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Language as Power: Construction of Social Reality on Riffat Abbas Poetry "A Dream on the Intersection of Past and Future"

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Abstract

The poetic approach to constructing social reality is a significant source of reflection on the lived experience of voiceless ordinary men and women. Poetic expression becomes a source of power and resistance expressed through language. Social reality expressed in poetry constructs a vision of history beyond time. The civilizational heritage of Multan dates back to the time of Rag Veda. The City's riches attracted many conquerors, subdued but never defeated. As Poet himself is the product of land and culture, Riffat Abbas's poetry expresses all the imprints that land has carved on his Cognition. His poetry represents the phenomena of continuity and preservation of cultural heritage in the face of all historical upheavals. The paper aims to analyze the social reality constructed in Riffat Abbas's poetry opting for the method of discourse analysis given by Mitchel Foucault to study the progressive trends on social attributes, societal relations, and socio-political system.

Key Words: Power, Poetic Expression, Social Reality, Civilization, Multan

Introduction

Power and knowledge are two independent concepts yet very much related to each other. Knowledge is considered an exercise of power, whereas power is accounted as the function of knowledge. Power is a complicated concept to understand, but different theorists have tried to understand the concept; some have laid down understanding as the power cube where one can understand power as a framework in which different levels, spaces, forms, and interrelationship is at play. Others have understood it as a framework to explain 'what we are?' Moreover, 'what makes us?' According to Foucault, power is diffused and embedded in discourses. He sees these discourses as 'Meta-power' or 'regime of truths'. Truth is a relative term that comes from multiple constraints constructed through the accepted form of

knowledge. Each society has its truth, and this truth is the most important source to understand the discourses accepted in the society; the function of this truth is to distinguish the truth of society from the false. The discourses that are confirmed by the societal truth are considered true, and discourses that contrast these are false.

Language is a tool for humans to interact with each other and their surroundings. Without language, humans cannot transform and transfer their ideas and emotions to future generations—another expression of language that has been used to transmit knowledge in writing. Literature is one such tool that surrounds all the social, cultural, political, and psychological narratives. Literary expressions are used to cage one culture's fading norms and

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values. Folklores are example of one such tool that holds the actual feel of the culture. Vicinity of literature holds the material and nonmaterial aspects of the culture. Poetry takes a high place in literature. Poetic expression juxtaposes a variety of geographical, societal and personal experiences in a reflective manner. Shortest possible discursive expression that can explain the discourse as a whole is poetry. Over the time many of the poets from around the globe has tried to preserve their respective culture through expressions in their poetry. The ecology of the society has a lot to do on the cognitive imprints of the Poet. The habitat of the City, its history, landmarks, civilizational heritage and cultural events makes what one called an author/poet.

Multan is an iconic city whose history can be dated back to the times of *Reg Ved*, written on the banks of seven rivers of Indus valley. Multan remained an integral component of Indus valley civilization. The City was alive at times of great Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, and is considered as the oldest living City. As important the City is, the language of the City is also vital in its oral and written forms; transcending across the time layers of millenniums. The language developed over centuries, by fusing the local with the wave of migrant language(s) and languages of conquerors. The Multani dialect of Seraiki infused the Aryans, Arab, Pathan, Sikhs, British and finally the Urdu language influences in a specific form of expression. Multan is considered to be the capital city of the Seraiki language. Seraiki is one of the most antique language of the Indian sub-continent and is part of Indo-Aryan family of languages. It plays a role of 'Lingua Franca' among the people dwelling in City and its vicinity with diverse ethnic traits i.e., the locals, the Pathans, and the Urdu speaking Mohajir (Urdu speaking population migrated to City during havoc of displacement as aftermath of partition. Yet a great number of Multani/Saraiki speaking population migrated to India. Though the events were painful yet it gave Multani/ Saraiki new horizons as new incumbents were exposed, and assimilated in culture and tradition, as well as Saraiki language and culture were exported to Delhi and other areas of North India) coming to region in 1947 as result of displacement of partition. The language is

spoken in all provinces of Pakistan, i.e., Balouchistan, Sindh and Punjab and areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa like Dera Ismail Khan etc. It's been used as the trade language of the region until recent times, as Multan was the major City of Caravan trade route. Today more than forty million people from different districts of Pakistan speak it as their first language and is widely spoken as the second language in northern and western Sindh as well.

