

Colonial literary Sources and the Image of Pashtuns: A Historical Analysis

**Maryam / Sadia Saeed
Rahat Shah / Qurat ul ain Jafeer**

Abstract

Colonialism is the form of the ascendance of individuals or groups on the states and departments of people. In the Indian sub-continent, the cultural domination of colonizers on the minds of the colonized led to the spread of certain perspectives that marked the distinction within society. Hence through the process of reification and codification of history British classified the Indian society: compartmentalized the whole into various groups. By applying the same approach British labeled the Pashtuns of the western frontier as "Pathans" either they were courageous/warriors or they were sinister and corrupt. In this paper, an attempt is made to unveil the difference between the original Pashtun and the Colonial Pathan by utilizing the theory of Orientalism given by Edward Said. Moreover, it is also argued that the true identity of Pashtuns is contradictory with the Colonial image and stereotypes like honoring the Baloch, intimidating the Sindhis, Ruling the Punjabis, and buying the Pashtun.

Keywords: Pashtuns, Colonial Period, Literature

1. Introduction

Colonialism is the name of a system of rules which acknowledges the authority of one person to enforce his will upon another. It leads to a situation of supremacy and dependence which extensively subordinate those people who are governed by it (Nwanosike & Onyije 2011: 42). Colonial conquest is not only circumscribed to the arms and armaments but the colonial powers fortified and legitimized themselves by cultural technologies of rule. Colonialism itself was a project of cultural control that abducted the minds of people by classifying them into certain groups and assigning them various characteristics which later became an important feature of their social identity.

Similarly, the word 'Pathan' was assigned to the western frontier Pashtuns, of the Indian sub-continent by their Colonial masters. There was a contradicted view on the personality of Pashtuns as to one extent they were considered as warriors and courageous fighters and on the other side, they were considered barbaric, menacing, and immoral. Albeit the dominant Colonial perception regarding Pashtuns was that they were cynical but it contradicted with the popular perception of Pashtun society. While considering the colonial writings there existed a point of view propagated strongly by Winch (1958) that the colonial writings should not be considered authentic as they had cultural bias (Lindholm, 1980: 351). This argument was furthered by stating that the true and valid understanding of a cultural system can only be possible via native accounts (Zein, 1977: 230). Thus, the colonial representation of other cultural systems must be discarded in favor of more considerate reports. Similarly, the dual representation of the personality of 'Pathan' in literature was due to cultural relativism i.e cultural bias. There is a need to critically examine the factors and rationalities behind those writings which vary according to different ecological, cultural, and state outlook.

Colonial literature on the stratification and labeling characteristics of Pashtun society is mostly considered as less valued, as the colonial writer is a person who is under the influence of corporate-state order and is directed to do the same as the state wants him to write. However recent ethnographies are striving to unfold the realities of Colonial writings by researching and analyzing the 'texts' that had produced the concept of 'othering' and demarcated the society into the historical background of the relationship between Colonial powers and Pashtun tribes.

2. Theory of Orientalism

Orientalism was the term first coined during the nineteenth century. Edward Said a political activist, an academic and, a literary critic published his work named "*Orientalism*" in 1978 in which he explained his understanding of 'Orient' (The East). He mentioned in his book that Orientalism is a multi-dimensional term where each of its aspects is interdependent on others. First of them bears an academic connotation where any form of knowledge acquisition related to the Orient is called Orientalism. It is also a style of thought based upon an ontological and

epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and “the Occident” (Said, 1978: 2). Moreover, the notorious aspect of Orientalism includes the western style for restructuring, dominating, and having authority over the Orient (Said, 1978: 3).

Many authors have interpreted Said’s Orientalism based on their understanding like the popular conception that this system emerged when several scholars felt the urge that improved knowledge of Asia was compulsory to promote the West's colonial ambitions. Moreover, he also opined that the western researchers were very filthy by the European thoughts as well as presumptions that they could not cope justly and sincerely with the Asian difficulties (Mart, Toker and Esen, 2010: 367).

