RP World History and Cultural Studies
Vol. 2, No. 2 (July – December 2023) pp. 35–39
e-ISSN: 2583-8156

RESEARCH PLATEAU PUBLISHERS

Cite this article: Shakuntala, Indian poetry and oral histories in the first World War: A subaltern response, *RP World. Hist. Cult. Stud.* **2** (2023) 35–39.

Original Research Article

Indian poetry and oral histories in the First World War: A subaltern response

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ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: 9 August 2023
Revised: 4 Nov. 2023
Accepted: 6 Nov. 2023
Published online: 10 Nov. 2023

KEYWORDS
Subaltern; Structures of feeling; Memory and trauma; Eurocentric attitude; Folk songs; Oral literature.

ABSTRACT
The First World War had an effect on people everywhere in the world. Nearly every significant nation took part in the conflict, sharing personal tales that became part of the annals of military history. India was also an outlier. Through their own sense impressions and "continuous overflow of powerful feelings," many poets of undivided India related in poem the experiences of the British-Indian army and the inhumane torture of the 'master' class during the First World War. It marked a significant shift in world literature's global historiography. Even though the soldiers' oral histories aren't generally considered "high literature," their shared experiences of pain and conflict make them profoundly literary. The semiliterate people who left behind rich oral traditions rich in their own language and culture, which are frequently combined with a range of forms, such as storytelling, verse recitations, and everyday prayers, chants, and folk songs, came from the villages of Asia, Africa, or the South Pacific, either willingly or unwillingly, to save their mother India. India, a multilingual, multiethnic, and multi-religious nation, has a wealth of prose and poetry written in regional tongues that reveal the underclass reaction to the Eurocentric perspective on conflict. The voices of the subaltern Indian troops and their families, as well as the poetry written by multilingual poets from undivided India that reconstruct an Indian combat experience and the intricate "structures of feelings," are all explored and unveiled in my work.

The colonial inhabitants classified as "subalterns" are those who are socially, politically, and physically shut out of the imperial colony's power structure as well as the empire's metropolitan home. The subaltern has come to be used "to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial peoples who employ this discourse," according to M. H. Abrams in his A Handbook of Literary Terms [1]. According to Abrams, the name "subaltern" originates from the Latin words "under" (sub) and "other" (alter), and it is a British phrase used to refer to a person of lower military rank [1]. The word "subaltern" was first used by Antonio Gramsci to refer to the cultural hegemony that drives out particular individuals and social groups from society's socioeconomic institutions in order to deny them agency and a voice in colonial politics. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak warned against using the term "subaltern" too broadly in an interview, saying that it "is not just a fine word for 'oppressed', for [the] Other, for somebody who's not getting a slice of pie... Post-colonial theory defines subalternity as a zone of difference as something with little or no access to cultural imperialism. Who would now claim that only the oppressed are like that? The oppressors are the working class. It's not beneath you.There are a lot of people that would like to identify as subaltern. They are the most hazardous and least fascinating. They don't even need the term "subaltern" to describe themselves, simply by being a minority group that faces discrimination on college campuses.... They ought to observe how the discrimination is implemented. Allow them to talk; they are part of the hegemonic discourse and are trying to get a piece of the action but aren't permitted to. It is inappropriate for them to identify as subalterns ("Subaltern (postcolonialism)", 2021).

Bill Ashcroft defines "subaltern" as "of inferior rank" in society as "who are subject to hegemony of the ruling classes" in his seminal book Post Colonial Studies: the Key Concepts [2]. Peasants, laborers, and other people excluded from "hegemonic" power are examples of subalterns. According to Gramsci's assertion in "Notes on Italian History," the history of the subaltern classes is just as intricate as that of the dominant class. The history that is still regarded as "official" is that of the ruling class. The examination of the British Indian army in France and Mesopotamia during World War I is a topic that contemporary historians completely overlook. First, the nationalist elitist history suppressed their stories, and then the big narrative of war did the same. According to Gramsci, the history of social groupings on the margins must be piecemeal and episodic. In addition to having less access to their cultural and social institutions, they also have less control over how they are represented. The poets of united India wrote for the voices of the peasant and semiliterate classes despite class strife and supremacy on the battlefield.

The First World War (1914–1918) had a significant impact on Indian literature and politics. The Japanese victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) served as a spark for Asian ideas against the predominance of the European colonial power. The ebullient "Indian" sentiment of those years was encapsulated by Jawaharlal Nehru in his autobiography: "Japanese triumphs stirred up my enthusiasm

and I waited eagerly for papers for fresh news daily. Ideas of nationalism flooded my thoughts. I pondered the liberation of Asia and India from the European thralldom [3]. The victory of South Asia gave Indians hope that they would be freed from colonial rule. Extremists in India, such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Aurobindo Ghose, started to question the leadership of the Indian National Congress by promoting a new philosophy that fused political activism with Hindu revivalism. Indian poets and authors were also greatly impacted by the Balkan Wars. India's viceroy, Lord Hardinge, proclaimed shortly after the Balkan Wars that India, as a British colony, had to fight in the Great War. Ironically, the educated middle class, political bourgeoisie, and native princes of the time welcomed the news of the war with great enthusiasm, demonstrating their support and allegiance to the British.

