

POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND CLASS STRUGGLES: READING PAKISTANI SOCIETY THROUGH SOCIAL HIERARCHIES

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Abstract

*This paper explores the interplay of power, privilege, and class struggles in Pakistani society, analyzing how social hierarchies are reproduced and contested through literature, culture, and institutions. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, Michel Foucault's notions of power and surveillance, and postcolonial insights from Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, the study examines how elites consolidate authority while marginalized voices remain silenced or misrepresented. Through close readings of Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*, Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, and Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, alongside sociological perspectives, the article demonstrates how Pakistani Anglophone literature reflects and critiques entrenched inequalities. By situating texts within historical, political, and cultural contexts, it highlights literature's dual role: exposing privilege while envisioning counter-discourses of justice. Ultimately, this paper argues that literature is not a passive mirror but an active site of resistance, offering imaginative possibilities for more egalitarian futures.*

Keywords: Power, Privilege, Class Struggles, Pakistani Literature, Inequality, Social Hierarchies

Introduction

Power and privilege have long been central concerns in both social sciences and literature, shaping how individuals and communities navigate their lived realities. In Pakistan, where postcolonial legacies intersect with entrenched feudal, bureaucratic, and military structures, these dynamics become particularly pronounced. Social hierarchies are not only evident in material terms land ownership, wealth accumulation, and control over institutions but also in cultural and symbolic domains, including language, education, and literature. Understanding how privilege is reproduced, contested, and negotiated in Pakistani society requires both a sociological and literary lens.

The origins of privilege in Pakistan are deeply tied to colonial history. British colonial rule institutionalized class hierarchies by empowering landed elites, landlords, and intermediaries who became brokers of state power. The zamindar and jagirdar systems entrenched feudal dominance, while colonial bureaucratic institutions created a powerful salariat class whose loyalty was tied to the colonial state. After independence in 1947, these structures were neither dismantled nor radically reformed. Instead, they continued under new guises, with landed elites, military rulers, and bureaucrats maintaining control over state institutions and resources. The military, in particular, has often positioned itself as the guardian of the state, consolidating authority through coups and authoritarian regimes.

Privilege in Pakistan also operates through cultural markers. English, the language of power during colonialism, has remained a gatekeeper of privilege, determining access to education, employment, and upward mobility. Elite private schools and foreign universities confer cultural capital that reinforces class distinctions. Fluency in English often signals not only education

but also modernity, cosmopolitanism, and legitimacy. By contrast, speakers of Urdu and regional languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto are often associated with lower socio-economic standing, despite their numerical majority.

This stratification creates a cycle where privilege is reproduced across generations. The children of elites inherit not only wealth but also symbolic capital in the form of elite schooling, global networks, and access to institutions of power. The poor, by contrast, are often trapped in systemic exclusion, with limited upward mobility. Education, instead of being an equalizer, frequently reinforces inequality through a fragmented system divided between elite English-medium schools, low-cost private schools, and underfunded public institutions.

Literature provides a unique space to interrogate these dynamics. Pakistani Anglophone fiction, particularly since the 1990s, has gained global prominence, producing narratives that grapple with issues of inequality, identity, and power. Writers like Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, and Mohammed Hanif engage with themes of corruption, authoritarianism, and social injustice, exposing the mechanisms through which elites maintain dominance. Their works resonate globally while reflecting the lived realities of Pakistani society. Literature thus functions not only as a reflection of inequality but as a critical lens, capable of reimagining social relations and amplifying marginalized voices.

This study therefore positions itself at the intersection of sociology and literary criticism. It asks three central questions:

1. How do power and privilege operate within Pakistani society, particularly in relation to class and social hierarchies?
2. In what ways do Pakistani Anglophone novels reflect, critique, or reproduce these hierarchies?
3. How can theoretical frameworks from Bourdieu, Foucault, and postcolonial thinkers illuminate the relationship between social structures and literary representation?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to ongoing debates about inequality, representation, and resistance. It argues that while privilege in Pakistan is deeply entrenched, literature remains a critical site for both exposing domination and imagining alternatives.

Background Study

The social fabric of Pakistan has been shaped by historical, cultural, and political forces. Colonial legacies established patterns of elitism that persist in contemporary institutions, especially in education and governance. The partition of 1947 further intensified class stratification by displacing millions and reinforcing divisions of wealth and land ownership. Postcolonial developments, including military interventions, uneven economic growth, and neoliberal reforms, have compounded inequalities, leaving vast sections of society marginalized.