Likewise, other authors believed that Edward Said dedicated his energies to the correction of Oriental Studies in Europe, with linguistics and interpretation of the meaning of culture through the process of invention, ethnography as well as the interpretation of Oriental texts. He mentioned that Orientalism was determined to establish European hegemony over the Orient. He further augmented his claim that every European in his perception about the Orient was an imperialist, racist, and wholly ethnocentric (Khawaja, 2007: 696-97).

Said, however, is the finest recognized for unfolding plus criticizing "Orientalism", which he considered as a collection of untrue stories and fundamental Western egotism to the Far East. In Orientalism, Edward Said asked for a "restrained and relentless Eurocentric bias against the people of Arabs as well as their culture” (Said 2003: 10). He elaborated that there was a long practice of untrue and fabricated descriptions of Asia and the Middle East in the culture of the West that had provided as an implied justification for Europe plus US' colonial as well as the imperial ambitions (Mart, Toker and Esen, 2010: 368). Moreover, the Europeans distinct themselves as superiors and they legitimated their colonial rule by this idea. They even thought that it was the responsibility of the Europeans to the world to enlighten the uncivilized nations of the world (Lockman, 2010: 90).

Orientalism was aimed at redefining oriental studies by considering their imperial background. Said took the help of Foucault’s power theory in his stance that European study of the East can best be understood when they are analyzed under the discourse of power. To exemplify, it can be stated that according to Said, no western discourse

about people, nation or culture be it of political or literary nature can ever be on passive end in the backdrop of colonization and imperialism as all the participants have cultural sovereignty. Hence, literary texts are also created under the influence of these political contexts, generating discourse about the East labeling it as the cultural “other” (Pinggong, 2002: 178).

Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* clarifies his point of view in the following words:

..[A] discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what "we" do and what "they" cannot do or understand as "we" do) (Said, 2003: 12).

By utilizing this approach, the colonial ethnography and codification of the history of Pashtun society do not seem free from the bigotry of colonial powers. They called Pashtuns a barbaric and uncivilized race that marginalized and segregated them from central India and other societies. According to the colonial writers like Mundy and Kipling, a debate had started over Pashtun's character that was protracted into literature while depicting the utopian views of the brave fighter ‘Pashtun’. On the contrary, there was also a counter view in which the Pashtuns were considered as threatening, brutal, and dishonest in the subcontinent was taken up in Scott's classic *The Raj Quartet* (Lindholm, 1980: 351). In this article, it is endeavored to study and highlight the facts in light of the native perspective so that the authentic truth can be brought forth.

3. British Affinity with the Tribes of the Western Frontier

British established their ties with Pashtun in the nineteenth century to safeguard the frontiers from the invasion of Napoleon Bonaparte. In 1808, Mountstuart Elphinstone visited Afghanistan in the court of the emperor named, Shah Shuja to sign an agreement between Afghanistan and the British Raj (Elphinstone 1815: 195). From this date until the end of the British Raj their alliance had remained very complex and

multidimensional especially the responses of Pashtuns remained very fluctuating with the changing policy of British Raj adopted towards them. Having a strong lineage system, with the feature of brevity, Pashtuns established several social administrations that ranged from Afghanistan's kingdom to the anarchical type of democracies in hill tribes. Furthermore, the relationship between the British and the Pashtuns began with the mission of Elphinstone.

Elphinstone was very impressed by the hospitality of Pashtuns and therefore in his book he remarked, "The British travelers from India [...] admired the strength of the Pashtuns as well as the fair skins, their features, industry, and hospitality" (Elphinstone 1815: 198-99). It is, however, an astonishing part of the story for Elphinstone that the attitude of Pashtuns towards Raj remained much lenient. It was just because Elphinstone went to Afghan court just as a guest and potential ally rather with the desire of dominating them. Similarly, it was due to the openness of Pashtun mentality that they welcomed him without any bigotry but in the form of a guest. This positive attitude of Pashtuns changed the mindset of Elphinstone who considered them barbaric.

