partake in communication and human affairs. They have their own heroes that have been depicted as villains by the outside world. They have their local folklores where their women have been continuously murdered. Loonri has its own story to tell the world. The story of representation, injustice and prejudices against the native. No discrimination is allowed in Loonri whether it is of humans or natural elements of the land.

They feel no alienation in the world even when their surroundings have been trounced and humiliated by foreign invaders. The people of Loonri revere their trees (*Peepul*), birds (Crane and Crow) and rivers (*Sindu Sagar*). Since they rely on no foreign aid whatsoever, they linger on without being noticed at all for a long time. They have resisted any attempts by external powers to subdue them either culturally or politically. They do not invade or trespass, occupy lands and also not favour wars and destruction. Loonri is a land of different arts.

The people of Loonri utilise their native wisdom to assimilate foreign epistemologies into their own, but discard foreign techniques of subjugation, as their sharp sense of sovereignty allows them to see through superstructures of power and ideology. Thus, the picture of this city is what Mbembe (2011; 2021) envisages in democracy-to-come where the differences do not create grounds for conflicts and war.

They can allow some aspects of differences to be transmogrified into a shared culture and values. The people of Loonri place flowers to even those invaders who are buried there and become a part of their motherland. They acknowledge and respect differences without any rancour. They show hospitality to foreigners with local pride, and listen to them with a calm attitude but do not tolerate where their sovereignty is

compromised. The manifestation of the native identity takes place mainly through their resistance. They resist, not with weapons and arms but by their local subtle art at a place called theatre and that is also their parliament where they discuss the affairs of Loonri. Their power is the

autonomy of human beings through their complete and indiscriminate representation which is the way forward to a better and just world for the progress of human civilization since no state can flourish when it flounders in melancholy and nostalgia for the past.

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