The City has a rich poetic tradition. Riffat Abbas is the modern addition in the history of language that transcends from Khawaja Ghulam Farid to modern day poet Ishu Lal and Riffat. Since 1984, he is expressing in a genre that represents his self-dialogue as well as the collective psyche and memory of the region whose people were waiting for a voice. Riffat's poetry takes the form of kaleidoscopic vision, dialogue and folklores. As a poet he tries to rein the untamed horse of time and gives voice to the marginalized people of Sindh valley, who faced the trauma of displacement with every coming wave of migrants. The oppressed from any region that is the victim of internal colonialism and exclusion can associate with the words of Riffat. [\(Langah , 2014\)](#)

Riffat's poetry is an expression of self in play with dominant discourse, a self that is resisting to maintain its identity under repression, or in words of Foucault, "resisting power", as a weak but "free human", with alive soul. Though the dominant power reach to capillary level to subjugate the self, resistance from common man arise in normal ways of acting and doing. Riffat Abbas is voice of the ordinary men women, child, beggar, and even the nonhuman living souls like rivers and deserts. Even the material iconic existences like the clock tower, stairs of shrines etc find an expression in Riffat poetry. Discourse according to Foucault, becomes a site of struggle between dominant and dominated, a silent presence like a breath that serves the dual purpose of voicing and silencing. Hence, the mode of discourse analysis employed by Michel Foucault is the most appropriate model to understand Riffat's poetry.

Methodological and Theoretical Debate

Foucauldian discourse analysis is based on the theories of Michel Foucault considered as basis of

Hermeneutics and Interpretive Social Sciences. It is a type of discourse analysis that focuses on the power relations in the society, expressed through language and practices like language games embedded in discourse of identity. [_\(Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 1972\)](#) The paper analyzes the constructed social realities in the poetry of a native poet, Riffat Abbas, who challenges society's dominant truth. The construction of social reality in the discourse(s) of Poet is created in the manner, where he transcends his idea to such a level that it becomes a timeless reality. Rooted in tradition and mores of the native land this Poet is so deeply attached to his craft and creates a version of reality to the people and City of Multan that is the specific to his writings whether in form of Hikayat, Ghazal or Nazam. The technique of Foucauldian discourse analysis is relevant to Riffat as his poetry is not only the embodiment of given culture but includes the truth of oppressed classes as well.

The process of Foucauldian discourse analysis is outlined into five steps

1. First step is to recognize that *discourse is an organized structure of statement* termed by Foucault as 'Discursive Construction' rooted in material conditions of existence. These statements are not independent but represent other discourses going on, on the margins of lingual constructions. Foucauldian notion of discourse is related with another conceptual tool kit of Power/Knowledge. Hence, lingual constructions in both written and oral form are result of working of power; and in turn act as resistance to discourses of power. [\(Merquior 1985\)](#) Language is manifestation of power and can act as resistance paradigm to empower the excluded, marginalized and deprived strata. So, language through its games of truth creates legitimacy to the dominant but at the same time language as resistance is the weapon of weak and voiceless.
2. Second step revolves around that *how these discourses are created?* History of mankind is the struggle between dominant and subjugated. Foucault negates the Marxist notion of power as an attribute of dominant and exercised from top to bottom. His beliefs

that power circulates between bodies of truth and reaches to the capillary level of society it is exercised on free man and so far, he is free. [\(Merquior, 1985\)](#) Hence the existence of resistance and oral narrations of ongoing struggle of weak against the strong remain everyday tale of all societies keeping the spirit of resistance alive. So, the language games are played on two levels first is by the dominant discourses expressed in formal legislations, official historical narratives and formal procedures. Other comes from folklores, oral history of people and literary expressions like poetry, novels etc.