The British were not alone in their colonization of the Indian sub-continent but they also had other European contenders like the French and the Portuguese. In wake of those circumstances, it was quite inevitable that the warlike Pashtuns could become the supporters of the Raj against their enemy, the French. However, the center of Raj was far from the Afghan border so this alliance was considered merely to secure the borders from invasion and there had no such assumption that the British domain of interest could overlap that of the Pashtuns (Omran, 2009: 183). This kind of behavior in the British was due to the self-image of Pashtuns as an ignorant and warrior race. Prominently, the martial Pashtuns could work as a police force to crush the insurgences of the enemies of Raj. Intentionally or unintentionally, the colonial attitude accepted the Pashtuns as the men whose interests were the same as their own (Lindholm, 1980: 353). This change in attitude of the British due to changed circumstances present that the actual image of Pashtun image was basically a product of the British interests in their dominated areas.

As soon as the threat of the French was curbed a new enemy emerged on the frontier that was Russia and its motto was to take access to the warm waters. To tackle this issue British had to adopt the policy of defense and to do so, they had to again ally with the tribes of

frontiers and Afghanistan. Albeit, the British were more inclined towards expansionism and thought that while doing so the Pashtun tribes will be absorbed into the Empire and become part of the Central government of Raj (Lindholm, 1980: 353). There were two different basic situations in the discussion that were known as 'close borders' plus 'forward policy'. The supporters of the close borders had asserted that in defensive position with the nearby state must hold the immediate boundaries including the River Indus and the western mountains; on contrary, those who supported forward policy suggested to spread the presence of British to the further west, to the Herat and Oxus River to build a defensive buffer zone (Spain 1961: 168).

The forward policy of Britain failed when its troops were annihilated by Pashtuns in 1841 and after that, the former maintained close border policy, and Pashtun tribes were asked to remain on the margins of State boundary which was beyond the control of Centre (Stewart 2007: 180). Hence, it can be analyzed that, when conditions went in the favor of the British they changed their attitude towards Pashtuns, and when they failed to occupy their territories British marginalized and labeled them as being aggressive and vociferous. However, the close border policy also remained ineffective because, in the north, the strategy of quitting the large tribal area non-administered led to bigger chaos. According to Sir Olaf Caroe, the last British administrator of North Western Frontier Province, violence had increased in Pashtun tribal areas just because of bitterness with Raj's retaliation. After the second war of Britain and Afghanistan, the former asserted much control over the tribal boundaries of Pashtuns, and a new forward policy was maintained to control the marginal tribes. British concentrated its military force in that region with the support of the tribal heads to crush the self-rule of the Pashtuns that was guaranteed to them by Colonial Frontier Crimes Regulations (Caroe 1965: 376).

The forts were constructed, armies were deployed on different strategic points in the tribal zones, and official boundaries were also recognized defining regions of control for the different rules of India including; Iran, Afghanistan, and Kallat. After the British occupation of tribal areas, Pashtuns never remained quiet instead, they started an uprising against them and it did not lead to the establishment of a central government system of Crown. However, during the 3rd Anglo-Afghan War fighting between the government forces and Pashtuns was

intensified. During Indian Independence Movement there was a great disturbance in tribal territories and the urban axes.

As Poullada remarks, "The proud Pashtuns, carefully settled in the mountains, faced the forward policies of Raj with the fierce guerrilla fighting skills and smiled with the contempt at the episodic extractions. By the end, the British administration satisfied with the policy of control and punishment" (Poullada 1979: 132).

4. Cultural Representation and Ideological Domination of Pashtun Society

The nature of relations between Pashtun tribes and the British was mainly dependent on the interests of the British in their colonies. The colonized always had to face this kind of social control where their colonizers establish their narrative on the basis of their cultural and racial bias. The same happened here in frontier but it was not fixed rather it was situation-oriented. Sometimes the stereotypical version of 'warlike tribes' was used for protecting the interests of the British against others and sometimes to counter the influence of Pashtuns. Orientalism got involved in this debate when the colonized and colonizers' perception of reality seemed to be opposite. Orientalists believed that the portrayal of colonized people in the literary texts of Westerners was not authentic as they had always been prejudiced towards them and established their opinions on the basis of their limited exposure and experience with them.

