

Thematic Analysis of *The Wandering Falcon*: A Representative Pakistani Anglophone Fiction

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Abstract: *Jamil Ahmad's The Wandering Falcon (2011) offers a striking example of the ways in which historical and political contexts impact the reception of Pakistani Anglophone fiction due to its unique publication history. Ahmad creates a correlation between identity, language, and physiognomy of individuals through Tor Baz, whose identity continuously passes through the process of change in the frigid tribal culture. This paper raises questions regarding how a literary text achieves commercial success and how the geopolitical context of both its setting and the location of the author affects the publication and reception of the work.*

Key Words: The Wandering Falcon, Pakistani Anglophone Fiction, Pakistani literature in English

Introduction

The Wandering Falcon was published in 2011 by Jamil Ahmad, a Pakistani bureaucrat, who served in Balochistan and Khaybar Pakhtoonakhwa (earlier known as North West Frontier Province) during the 1950s. Ahmad penned the novel in the 1970s but due to a lack of publishers' interest, the manuscript remained in storage for almost four decades. When a chapter from the manuscript, "The Sins of the Mother," was published in *Granta's* special edition on Pakistani literature (2010), amidst post-9/11 interest in the people of FATA (Federally Administrated Tribal Areas), Ahmad gained attention and was offered a publication contract for the entire book from Penguin, India. It was initially published on 28 March 2011 in India, followed by

international publication(s). In September that year, it was released in the UK by Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin India, and in the US by Riverhead Books in October. The novel was nominated for prizes such as the Man Asian Literary Prize (shortlisted in 2011), the Commonwealth Book Prize (2012) and was finalised for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature (2013) and the Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize (2011, in India). It was also named as one of the best books of 2011 by *Publishers Weekly*. Unfortunately, Ahmad passed away in July 2014 without publishing any further literary works.

London-based Pakistani writer Moni Mohsin, in *The Guardian*, positions *The Wandering Falcon* second among her list of the top ten novels about

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Pakistan, commenting specifically on the significance of the novel's setting which is "Af-Pak". *Publishers Weekly* also nominated it as one of the best books of 2011, stressing the significance of the fictional setting in praise of the novel and describing it as "a gripping book, as important for illuminating the current state of this region". It is clear, then, that the novel belatedly transformed Ahmad into an international literary figure, whilst receiving praise for its portrayal of a region having dearth of literature in English, certainly from a Pakistani perspective.

The Wandering Falcon became publishable in 2011, despite being refused 40 years earlier, due to the vastly different global geopolitical circumstances at play in the 1970s and in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Post 9/11 and during the War on Terror – particularly after the invasion of Afghanistan by the US and allied forces in an attempt to oust Al-Qaeda terrorists – there was a substantial worldwide political and cultural interest in Afghanistan and its neighbour Pakistan. It was widely believed that the leader of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden, escaped the invasion, probably with the help of the local Afghan militant group, the Taliban, by crossing the border towards the Western Pakistan where he regrouped his forces. The territory in which many of the anti-Al-Qaeda and anti-Taliban battles were fought was the rugged Tora Bora Mountains in south-eastern Afghanistan/north-western Pakistan and this is the region in which *The Wandering Falcon* is set. It is highly likely that the topicality of the text's setting, along with its ostensibly "authentic" portrayal of local tribal culture, played a significant role in Penguin's decision to publish the novel.

Analysis and Discussion

The Wandering Falcon is a collection of nine loosely connected chapters/stories that have been read, in composite, as a novel. It is set in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan in the 1960s and earlier before the strict border policies that exist today were enforced. The various sections of the text are united by Tor Baz (the Urdu word for a 'black falcon') who symbolically stands for all tribesmen and who earns his livelihood by roaming

in and around the various tribes of the "rugged regions" and Baluchis, who thinks that "[...] Adam was the first Baluch on this earth", after leaving Bhattanis clan at the age of fifteen. Through the perspectives of different people who adopt Tor Baz, Ahmad offers many references to the "Pushtunwali" – the code of tribal customs and traditions which governs tribal life with respect to the matters of honour and prestige (*The Wandering Falcon*, p. 69).