3. Third step is to identify that *what can be said and what cannot?* Discourse itself creates a multitude of binary and sets the limits of prohibitions. The dichotomies between normal & deviant; true & false; right & wrong; sacred & profane; legitimate & illegitimate are hidden in discourse. Discursive construction in formal language game comes with the claim of truth and legitimacy while other side remains non-conformist and opts for multiple forms of expression to challenge the constructed social reality. [_\(Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, 1972\)](#)
4. Forth step is to know about the *spaces in which new statements can be made*. As dominant discourse is challenged on multiplicity of spaces by multiple others; the power narrative recreates itself to maintain its dominant and legitimate position. Change in lingual discursive construction brings transformation in material conditions of existence; and certain previously excluded discourses are accepted in chambers of normalcy. The main objective of resistance discourse is to gain their place in regime of truths.
5. Last step is to *materialize the practices* that are generated in spaces that are considered to be the other of dominant power. Language acts as power to motivate the excluded and provide them with icons and symbols of identity. Construction of othering remains central to the discursive construction of resistance paradigm. Discursive

constructions expressed as form of language of resistance assign meaning to discourses evolving on bottom of power hierarchy. (Foucault, [What is Critique](#), 2002) The discourses of feminism, environment and native people kept alive through oral transmission across time make resistance politics meaningful.

Scheme of Study

The paper is divided into four parts to answer the following five steps of the Foucauldian discourse analysis

Poetic Expression and Discursive Construction of Reality

In this segment the first two steps of Foucauldian discourse analysis are discussed by taking poetry of Riffat Abbas as an organized structure of statements and then representing a challenge to dominance from the excluded.

What is Author: Imprints of Language Games on the Cognition of author

As discursive constructions are rooted in material conditions of existence, the research in this segment takes in account the imprints of dominant discourses on poet Riffat Abbas cognition which he resists on the later stage of his intellectual development.

Sufi in the Land of Saints: Trajectories of Multan on Poetic Expression of Riffat Abbas

On this level of research, the how question is addressed. How this modern Sufi inspired from postmodern hermeneutic tradition of Derrida and Naruda accepts the challenge to make place for his poetic discourse and takes inspiration from the timeless wisdom of his City Multan. How local combine with global literary expressions and how the poetic expression combines the diverse regional experiences in similar yet unique terrain of thought.

On intersection of Past and Future: Depiction of Discourses in poetry of Riffat Abbas

The last level of analysis will analyze Riffat effort to materialize the excluded practices through the power

of language and construction of other discourses like feminism and environment.

Poetic Expression and Discursive Construction of Reality

This segment is based on the first two steps of Foucauldian discourse analysis taking the poetry of Riffat Abbas as an organized structure of statements and then representing a challenge to dominance from the excluded. According to Foucault Discourse is a presence as silent as breath. Although discourses are organized written statement, occurrence of these statements takes place with in a setup of material existence. According to Foucault discourse is a violence we do to natural order of things. What is present in discourse is also a manifestation of what is silenced, excluded and trivialized. ([Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge 1972](#)) Hence language becomes a synonym of power and cite of dialectical struggle with resistance. Riffat poetry is an expression of the truth silenced by the language games of the dominant coming as victors and migrants of the City, who displaced the natives from center to margin. Title of his first book *Bhondi Bhoi Te* (On a Turning Earth) is an understanding of subversion and violent acts of discourse that is played through official language games to incur legitimacy on their version of power. (Saeed A. A., 2016)

Khalid Saeed identifies three dominant features in poetic expression of Riffat. First the account of indigenous experiences: the natives known by the dominant discourses as Musali, *Chamar* and *Gadu* (Donkey), becomes a signifier of wisdom in his poetry. The experience of decentering and degradation to an animal status is parallel with other indigenous races of North & South Americas and Australian aboriginals. Second the reversal of dominant truth in satire and symbol expressed in comedy: in a comical manner he reverses the folklores like *Sohni Manhival* and constructs it as a case to be reported in Police Station. The noted critic Khalid Saeed is of the view that Riffat is comparable with Athenian comic playwright, Aristophanes, who in peak period of Greek tragedy introduced Comedy. Like Aristophanes, he believes a slander is in play that communicates false statements based on the law of the country play to harm people. Last the

construction of alternative vision of a peaceful world in form of feminist and environmental discourses. He struggles to keep the truth of people alive by reversing the dominant discourses. The women trivialized by Aryan religion become a symbol of peace. (K. Saeed 2018)

Riffat also accounts the migratory experience as city dwellers are mostly migrants coming from a far-off homeland. '*Kiwain saqon yaad na rehisi; oon ghar da rasta*' (How will I forget the way to my beloved homeland; A homeland at distance of all the forests and rivers)".