Orientalist scholars had emphasized how the West treated the East as 'other', classified them into certain groups, and labeled them with certain stereotypes that became an ultimate force of social control. Thus the classification of society into various groups divided people and this categorization became an important part of their identity because the labeled groups had different established opinions and ethical relationships. For instance, it was claimed by the British that Pashtuns were highly decentralized and could not regulate themselves under a central form of government. However, there is need to deconstruct this narrative to bring forth the reality that, Pashtun society is highly egalitarian and does not allow the authority of a single person while they give equal status to the dignity and honor of each individual and never compromise on the principles of equality and equity (Ginsburg 2011: 96). By analyzing this custom, one cannot consider

them ‘Traditional’ or ‘uncivilized’ because they possess a highly unique system of individualism.

As far as the Oriental studies on Pashtun tribes are concerned they depicted a different picture of Pashtuns depending on the circumstances in which they were written and also on their authorship. The colonial writings on frontier were primarily by political administrators and military personnel. Thomas Holdich served for twenty years in frontier and his depiction of Pathans was that, “the Pathan is a republican of a worst type. He is law unto himself” (Titus 1998: 663). Similarly, in the late nineteenth century Winston Spencer Churchill wrote an account of the British campaign against Pashtuns in Malakand where he presented his perception of Pashtun tribes as, “warlike tribes, barbarous, unapproachable, and irreclaimable” (Churchill 1898: 304). In addition to this, he blamed Islam for the martial characteristics of Pashtun tribes as it was founded and expanded by the sword so Pashtuns being staunch Muslims were considered to be merciless fanatics. The perception of Churchill related to Pashtuns (Orientals) was highly prejudiced as the popularity of Islam in the sub-continent is primarily the result of the preaching of Sufi mystics. Moreover, the warlike trait of Pashtuns cannot be attributed solely to them as there had been many warlike nations in history like Anglo-Saxons (Cole 2009).

Moreover, Pashtuns were always considered as ‘violent’ in colonial literature and the reason behind this misconception was the lack of their own voice. “The voiceless-ness of Pashtuns is created and sustained by highly militarized and politicized agendas routed through the Afghan state that target them as an enemy to be physically exterminated and culturally eradicated” (Hanifi 2016: 4). Moreover, the Pashtuns were considered warriors or savages due to the lack of native Pashtun literature in colonial times. Furthermore, the excessive dependence on colonial literature to understand the tribal Pashtuns had caused them to consider them as conventional and extremists. In this regard, Farooq Yousaf (2019) argues, “it was a major “intellectual polarization” among the British colonial writers that perceived Pashtuns “having the propensity for violence.” However, this “intellectual polarization” has existed, in some way, even after the British Raj left the Indian subcontinent in 1947.” (pg. 3)

As far as the British were concerned, they had always endeavored to segregate themselves from their subjects in Colonial rule

and adopted the sense of 'Othering' towards the locals. Hence, colonial dissertations were expected to establish the different concepts of 'Others' which were compliant to authority plus obtainable to assist.