In the first two chapters, "The Sins of the Mother" and "A Point of Honor", the readers learn that Tor Baz's parents were stoned to death in the name of honour by their tribe, Siahpads, six years after fleeing from their community. Tor Baz, their child, was thus born in exile; he also watched his parents' brutal murder. Eventually, "two stone shrines are raised over their graves as a sign of Siahpads' revenge". Tor Baz is left alone in the world at the age of five "without a home in a region where everyone is first identified and lives by the customs of their tribe". Tor Baz has to pass through cultural and identity shift process as he is abandoned by his tribe due to his mother's, the daughter of the tribe's chief, marriage to an impotent man but who in a rebellious act elopes with her father's servant and defies the tradition. He "is adopted by Baluch rebels fighting the Pakistani government and grows up to be the wandering falcon as the title, a boy with no fixed identity" (Peer, 2011). Ahmad uses words like "foster father" (69), "adopted son" (63), "falcon" (94), [t]he boy, who possessed no shoes" (29), "following" (35), "stubbornly silent" (69) and quotes different incidents to highlight how till the age of 15 he has to pass through different crises of identity till he himself decides to stand against all the challenges.

The story, then, moves from Tor Baz's backstory to focus on other tribes. In the third chapter, "The Death of Camels", the readers are introduced to the Kharot tribe, Powinda (nomads), who are accustomed to cross the Af-Pak border during winter for the sake of their animals. When the strict frontier policy of no border crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan without permits (an earlier form of visa) is enforced, the tribe attempts to cross the border with the Holy Quran

in their heads, indicating the local belief that no one will harm them due to the Quran. This, unfortunately, fails to save them from frontier police's bullets, revealing the tribesmen's relative naivety and simplistic religious beliefs. It also offers what Peer (2011) describes as "a blistering critique of the ruthless ways of nation states, as they seek to impose artificially constructed borders on older, more fluid worlds" in his *Guardian* review of the novel. The story of Dawa Khan's failed attempt to avenge his cousin's murder follows. Due to a tribal custom that women and children should not be affected by the revenge, Khan waits until the murderer's children grow up. However, before he can execute his revenge, the murderer dies of natural causes. While this story can be seen as "informing" about the acceptable practice of revenge-killing, it also, nonetheless, reveals the extent to which respect for women and children are encoded in tribal custom.

Other chapters in the novel explore similar aspects of local traditions. In "The Mullah," Mullah Barrerai adopts seven-year-old Tor Baz after the killing of members of the Kharot tribe by the frontier police. Tor Baz borrows their dead son's name as the Bhattanis (tribe's name) are not ready to give him proper place because "[t]he boy spoke and understood their language but his accent was strange and puzzling to them and they could not place his tribe" (68). Nor could the boy tell them where he had come from so that he could be returned to his parents. Barrerai is a manipulator, and is hated by the Bhattani tribe whom he tricks by promising to give them gold if they help him assist the British during a border feud with Germans "in the name of money and religion" (107). In the story entitled "The Mullah", the third person narrator tells us that hardly at twelve or thirteen years of his age, Tor Baz is adopted by the bereaved parents and he spends two years with Bhattanis. He never reveals his past and his tribe and when his foster father presses him hard to reveal his tribe, he remains stubbornly silent and leaves the tribe next day and from this point his transition from *being* towards *becoming* starts.

In the next chapter "Kidnapping", the now adult Tor Baz is working as an informant for a local

deputy commissioner. The chapter presents the story of the Mehsud tribe (described as the "wolves of Waziristan") who kidnaps a man because he failed to pay the required "bride price" to his fiancée's father: a custom where the groom pays money to the bride's parents, signifying the value the tribes accord to women. Although he is adopted by different cultures and tribes in his childhood, it did not leave a permanent impact on his identity except for the preaching of Mullah Barrerai which plays a central role in the religious and social life of Tor Baz.

In the sixth chapter entitled "The Guide", the adult Tor Baz acts as a guide for a dying person who returns to his Afridi tribe. The next chapter, "A Pound of Opium", is about a girl Sherakai who is sold for a pound of opium and a hundred rupees to a local prince; her mother pays money to the prince for her return and weds her again. Chapter Eight, "The Betrothal of Shah Zarina," is about the Gujjar tribe where Shah Zarina marries a man who owns a bear. He arranges food and accommodation for the bear instead of her as he believes that he "can get another wife but not another bear" (221). This treatment prompts Shah Zarina to run away. In the last chapter, "Sale Completed," Tor Baz ponders whether to sell or keep Shah Zarina after he buys her from Mian Mandi – the market where eloped women are sold. This reveals to the reader that Mullah Berrera's humility, virtue and community completely unaccustomed praxis leave a long-lasting impact on his life and while taking the major decisions of his life, e.g., to marry and settle down, Mullah's preaching proves beneficial in keeping him on the right track. As this brief textual summary suggests, each story is centred on a particular tribe or a tribal incident and there is no logical coherence among chapters except for Tor Baz's physical, emotional and intellectual growth which serves as a thread that links all the chapters. The text is peppered with proverbs signifying the importance of "wit" and the uniqueness of tribal wisdom.

