

The Impact of Global Events on Urdu Fiction: A case Study of “Before Hiroshima, After Hiroshima”

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Abstract

Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi is a renowned fiction writer of the 20th century. "Before Hiroshima, after Hiroshima (originally titled "Hiroshima Se Pehlay, Hiroshima Kay Baad)" is one of his prominent short stories. This short story is a poignant exploration of the devastating impact of the atomic bomb on human lives and the moral fabric of society. The story juxtaposes the serene life before the bombing with the unimaginable horror that follows, effectively highlighting the stark contrast between peace and destruction. The story serves as a powerful critique of war and its dehumanizing effects, urging readers to reflect on the consequences of violence and the importance of preserving humanity. This research paper is based on the impacts of Global events on Urdu fiction: a case study of "Before Hiroshima, After Hiroshima."

Keywords: Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Before Hiroshima After Hiroshima, Urdu Fiction, Global Events

Objective:

The aim of this paper is to analyze the impacts of Global events on Urdu fiction through the case study of "Before Hiroshima, After Hiroshima" written by well-known Urdu short story writer Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi.

Research Question:

What is the nature of the impact of global events on Urdu fiction, and what is the method of their propagation?

Methodology:

The method used in this research involves textual analysis of the short story “*Before Hiroshima, After Hiroshima*” by applying the analytical and descriptive design. This paper is based on qualitative research and uses inductive and deductive research methods.

Theoretical framework:

Globalization theory is an interpretive approach that intends to unfold the deeper and underlying meanings of the text and provides a methodology to understand literature. This theory in literature examines how global processes and events influence literary texts, reflecting interconnectedness and cross-cultural exchanges. For this research, the following key aspects of Globalization Theory are applied to examine the text:

1. Historical Impact: How the global event of Hiroshima influenced the themes and narratives in Qasmi’s story.
2. Cultural Reflection: How the story reflects the interconnectedness of global and local cultural narratives.
3. Identity and Power: How characters in the story navigate their identities and respond to global power dynamics.

Introduction:

The two world wars of the twentieth century are such a tragic metaphor for terror, fear, disease, and poverty that they completely changed human thinking. On the one hand, these wars introduced the world to deadly weapons; on the other hand, they severely trampled on the existing morality, loyalty, and human sanctity in societies. The atomic attack on Japan during the Second World War was an extreme form of human barbarity. This attack caused the deaths of two to three hundred thousand people in few hours. Like literature of other languages, Urdu writers also expressed their reaction on this tragedy. In this regard, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi’s short story “*Before Hiroshima and After Hiroshima*” is of foremost importance. About the popularity of this story, Fateh Muhammad Malik writes, “In the long short story “*Before Hiroshima and After Hiroshima*,” he (Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi) described the effects of war on his society in a comprehensive way. The style and the artistic craftsmanship with which it is presented are unparalleled not only in Nadeem’s work but also in Urdu fiction.”¹

Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi has made the effects, destruction and devastation caused by the war on humans the subject of his story. The story focuses on a village whose farmers do not even know the geography of the front lines, but since their young sons are taking part in the war, they have become fully involved in it. They are not interested in winning or losing, but only in ending the conflict. The beauty of this story lies in how the entire village’s life has become intertwined with the war’s outcomes. The main character of the story is Shamsheer Khan, who, fed up with his

domestic economic crisis, sends his son to join the war. Later, he overcomes this economic crisis, but he faces a tragic end with the departure of his daughter-in-law and grandson.

“This is not only the story of Shamsheer Khan but also of Shamsheer’s village. The peace and happiness of the village had been destroyed by the war overseas. The simple farmers, for whom there was no other important topic except the harvest and the rain, now talk about the war.” 2

Discussion and Analysis:

From the title to the characters’ narrative and their tragic ending, all the circumstances are connected to the Second World War and its associated economic and financial situations. From title of the story, the reader’s mind is at once drawn to the great disaster in Japan and its deadly effects. The characters in the story must have been directly or indirectly affected by this nuclear disaster. Tahira Iqbal, while criticizing the story, writes:

“Before Hiroshima, After Hiroshima, a story set in a village in Punjab, focuses on the destruction caused by war and the atomic bomb. This remote village, surrounded by poverty and destitution, severely affected by the events and consequences of the Great War. The beauty of the story lies in the creation of an environment where every aspect of life has become intertwined with the consequences of a distant war.” 3

Apart from the context of the title and the war situation associated with it, an impression emerges at the beginning of the story that its main character, Shamsheer, was living a prosperous life. His lands had natural access to river water, resulting in good harvests. However, the situation has changed. The water of the Indus River, which naturally irrigated Shamsheer’s lands, has become the object of a government project. A large canal is being constructed from the Indus River, diverting a considerable proportion of the water. Here, the author addresses human monopolization and wrongful domination over natural resources. The farmers’ crops in this entire area depend on the Indus River’s irrigation system, but the canal project has destroyed their crops.