For more than a century Afghanistan and Pashtun tribes remained as a wild west for the British of India. With Pashtun clans, the British always tried to control Afghanistan, to direct surrendered tribal districts, and to impose the Imperial law in the directly administered regions (Brown 1993: 667). The restrictions had imitated in different survey reports and several Colonial records. At a concrete level, it was consequential to know with whom to contract in both Persian and Pashtun as well as how to accumulate and assess evidence to impact incidents. The cultural expression had remained vital to comprehend that what the British labeled Pashtuns, which turn out to be a major subject of British elucidations. Initial interpretations frequently showed shaded indebtedness of social dealings. In a while and with recurrence, however, more elusive former explanations were over-generalized plus preoccupied in the individuals' behaviors. Here is an example which states; "The real Pashtuns are maybe the cruelest of all nations with that we were passed into connection in the Punjab. They are murderous, barbaric, and unkind at their highest level. Similarly, they had a system of honor that they firmly follow; and the attraction about them, regarding the chief men, that approximately makes one overlook their deceitful behavior. They lead untamed, energetic life in the mountains, plus there was also an aura of masculine freedom about them which is inspirational in a state like India" (Brown (1993) quotes Bonarjee 1899: 11-12). Such texts summarized set knowledge into widespread labels that conceited plus exaggerated through discussions on strategies during the whole British period. Moreover, initial colonial authors recognized delicacies of Pashtun attitude, social relations, and standards when awarding and assessing evidence about Pashtun. The understanding of one's tribe, family as well as reputation reproduced straight facts about the Pashtuns, although placed in 18th-century traditionalist texts. In the established Colonial government, these vulnerabilities became subdued and later vanished at last of the 19th century. Future works were bigoted and categorical. "Though Pashtuns had gone through several views, yet there was a prominent characteristic of their handbooks was that since the end of the nineteenth century till the independence of India there was no significant change seen in their descriptions. The descriptions

of every race had remained astonishingly the same” (Chene 1991: 7). Finally, during the colonial era, Pashtuns’ attitude recorded by anthropologists and ethnographers became an important ingredient of their ‘national identity’.

According to Said’s Orientalism this colonial knowledge was the over powering system of thought. It was primarily written with a Eurocentric prism where they considered the natives as “others” in order to justify the evolution of world system which comprised of a center/periphery polarity and reproduced through exploitation (Sa’di, 2020: 1-2). In addition to this Said was also focused on the impact of colonialism on the European societies. His argument that orientalist views were convincing in all aspects of European life and this legacy can not diminish easily. Hence, many sociological problems of islamophobia, discrimination of people of color and race prevalent today can be the products of long history of colonialism. This can be argued here that Said’s Orientalism although is an old and outdated work but it still has some relevance when it comes to the projection of other people by Eurocentric prism as mentioned above. The mild form of Oriental discourse, where ‘civilizing mission’ propagated by the liberal minded circles still persists in order to fulfill their neo-imperialistic aspirations as witnessed in case of US’s invasion of Iraq (Sa’di 2020: 3).

Moreover, many authors like Bernard Lewis have criticized Said for not digging deep and applying broad generalizations in his work. However, in 1995 Edward Said himself in his work ‘afterword of Orientalism’ provided answers to this critique. He mentioned that his work had been interpreted wrongly by many where they opined that the Orientalism was meant to project Islam and Arabic cultures as perfect and West as one which is after aggrandizement. He elaborated that he had clearly mentioned in his book, ‘there is no stable reality’ (Said 1978: 331) by which he meant that knowledge of the surroundings reality is constructed within specific discourses shaping how we perceive the world. In simple words he was convinced that imprint of individuals who wrote about Orient can not be ignored. Thus, the same was applied in the case of colonial identity of Pashtuns who were termed as barbarious as well as brave and courageous depending on the understanding of reality at that time.

5. Conclusions

The British when took control of the Indian sub-continent they not only conquered the land but they also tried to took hold of the minds of the people as well. One of the significant examples in this regard was their classification of Indian society. They classified the different ethnic groups and labeled them according to what was deemed fit to them. Hence, they constructed many stereotypes, like honoring the Baloch, intimidating the Sindhis Ruling the Punjabis, and buying the Pashtun.

Similarly, the British also tried to segregate themselves from the rest of Indian society by adopting the sense of 'othering' towards the natives. Orientalism is one such system that was devised by the West to justify this 'othering' in the literature. It made its first appearance in the nineteenth century when many scholars considered that a fair knowledge of Asia was essential to substantiate the West's colonial aspirations. The colonial literature used the term 'Pathans' for the Pashtuns of the North West Frontier Province and portrayed them to be uncivilized and bribable. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* strongly criticizes this notion of Colonial stereotyping based on Western superiority complexes. He considered that this depiction of the ethnic identities in Western literature was a kind of justification for their colonial and imperial ambitions as well as their cultural bias. The ethnographic studies of the Pashtun society depict that there exist two counter views related to their character. One presenting them to be brave warriors and the other being sinister, cruel, and corrupt. However, the critical evaluation of the native accounts presented the reality to be otherwise.