Riffat has also challenged the absolute trends of governance as well. His poem '*Hathi*' reached to town tethers to perform certain tasks. His other poem, '*Hik Shehar Ichoon*' is a message from a remote city in control of a blind commander. [_\(Saeed A. A., 2016\)](#)

What is Author: Imprints of Language Games on the Cognition of Author

As discursive constructions are rooted in material conditions of existence, the research in this segment takes in account the imprints of dominant discourses on poet Riffat Abbas cognition which he resists on the later stage of his intellectual development.

Riffat started poetry in at a mature stage, when he started understanding the working of language games, and their role in legitimizing power. As a teacher and student of Literature, he drew inspiration of resistance poetry of Neruda, Whitman, Paz and Baudelaire. [_\(Khan, \[2006\] 2014\)](#) The memory of Railway stations on the West Bank of Punjab in vicinity of Darbar Sher Shah and his ancestral town Shujabad, were defining imprints on his poetry. According to the literary critic Shakir Hussain Shakir, Riffat poetry in initial phase was written in continuity of folk tradition of land. It seems a continuity of Khwaja Ghulam farid "Kafis", recorded for Radio Pakistan by Mansoor Malangi. The poetry represents the life experience of Common Man. On later stage of intellectual development, Riffat becomes more abstract. Though this strand of Riffat poetry is intellectually rich and represents the themes that earlier poets of Saraiki never discussed, the selection of concepts took him far from Common man. Unlike Shakir Shujabadi, he is no more the voice of common

man, but expressing in a syntax that intellectuals can only understand. (Shakir 2018)

Riffat's poem 'Cartoon' depicts the discourse of resistance as a lived experience and symbol of cartoon. Cartoon as symbol of resistance can be squeezed; thrown from the city walls, or paraded over by the whole army and torn into pieces; it will fall and get up again and again, though in a distorted form with eyes, nose, and ears intact but displaced. Like a cartoon character city is meant to last no matter what happens to the City; it will remain intact. [_\(Khan, \[2006\] 2014\)](#) The land and its dwellers remain there but with lost freedom.

The lost freedom will never be regained, as the conquerors of the City will become slaves with the coming of the next worriers, and the process continues. So, the City is inhabited by slaves, i.e., slave men, slave women, slave generation but still, the City retained the color of its identity. Riffat praises for long life. He says that I am alive because I am the soil, water, forest, and life.

Though Riffat's poetry is an ode to slave generations keeping the self-alive yet like a sensitive soul, he is a poet of hope. Referring to a book of promise he writes that "it is promised that hunters will not come again, green grass and yellow flower will blossom....and the tyrant rule is over and golden days are about to come"

Sufi in the Land of Saints: Trajectories of Multan on Poetic Expression of Riffat Abbas

On this level of research, the how question is addressed. This modern Sufi inspired by Baudilaire and Naruda accepts the challenge to make place for his poetic discourse and takes inspiration from the timeless wisdom of his City Multan.

Riffat extended the Sufi tradition of love of Multan '*Ishq Allah Sain Jagya Te Mukh Adam da*'. "Allah is not waiting in heavens; waiting for the Mullah's good offices to save you. His thought is thought of Sufi, psychedelic though not hallucinatory. [\(A. A. Saeed 2016\)](#) In an authority note of cosmic wisdom Riffat writes in his book "[Een Narangi Andar" (In this Cosmos) that secrets of world and creator are known to ancient people and living.and the books of our lived experience will remain till eternity promising a promised tomorrow.