Environmental criticism covers three aspects of biocentrism, ecocentrism, and anthropocentrism. In this story, the concept of ecocentrism is used. Taking away the livelihood of an entire region’s people and violating natural laws is one of the most serious crimes against any natural phenomenon on this planet. From a biocentric perspective, everything in the universe is important. This concept contrasts with anthropocentrism, which posits that humans are not more important than other creatures in the universe and therefore have no right to exploit natural phenomena. Like humans, other entities in the universe—such as nature, animals, birds, insects, rivers, plants, and inanimate objects—are all important. Directing the flow of river water to chosen areas and depriving naturally irrigated regions is an open declaration of war against the morality of nature.

“When he saw a single pea plant on the scorched, barren lands and the cattle roaming around in search of these scattered plants, he would become sad. The lands were deteriorating and becoming desolate day by day. The water of the Indus was sinking into the centuries-old dry stomachs of these vast valleys, occupied by Nawabs and feudal lords who, despite being alien to these valleys, were already the owners of very prosperous states.”⁴

At the beginning of the story, the economic crisis that Shamsher suffers from due to flawed irrigation projects is caused by the feudal and capitalist classes. Behind this capitalist system is the struggle over class division, giving rise to the bourgeois and proletarian mentality. The bourgeois mentality considers only its right to natural resources, and all means of human development in society. For this class, it is unacceptable that any other class can receive help from these resources. In this story, bourgeois psychology is openly described: the water of the Indus River was irrigating the fields of hundreds of people, providing the livelihood of these farmers. But this was not acceptable to the feudal class, so they dug a large canal and diverted all the water to their lands. As a result, all the agricultural lands of the working class became barren. In such a situation, the entire village is continuously fighting to combat the economic crisis. In this regard, Dr. Fawzia Aslam aptly states, “War, no matter what level it is, gives nothing to a person. Those who fight the battle of survival also become the fuel of destruction, and those who fight the battle of destruction often become victims of the death of feeling along with their lives.”⁵

The tragic aspect of the story is that these workers are indifferent to this oppression and injustice. They know that the capitalist has a monopoly in every department, so even if they raise their voices against the oppression, they will not be heard. Here, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi exposes the bitter social reality that only the capitalist has the right to live as he wishes. He can subdue nature with his will and take away the common man’s right to satisfy his basic needs. He can engage in all kinds of social exploitation under his oppressive thinking.

“I don’t understand anything,” he had said to the landowner one day. “Why is the land of a thousand poor farmers being destroyed to provide comfort to just one landowner? This is strange and contradictory. Every human being has an equal share in these blessings of God. Even the waters of the river have been taken over, my lord. Shamsher Khan, the government can do whatever it wants, whether it makes the river flow in the valleys or sets fire to the green fields. Do not speak openly. If the government finds out, you will be arrested. And who will raise a finger against God and the government?”⁶

Another theme of the story is livelihood. There is only one breadwinner in the family. When he was not earning, he was not accepted by his family. His father does not even allow him to light a lamp without his permission. He is obliged to live his routine according to his father’s will. The tragedy of this class is that they have no choice in achieving their desires, needs, and happiness.

They are imprisoned by the chains of livelihood that society has placed around their feet. This is why Dalir Khan ends up empty-handed despite risking everything.

On the other hand, the upper class of society has the freedom to get its needs and desires at will, because they think themselves the masters of the lives of the lower class. This class is so insensitive that they do not care about the feelings and emotions of anyone but themselves. For them, only their own selves are important. That is why the people of this class do not hesitate to usurp the rights of others to satisfy their egos. In the story, the mentality of this class is satirically described through the words of Shamsher.

“Brother, if the government really puts pressure on the air, then strange noises will start, and there will be shouting. ‘Hey brother, what happened? What is the noise?’ ‘Nothing, brother, the air has run out in this house, and the whole family is suffering.’ I have sent the heir to the city with five hundred rupees to buy air canisters from the government.” 7

In the story, Shamsher appears as a character with a well-established reputation in his village, but now he is in emotional and psychological defeat. The tragedy of Shamsher Khan’s character, which begins at the start of the story, reaches its peak at the end. However, by this point, the tragedy is not just Shamsher’s but becomes the tragedy of the entire village.