Pakistani literature, particularly Anglophone writing, has emerged as a powerful platform to engage with these realities. Authors such as Kamila Shamsie, Mohsin Hamid, Mohammed Hanif, and Nadeem Aslam highlight how systemic inequalities permeate everyday life. Their works not only critique power structures but also reveal how individuals navigate, resist, or succumb to them. The background of this study, therefore, lies in understanding Pakistani literature as both an artistic endeavor and a sociological document that records the lived conditions of diverse communities.

Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Examine how Pakistani Anglophone fiction represents themes of power, privilege, and class struggles.
2. Analyze the intersections of class with gender, ethnicity, and religion in literary narratives.

3. Explore the ways literature critiques social hierarchies and suggests possibilities for resistance or change.
4. Contribute an interdisciplinary perspective that combines sociological analysis with literary criticism.

Literature Review

Scholars of Pakistani society have long emphasized the persistence of inequality. Hamza Alavi's work on the "salarial class" (1972) demonstrates how colonial bureaucratic structures produced a powerful middle class that has shaped state policies. Ayesha Jalal (1995) traces how elite families dominate politics and bureaucracy, creating patron-client networks that marginalize ordinary citizens. Akbar Zaidi (2005) highlights the persistence of landed elites and industrialists in shaping economic policy, ensuring that state resources benefit the privileged few.

This scholarship underscores the resilience of elite structures, which adapt across historical periods. Whether through feudalism, military rule, or neoliberal globalization, elites have found ways to consolidate and reproduce power. Yet these studies often focus on material inequalities, paying less attention to symbolic dimensions such as language, education, and cultural capital.

Pakistani Anglophone fiction has increasingly been recognized as a critical space for engaging with social hierarchies. Amina Yaqin and Peter Morey (2011) argue that writers like Hamid and Shamsie reveal the contradictions of globalization, where elites thrive in cosmopolitan spaces while the poor face exclusion and surveillance. Claire Chambers (2010) examines hybridity in Pakistani fiction, showing how texts negotiate between local realities and global readerships.

Other scholars critique the global circulation of Anglophone fiction. Elleke Boehmer (2005) argues that postcolonial writers often cater to Western audiences, reproducing cultural privilege even while critiquing inequality. Pakistani fiction, while offering valuable critiques risks commodifying local realities for global consumption. This tension raises important questions: can Anglophone literature represent the marginalized authentically, or does it inevitably reproduce privilege?

The major gap in existing scholarship lies in the lack of interdisciplinary analysis. Sociologists document inequality, and literary critics analyze representation, but few studies integrate these approaches. Moreover, vernacular literatures, Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi remain marginalized in global scholarship, even though writers like Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Saadat Hasan Manto provide radical critiques of inequality. This paper, while focused on English texts, acknowledges these limitations and calls for broader engagement with local literatures.

Research Gap

While significant scholarship exists on Pakistani society and its entrenched inequalities, much of it has been confined within disciplinary boundaries. Sociologists such as Hamza Alavi and Ayesha Jalal have examined elite domination through historical and political-economic lenses, while literary critics such as Claire Chambers and Amina Yaqin have explored themes of identity and representation in Anglophone fiction. However, there is a lack of integrative studies that bring these two perspectives into dialogue.

Moreover, existing literary criticism often focuses on issues of identity, hybridity, and globalization, but pays less attention to how class and privilege function in everyday Pakistani life. Similarly, sociological accounts tend to prioritize structural inequalities while neglecting the symbolic and cultural dimensions illuminated by literature. Another gap lies in the privileging of Anglophone texts in global academia, which risks sidelining vernacular literatures in Urdu, Punjabi, and Sindhi that also contain powerful critiques of inequality.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting an interdisciplinary approach that draws on sociology, postcolonial theory, and literary studies. It foregrounds the themes of power, privilege, and class struggle across selected Anglophone novels, while also situating these narratives within the broader sociohistorical context of Pakistan. By doing so, the research contributes to a fuller understanding of how literature both reflects and contests entrenched hierarchies.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study draws on three complementary theoretical traditions:

Bourdieu's Capital and Habitus

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of capital economic, cultural, social, and symbolic explains how elites consolidate privilege. In Pakistan, wealth often intersects with cultural capital, such as English education, which signals class status. Habitus, or embodied cultural dispositions, explains how elites maintain dominance effortlessly, while marginalized groups internalize their subordination.

Foucault's Power and Surveillance

Michel Foucault's theories of power as diffuse and relational illuminate how Pakistani institutions operate. The education system, bureaucracy, and military function as disciplinary apparatuses, normalizing hierarchies and regulating citizens' behavior. Surveillance, both literal (state monitoring) and symbolic (social scrutiny), sustains inequality by making compliance habitual.