Literary Critic Shakir Hussain Shakir defines the imprints of City and its places on the Cognition of Riffat. Sitting on the stairs of Shah Shamas Darbar he found a secret route to the roots of the City. Sitting on a tea stall in the shadow of Darbar Shah Ruken e Alam, while having discourse with friends he writes, the 5th book and name it '*Sangat Ved*,' tracing the heritage of five millennia. To Shakir, he has changed the address of his dialogue; it is no more human, but forces of nature. (Shakir 2018) It is the continuity of Aryan hymns, *Veds*. He invokes the goddess of rain as well as *Vayu* (the god of wind), *Surya* (the Sun god), and *Soma* (the Moon-god). He writes the elegy for Mohran the dancing girl stoned to death in the crime of refusing to extinguish the guiding lamp in her window.

Riffat is a Poet of human relations; his poems '*pio dey mondhay tay*' on father's shoulder', '*sohnian trimtein*' beautiful women', '*asan trimtein mard*' we women and men', 'Multan' and '*kuheir*' fog' all depicts the life experiences of ordinary men and women and their behavior toward human relation, emotions and sensitivities written in backdrop of Multan's iconic places like Fort, city wall, city doors, and graveyards. The common people rise in from the soil of City goes back to its soil and remain nameless, while City and its icons all remain shadowed by fog. (Khan, [2006] 2014)

He creates the accounts of rituals that are alive for centuries in common man practices and believes that truth can be subdued but it remains present. "With little hands, small people make clouds which bring them rain.

On Intersection of past and Future: Depiction of Discourses in Poetry of Riffat Abbas

The last level of analysis will analyze Riffat effort to materialize the excluded practices through the power of language and construction of other discourses like feminism and environment. He writes in the language of marginalized who survived the repression of centuries and dominant discourses categorize them as barbarian and wrote the truth about them some left land and lost in deserts but the other survived the miseries of journey of forests, oceans and mountains. The others who lived was

silent and their truth was excluded from dominant language games. (R. K. Nawaz 2017)

The region of Multani language, a traditional region, has a unique history of women oral history with strong female characters expressing their identity, self and love with a strong desire of revolt against tradition. Women of the region never subdued and bent before oppressive practices, yet they met their fate in the form of brutal death penalties by loved ones and society. Riffat write an ode to such heroic women characters, and asks if there is a police station where he can register the complaint of murder of "Heer Sial". He laments that Sassi was deceived and she had to travel on waves of river on an uncooked pitcher to meet his beloved. As all these folklores were written by Sufi poets of Sindh Valley like Shah Abdul Latif and Waris Shah, Riffat laments that "we the male are narrators of women tales.....and narrated in such bias manner that we have dragged Sassi in deserts just to make her a miserable creature". We never focused on heroism of women as heroism is considered to be a male trait where man has agency to travel on chosen path. While on contrary these women folklore characters clearly show that they travelled on the paths of their will, wish and choosing.

Riffat gives message to all the oppressors that 'you have cast a gaze upon us for centuries, now it's over turn! Look how we see you'. Only the sons and daughters of soil are excluded but the experiences of women, earth and nonhuman creatures are excluded by power discourses. Riffat conceives himself as the 'Red guava', hovering honey bee; the ant carrying pinch of flour; the sweet water that quench thirst; the dawn that appears in crimson color.' (Abbas, 2016)

He is the painter of life and writes life histories of creatures other than humans, i.e., wild pigeon, the trees in forest who are his friends tied and bound by the enemy; the Indus Dolphin that is a princess turned into mermaid to enjoy her freedom away from tyranny and oppression.

He paints nature as female embodiment with powers of creation. As he narrates 'all the men and women of the world will become females, there will be a wind of change that will eventually changes us all into females, as female with its implicit trait of mothering is the other name of nature'. Riffat has

adopted this simile from other indigenous cultures that believe in only two gods that is earth as mother and son as father responsible for all the life. According to the Poet the world should be seen through the eyes of a mother, that's the only way to avoid conflicts and disparities among human race. (Saeed K. , 2018)

The noted cultural psychologist of Multan believes that Riffat has adopted the peace discourses of feminism from English poet William Blake, who believes that if the world has to survive, it must be governed by females. Influence of Sufi narrative to call themselves as females like Shah Hussain in his Kafi '*mandi hank e chungi han sahib tare bandi han*'. Riffat is part of the same tradition.