“The story revolves around Shamsher Khan’s economic crisis and emotional turmoil. Shamsher Khan sends his only son to the war front to alleviate his economic woes. Day by day, he begins to suffer from emotional and psychological turmoil due to the news of young men being killed or taken prisoner in the war. The daughter-in-law’s behavior intensifies this chaos and turmoil... Thus, the world of peace, tranquility, sanctity, and loyalty that existed before the war destroyed.” 8

The text clearly explains the oppression of the colonial powers. It has always been a successful tactic of the colonizers to consider the colonized as inferior to them, considering their civilization and cultural values inferior to their own. This dominant mentality has always led them to see themselves as highly educated and endowed with superior political and social consciousness. However, the role of the colonizer has always been exploitative. These powers entered the subcontinent as the East India Company under the guise of trade, plundering natural resources and raw materials and transferring them to Britain. In addition to introducing their own education to the local population, they made full-fledged efforts to impose their civilization and culture. The sole purpose was to keep the colonized mentally and physically subjugated and enslaved forever. Colonial references are found throughout the text of the novel. These coherent references clearly illustrate the colonial mentality.

At one point in the story, when Shamsher sees the word “India” in his son’s letter, his fascination with the English language intensifies. He finds it unbelievable that his son has started learning

English. Here, learning English is not just getting a new language; it is an expression of the inferiority complex that the colonial powers instilled in the local people on English culture, language, and sciences.

“India?” he asked the Patwari.

“Yes. That is, India. Associations.”

“Is this English?”

“Yes.”

“That is, Dalir now knows English too?”

“That is what it seems.”

“O Shadan daughter,” he called out when he came home. “Did you hear anything? Dalir has started speaking English too.” 9

An effective tactic of colonialism is the discourses that the colonizers devise to increase their popularity. Later, the colonial powers popularize them through mass media, education, and private organizations. The purpose of these discourses is to set up fear and monopoly over the local people. In the subcontinent, such discourses also gained acceptance through political, educational, and journalistic means in a noticeably brief period. The immediate result was that the local people became victims of an inferiority complex. Meanwhile, the ability and intelligence of the English nation impressed them so strongly that they have not been able to escape its influence on this day. In this story, when the villagers talk about the nationalities of those who died in the World War, no one believes in the deaths of the English. This is due to the same colonial rhetoric that has kept the people of the subcontinent under their terror and oppression to this day.

“No, no, my dear, how does the Englishman die? The Englishman is like Qutb Sahib’s stick, a teak beam, a steel frame. My brother, the Englishman, is also a human being like us. The only difference is that he is white, and we are a little darker. He has ships, we have camels, he has guns, we have sticks.” 10

In the story, the words “English” and “America” not just used for nationality and language, but as codes for colonial powers. The author has not used any other phrases to explain these codes. This is because the comprehensiveness of these codes does not need any explanation. While explaining the context and lessons of the American attack on Japan, whenever a farmer talks about the English or America, everyone unconsciously starts appreciating the English. This is not because the English have been their rulers or because they fear punishment for insulting them. Rather, this awe stems from the self-created discourse of the English nation, presenting themselves as the most hardworking, organized, powerful, and developed nation. This situation persists in the

subcontinent even today, partially, and completely. According to them, no other nation in the world is powerful enough to defeat the English.

In this effort to prove the British nation is powerful, there is no sympathy for the British in the hearts of these farmers; rather, it is simply a challenge to them that makes it clear that the superiority of this nation is Muslim. These simple farmers have accepted this fact so confidently that they do not even want to use the word America instead of British, because other nations besides the British also live in America.

“A farmer said, ‘How it grew roaring and roaring. And how the English caught it.’

‘No. Not America. Objection.’

‘No, not the English.’

‘America.’

‘The English.’” 11

Conclusion:

Although the external context of the story is associated with war and its consequences, and each character affected by the war in a way or another, if we look beyond the title and war context, the story has a deep meaning in relation to other important aspects. An outstanding feature of Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi’s story is that he has set it thousands of miles away from the thematic space; despite this, the social and economic effects of the war are clearly felt. One of the human tragedies of the twentieth century was the world wars, in which millions of people died. Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi did not limit this story to one topic; multiple themes appear at various levels.

The economic crisis is the central theme of this story. Everyone in the twentieth century seems to be struggling with this crisis. In this story, the entire village, except Shamsher, seems to be suffering from this crisis. Society is reluctant to accept those who are not economically stable. This becomes clear when Shamsher sacrifices his only newly married son to war in the hope of earning more money. In this context, a Marxist analysis of the text is also important.

This story explains how landlords and capitalists exploit farmers and workers. The creation of a large canal from the Indus River, which destroyed the agricultural land of the remaining farmers, openly describes the feudal mentality. Undue domination over natural resources to achieve personal interests is also an important theme of this story. The large canal created from the Indus River has left a vast area barren. A study of the story also reveals interesting points from the colonial perspective. The domination and monopoly of the British government have psychologically enslaved these people. These simple-hearted villagers still recognize the British

ability and intelligence even after their departure. Inevitably, the text of the story studied in more detail in other contexts beyond its title and main theme.

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