A key reason for selecting this text for this study is its unique publication history (that it was published decades after the writing of its manuscript) and what this text reveals about the

global “cultural industry”. The time lapse between the writing and the publication demonstrates how the “value” of a text can change from one historical moment to another and further suggests the ways in which political circumstances impact literary evaluations. In short, how the judgments about the value of a literary text – as a saleable commodity – changed from the 1970s through the 2010s is highly significant. The text was forgotten for a large part of the twentieth century until it was rediscovered and marketed as part of post 9/11 interest in the region in which it was set. This makes it clear that the reception of a text is significantly determined by the historical and cultural specificities of production and promotion.

The text reveals the extent to which the transformation of “fields of cultural production can alter the very act of value attribution” as asserted by Wenceslas [Lizé \(2016\)](#). *The Wandering Falcon* sheds light on the authority of the dominant agents of literary production and promotion and the extent to which promotional strategies are intimately connected to the issues of literary evaluation ([Bilal, 2016](#)). The text, thus, invites consideration to how, in the words of Ana Cristina Mendes, “the production, distribution, and reception of texts are regulated by specific institutions that canonise authors, trends and writing styles” ([Mendes, 2016, p. 217](#)). It also suggests the importance of the national branding of literature in the global market.

Ahmad lived in Pakistan all his life and his resident status purportedly impacted on the text’s reception (first negatively, later positively). [Boehmer \(1995\)](#) claims that the initial failure to secure a publisher for this work appears to confirm that “postcolonial writers who retain a more national focus, who don’t straddle worlds, or translate as well, do not rank as high in the West as do their migrant fellows” ([Boehmer, 1995, p. 239](#)

). It is the only *Pakistani-authored* Anglophone text that fills the lacuna of the representation of Balochistan, which has been a popular setting for colonial writers such as Rudyard Kipling and Mitford but until recently Balochis were absent from Pakistani prose writing in English. [Shamsie \(2016\)](#) argues that state censorship is one of the reasons behind this silencing. Pakistani writer

Fatima Bhutto endorses this view in her book *Songs of Blood and Sword* by introducing Balochistan as “a province blighted by Pakistan” ([Bhutto, 2010, p. 115](#)). Similarly, [Chambers \(2015\)](#) notes that at the time of partition, Balochistan (Pakistan’s largest province) was promised, but did not ultimately achieve, independence and, resultantly, the “volatile Balochistan [...] trouble[s] the idea of Pakistan” (Dawn, 2015, *Rivers of Ink*, p. 47). She draws attention to Baloch’s “tripartite scattering between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran with that of their relations, the Kurds, between Iran, Iraq, and Turkey” (“The Baloch”), which adds layers of complexity to its relationship with Pakistan. Arguably, Balochistan and FATA are treated as peripheral regions even within Pakistan, which may explain their lack of literary representation in Pakistani Anglophone fiction.

Unsurprisingly, a number of critics and reviewers have praised Ahmad for “unsilencing Balochistan” in his portrayal of this province while also noticing that “from a Baloch perspective Ahmad might appear just as much of an interloper as ... earlier British authors Kipling, Mitford, and de Windt” ([Chambers, 2015](#)). Due to Ahmad’s privileged status as an administrator in the area. In his review of the text, Bruce King (2012) brands it as “a missing link in the history of Pakistani literature” due to the insight it provides into tribal culture (325). Muneeza Shamsie credits Ahmad for offering “rare insights” into Balochistan’s tribal culture, suggesting that *The Wandering Falcon* was “showered with critical acclaim” due to “the growing international interest in Pakistani English literature” ([Shamsie, 2016](#), *Pakistani English Novels*, p. 166). She claims that Ahmad’s knowledge of the remote regional areas enabled him to present a different view of the tribal areas which are now a “focal point of US and European foreign policy” (*Pakistani English Novels*, p. 166). Furthermore, [Sadaf \(2018\)](#) praises Ahmad for restoring the dignity of tribal life usually seen in the West as “uncivilised”:

By providing a historical understanding of the tarnished tribal belt that is now widely popularised in the [w]estern world as a hub of the Taliban leadership, high-tech warfare, and the target for US drone strikes, the stories offer rare insight into the

Pashtun tribal principles that have puzzled the West. These tribal areas bordering Iran and Afghanistan are often reported as 'lawless' and dangerous in the international media." (Understanding Tribal Codes, p.144)