Women become a symbol of resistance in his '*hikayat*' '*Natak main bayaan kia gya Qissa*' a tale told in a drama'. Women role of a gracious dancer of City who fights against all odds to meet his beloved and at the end dies. This women character is the continuity through many generations, which is murdered by a ruler and judge but remains hopeful to see his beloved. Riffat, in the same drama describes the relation of natural bodies like moon with old a woman who is capable of grasping it in *HER* old hand. The rain is also a woman wishing to merge with her beloved *City*.

Conclusion

The paper analyzed Riffat Abbas Poetry in framework of Foucauldian discourse and critique as challenge to dominant order. Discourse is taken as violence to natural order of things and City of Multan as the site of enactment of dominant order present in language games of victors who enslaved and marginalized the land time and again. Foucault's model of Archaeology and Genealogy attempts to unearth truth from the artifacts that are historians, crafted. Riffat Abbas believes that he has an aim as dweller of this land that was colonized again and again. He believes that even in Rag Ved written by Aryan (Aryans as ethnocultural group settled in Iran and North India in prehistoric times. As people are considered to be of European origin, it was perhaps the first colonization of Asia/ India by European race. Like modern colonial discourses, these people categorized local people as faceless creatures. The local religion based on forces of nature was replaced

by religion based on scripture. The rivers, mountains, and climatic forces that were the base of old Indian religion were personified in the form of gods, goddesses, and powerful attributes were associated with them. However, the abrupt change was not in man relation with natural forces and gods/goddesses where they became more of an external force than part of life; but in human relations. Asymmetrical power relations between men, women, classes, natives and colonizers ruptured the social fabric based on equality. In this environment, the linguistic narratives primarily employed in religious scripture played a decisive role in sustaining newly emerged social relations. The truth of natives was displaced to Southern India the land of Rawan the Rakshasas, the kidnapper of chaste, pious women saved by brave, kind, humane Ram who followed morals more than everything) colonizers the local people are abused as "Rakshshas" (Evil forces, personified as Rawan the Rakshasas in Ramayana, the religious book of Aryans. (Nawaz & Kumar, 2016)). As Poet I have to establish the case of that evil forces, whose truth is hidden. I was abused thousands of years ago and as true dweller of Indus valley, I will not abuse back but write my truth. Hence, I am writing for my City, its broken wall, its

natives, whose history was written by the colonizer. The colonizer had the right to write history, and he named me niggard, thief, oppressor. The colonizer had the force of religion and belief with him and he declared me culprit and guilty. In Foucauldian spirit Riffat Abbas believes that not the whole truth is lost in this game of truth. (Arish, 2019)

As the City retained its unique cultural traits, artifacts and oral tradition and appears as a timeless space on the intersection of past and future. Riffat becomes the voice of excluded and tries to find the place for the excluded truths in mainstream discourses. The City itself is a defining imprint on Cognition of Riffat, who sees city stairs, its clock tower, Fort, city wall, and people embedded in web of relations, through generations. Khalid Saeed is of the view that Riffat concept of time, where past resonate in present and is a reflection of future as well, has parallels within Augustanian concept of time. He juxtaposes the discourses of locale, habitable and environment and draws inspiration from the rituals of his environment and roots. (Saeed K. , 2018) Hafiz

Khan believes that all the places and people who experience cultural and political subjugation and colonization enter in dialogue with their oppressor and seek their due place and share in the system from which they are excluded. Riffat is the voice of those subsumed whether they are local inhabitants, women, or nonhuman creatures. [_\(Khan, \[2006\] 2014\)](#)

Riffat is the historian of modern nation history as well. He witnesses postcolonial absolutism of

institutions and dominant regions legitimized in formal discourse and legal frameworks. He denies being acknowledged by the Pakistan-dominant region Punjab and refuses to take the Pride of Punjab award. Riffat, the voice of the subjugated region, takes pride in the cultural heritage of his City dating back to the *Vedic* period and appends it by writing a new *Ved*. He wants to free the symbols of his City from the dense fog to make thee visible.

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