It is found that the classifications of the Indian society and labeling and stereotyping of the ethnic identities were meant for social control over them. It is opined that these groupings were not used as a simple label but also as methods for establishing opinions, knowledge, and ethical relationships. It is widely believed that the classification in which a man is retained alters the connotation of his behavior. Some scholars presented the true Pashtun character considering all the delicacies of their social relations, their tribal and family life, and honor. On the contrary, the colonial authors of the nineteenth and twentieth century did their characterization of Pashtuns on their bureaucratic terms most probably because the colonial history of the frontier was based on the accounts and personal memoirs of the

political administrators and the military officers. Hence, making it indispensable for the readers of history to deconstruct the 'identities' considering all the underlying aims and ambitions of the colonial ethnographic writers.

References

Brown, R.H. (1993) Cultural representation and ideological domination. *Social Forces*, 71 (3): 657-676.

Caroe, O. (1965) *The Pathans: 550 B.C. - A.D. 1957*. New York: Macmillan.

Churchill, W. (1898) *The story of the Malakand Field Force: an episode of frontier war*. Longmans, Green.

Des Chene, M. (1991) *Marshalling Difference: Military Familiars in British India*. University of British Columbia: Department of Anthropology.

Elphinstone, M. (1842) *An account of the kingdom of Caubul, and its dependencies, in Persia, Tartary, and India* - Volume II.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/afghanuno/19>.

Ginsburg, T. (2011) *An economic interpretation of the Pashtunwali*. The University Of Chicago Legal Forum, pp. 89-114.
http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/journal_articles

Hanifi, S.M. (2016) The Pashtun counter-narrative. *Middle East Critique*, 25(4): 385-400.

Khawaja, I. (2007) Essentialism, Consistency and Islam: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism. *Israel Affairs*, 13 (4): 689-713.

Lindholm, C. (1980) Images of the Pathan: The usefulness of colonial ethnography. *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie/Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie*, 21 (2): 350-361.

Lockman, Z. (2009) *Contending visions of the Middle East: The history and politics of Orientalism* (Vol. 3). Cambridge University Press.

Mart, Ç.T., A. Toker and M.F. Esen (2010) Criticism on Edward Said's Orientalism. In 2nd *International Symposium on Sustainable Development*, pp. 8-9.

Nwanosike, O. and F. Onyije (2011) Colonialism and education. *Mediterranean journal of social sciences*, 2 (4): 41-47.

Omran, B. (2009) The Durand line: History and problems of the Afghan-Pakistan border. *Asian Affairs*, 40 (2): 177-195.

Poullada, L.B. (1979) Pushtunistan: Afghan domestic politics and relations with Pakistan. *Pakistan's Western Borderlands: The Transformation of a Political Order*, pp. 24-41.

Sa'di, A.H. (2020) Orientalism in a globalised world: Said in the twenty-first century. *Third World Quarterly*, pp. 1-16.

Said, E.W. (1978) *Orientalism*. London: Redwood Burn Limited Trowbridge and Esher.

Said, E.W. (1985) Orientalism reconsidered. *Race & Class*, 27 (2): 1-15.

Spain, J.W. (1961) The Pathan Borderlands. *Middle East Journal*, 15 (2): 165-177.

Stewart, J. (2007) *The savage border: the story of the North-West Frontier*. The History Press.

Titus, P. (1998) Honor the Baloch, buy the Pushtun: Stereotypes, social organization and history in Western Pakistan. *Modern Asian Studies*, 32 (3): 657-687.

Yousaf, F. (2019) Pakistan's "tribal" Pashtuns, their "violent" representation, and the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement. *SAGE Open*, 9 (1): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244019829546>