As noted by [Sadaf \(2018\)](#), many reviewers and commentators praise the novel for its ostensible (historical and social) insight into a real experience of, and authentic information about, the region and its inhabitants. [Brouillette \(2007\)](#) comments about the ways in which postcolonial authors are often branded in terms of nationality and promoted as "representatives of their purported societies, 'cultures', nationalities or sub nationalities" (Postcolonial Writers, p. 97). [Gilroy \(1993\)](#) is even more direct in his assertion that "authenticity enhances the appeal of selected cultural commodities" (The Black Atlantic, p. 99). The following comments, by Peer in a review for *The Guardian*, suggest the extent to which Ahmad has been read in terms of his "authentic" representations of the Baloch culture:

Although the tribal areas of Pakistan have dominated the news and opinion pages for years, rarely has a writer shown greater empathy for its people... about a terrain largely inaccessible to journalists and writers. The Pak-Afghan frontier has become synonymous with terrorists and the mechanised war of drones. The ambitions and interests of nation states – America, Pakistan, [and] Afghanistan – have rendered invisible the Baluch.

Peer (2011) admits that the appeal of this novel significantly hinges upon the location of its setting – Af-Pak. It could be argued that the "value" of the novel, for many, was/is in its perceived role as an "insider's" witness to south-eastern Afghani/north-western Pakistani tribal culture.

Problematically, and as pointed out earlier by critics/reviewers, Ahmad is not a Balochi but has lived in the area for some time. In her book chapter "The Taming of the Tribal", [Ansari \(2019\)](#) broaches the question of Ahmad's authority to write for/of the tribes because of his "subject position [which is] embedded in a colonialist and ultimately orientalist discourse of the British Raj" (p. 153) as a political agent appointed in the tribal land. She argues that

the text presents "a simplified image which is easily judged and 'othered' by mainstream populations both in Pakistan and abroad" (p.151). This simplified image is "romanticised as nomadic and peripheral" and later "internalised [as] orientalist representations" (151). I endorse her earlier observation but draw on this only as a means of reinforcing Ahmad's positioning – by himself and his publishers – in the reading of this text. It is worth-recalling [Huggan's \(2001\)](#) claims with respect to the marketability of "anthropological-exotic" fictions (Postcolonial Exotic, p. 3) "that emanate, or are perceived as emanating, from cultures considered to be different, strange, 'exotic'" (25). He further adds:

Exoticist spectacle, commodity fetishism and the aesthetics of decontextualisation are all at work ... in the production, transmission and consumption of postcolonial literary/cultural texts. (The Postcolonial Exotic, p. 20)

The exotic, in this case, is the tribal region of Pakistan frequently represented in news media as an area bombarded by American drones. The appeal of this "anthropological-exotic" text is arguably considerably heightened due to its politically (or militaristically) engaged setting which is of interest to contemporary major global powers: *The Wandering Falcon* is branded as a text which offers to explain this setting to its readers. The comments of [Jenning \(2012\)](#) regarding the novel's fictionalized history and contemporary happenings in Afghanistan are apt as she postulates "the mountains, deserts and broken hills of *The Wandering Falcon* are the same ones that CIA drones fly over (The Land of Blood and Stones, p. 180). Jennings' observations here are reminiscent of the central concern of the article that the publishers cater to heighten the western interest and to attract the "potential White liberal" readership, they present texts in particular "historical moments", i.e., offer a text about Pakistan/Afghanistan when it is in the news. *The Wandering Falcon* reflects the interests of a contemporary readership concerned with the milieu of the American "War on Terror".

Being the part of administrative system, Ahmad devoted many years of his life to this region and his position as an author and omniscient third-

person are important points because they inform and provide the conditions for knowledge production. Ahmad's double role as an author and the third-person narrator is also "closely tied to the power relations and disciplinary techniques adopted by the postcolonial nation state from the colonial era, for the administration of the so-called Pashtun problem in the Pakistani state's 'wild west', a space on the western borders notorious for its lawlessness" ([Ansari, 2019, p. 152](#)). Ahmad, however, attempts to portray this region not as barbaric or lawless but rather as a community with its own egalitarian system and specific issues – a zone that is different from the mainstream and therein lies its beauty.

Conclusion

It is highly convincing that *The Wandering Falcon*

offers a striking example of the ways in which historical and political contexts impact the reception of Pakistani Anglophone fiction due to its unique publication history. Ahmad creates a correlation between identity, language, and physiognomy of individuals through Tor Baz whose identity continuously passes through the process of change in the frigid tribal culture. It also reveals the very extent to which the production and transformation of cultural fields can alter the very act of attribution. It also sanctions the authority of the dominant agents of literary production and promotion, and the extent to which promotional strategies are intimately connected to issues of literary evaluation. Ultimately, the work promotes the significance of national branding of literature in the global perspectives.

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