Postcolonial Perspectives

Edward Said's *Orientalism* shows how global hierarchies shape representation, while Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" highlights the silencing of marginalized voices. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity offers insight into Anglophone Pakistani literature, which navigates between local authenticity and global markets. These frameworks contextualize Pakistani literature within both national and global structures of privilege.

Methodology

The study employs qualitative textual analysis. It closely reads *Moth Smoke*, *Home Fire*, and *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* for their representation of power, privilege, and class struggles, situating them within Pakistan's sociopolitical realities. Secondary sources include sociological texts and critical essays. The focus on Anglophone texts acknowledges their global prominence while recognizing the need to expand analysis to vernacular literatures in future research.

Analysis and Discussion

Class and Corruption in *Moth Smoke*

Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* portrays the entanglement of class, corruption, and desire in Lahore. Darashikoh Shezad, a disillusioned banker, becomes ensnared in the elite world of his childhood friend Aurangzeb, whose inherited privilege shields him from consequences. Through Bourdieu's framework, Aurangzeb embodies the reproduction of privilege: his wealth, English education, and family connections ensure access to power. Dara, though educated, lacks sufficient capital to sustain elite status, highlighting how privilege is not easily accessible but inherited and consolidated.

The novel critiques not only individual corruption but also systemic inequality. The poor are criminalized while elites manipulate legal and financial systems to their advantage. Hamid thus exposes the moral vacuum of Pakistan's upper class, where privilege fosters impunity.

Transnational Privilege in *Home Fire*

Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* interrogates privilege in transnational contexts. Eamonn, son of a British-Pakistani politician, enjoys wealth, security, and legitimacy across borders. In contrast, Aneeka and Parvaiz's working-class background exposes them to vulnerability. Parvaiz's radicalization underscores how marginalization creates spaces of exclusion, while

Eamonn's privilege protects him even when complicit in moral compromise. Shamsie critiques the unevenness of global privilege: elites move fluidly across borders while marginalized communities face suspicion and surveillance. Foucault's framework of surveillance is evident in how Parvaiz is monitored and criminalized, while Eamonn navigates freely. Shamsie highlights how privilege is not only local but global, shaped by race, class, and citizenship.

Military Power and Satire in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*

Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* satirizes General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship, exposing the absurdity and violence of authoritarian rule. The novel dismantles the aura of military invincibility, depicting how the state disciplines citizens through coercion and surveillance. Foucault's insights into discipline are reflected in the military's regulation of soldiers' lives, while its suppression of dissent exemplifies how power silences opposition.

Hanif also illustrates how elites benefit from proximity to the military, while ordinary citizens bear the brunt of authoritarianism. Yet satire itself becomes a tool of resistance, destabilizing the legitimacy of power.

Gender, Religion, and Subaltern Voices

Privilege in Pakistan is also gendered and religious. Women, minorities, and laboring classes often face multiple layers of exclusion. Spivak's argument that the subaltern cannot speak resonates with the silencing of women's voices, as seen in works by Bapsi Sidhwa and Saadat Hasan Manto. Manto's short stories, for instance, foreground prostitutes, refugees, and servants, highlighting how marginalized groups bear disproportionate burdens of violence and inequality.

Literature as Counter-Discourse

Despite systemic inequalities, literature provides space for resistance. Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry envisions egalitarian futures, while Hanif's satire destabilizes authoritarian narratives. Shamsie and Hamid, though writing in English, expose contradictions in elite privilege, revealing the fractures within social hierarchies. Literature thus becomes a site of counter-discourse, imagining justice where reality offers oppression.

Conclusion

This article has examined how power, privilege, and class struggles manifest in Pakistani society and literature. By integrating sociological and literary perspectives, it demonstrated how elites consolidate dominance through economic, cultural, and symbolic capital; how institutions normalize inequality; and how literature critiques and resists these structures.

Pakistani Anglophone fiction plays an ambivalent role: while circulating primarily in global markets, it nonetheless provides valuable critiques that resonate locally and internationally. These texts expose how privilege is reproduced, how marginalized groups are excluded, and how power operates through both material and symbolic means.

The study highlights the need for interdisciplinary approaches that bridge sociology and literary criticism. It also underscores the importance of engaging with vernacular literatures, which offer equally profound critiques often ignored in global academia. Future research should examine Urdu, Punjabi, and Sindhi literatures alongside Anglophone texts to provide a fuller understanding of inequality.

Ultimately, literature in Pakistan functions as more than art: it is a political act, an intervention into social hierarchies, and a call for justice. By amplifying silenced voices and challenging dominant narratives, literature becomes a vital tool in envisioning more egalitarian futures.

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