During the First World War, numerous poems were contributed from India. The desire and emotion of the poetic sense blended with the love of combat. The poetry, which have been lost to time, had a significant impact on India's participation in World War I. The poetry, both in its entirety and in its pieces, creates "structures of feelings" that the youngsters and their family had experienced and felt during that time. The poems are not well-known today and are not virtually available on websites. In Indian hands, those fleeting emotions took on the form of literariness. None of them are well-known, established poets with widespread recognition or international acclaim. However, these pieces are excellent records of the emotions of the period. They had political messages at the time, and their poetry was socially conscious.

The Urdu poetry expressed a deep desire for independence. In a poem titled "Khak-e-Watan" ("The Dust of the Homeland"), Suroor Jahanabadi bemoaned:

Once your flag of greatness was flying high
Now the sign of your greatness lies in the dust.

In a poem similarly titled "Khak-e-Watan," Brij Narain Chakbast claimed that while "Dust of the Country" (khak-e-Watan) remained the same, "hub-e-Watan," or love for the nation, had vanished. In "Mazaalim-e-Punjab" (The Victims of Punjab), Zafar Ali Khan made fun of General Dwyer's ruthlessness as well as the British. He continued to wish that all of the blooddrops from the martyrs might be utilized to adorn the walls of the fort of freedom (qasr-e-azadi) in "Sholae- Fanoos-e- Hind" (also known as "The Spark in the Chandelier of Hind"). In his hymn "Tarana-e-Jihad," Ehsan Danish implored Muslims to follow the precepts of their faith (Badhe chalo, badhe chalo). Mohani protests vehemently against the British occupation of Baghdad in March 1917 in a ghazal he wrote in 1917.

Known as the "Nightingale of India," Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) was a political figure, poet, and freedom fighter. She was educated in Cambridge, London, and Chennai after being born in Hyderabad. She participated in the National movement, turned to Mahatma Gandhi as her leader, went with him to the historic Salt Satyagraha, and struggled for Swaraj. In addition to serving as the first Governor of the United Provinces, which is now Uttar Pradesh, Naidu was named President of the Indian National Congress in 1925 [4]. The Golden Threshold, her debut collection of poems, was released in London in 1905. Poems about children, nature, love, death, and patriotism were among her works.

Sarojini Naidu is a globally renowned poetess whose poem "The Gift of India" features Indian soldiers. The poem honors the role that Indian soldiers played in the First World War. In the First World War, more than 10 lakh Indian soldiers from the British Indian Empire fought for the Allies. Many of them gave their lives in sacrifice. Indian forces participated actively in many of the war's battles and fought in a number of sites that were significant to the allied holding. But given the length of the War's history, the Indian soldiers' role is often ignored. The poem "The Gift of India" by Naidu captures these altruistic sacrifices made by the Indian army in response to the western agitation. The poem discusses the many advantages that other nations gained from India in addition to its main theme of warriors giving their lives in battle for another nation. The benefits are seen by the poet as presents from India to the colonists. Through her poem, Naidu writes:

Gathered like pearls in their alien graves Silent they sleep by the Persian waves, Scattered like shells on Egyptian sands, They lie with pale brows and brave, broken hands, They are strewn like blossoms mown down by chance On the blood-brown meadows of Flanders and France.

...

And you honour the deeds of the deathless ones Remember the blood of thy martyred sons!

When the lyric is crafted by an Indian nationalist poet with Indian passion, it takes on a unique quality. The middle class Bengalis are exposed to the personal processes of colonial education through an aestheticized vocabulary that is reminiscent of Georgian poetry. The poem's strength stems from the mother's war-traumatized awareness, which merges with the potent archetype of "Mother India" suffering under colonialism. This poem is an appeal for the Indian sepoys to be recognized rather than a declaration of the demise of the European bourgeois consciousness. It speaks passionately and elegantly of all the gifts India has given Britain. In addition to the "rich gifts of clothing, grain, or gold," She has bestowed upon her "priceless treasures," her sons, who sadly now rest in forgotten graves after marching to "the drum-beats of duty." This picture is a reference to the French poet Arthur Rimbaud's poem "Asleep in the Valley." In addition, Rimbaud discusses the pointlessness of war, to which young people have dedicated their lives in the breathtaking landscape of Mother Nature:

A soldier, very young, lies open-mouthed, A pillow made of fern beneath his head, Asleep; stretched in the heavy undergrowth, Pale in his warm, green, sunsoaked bed.

Shibli Nomani (1857–1914), a renowned scholar of Sufism and literature, was also a poet, educator, and wanderer. For sixteen years, Nomani was a Persian and Arabic teacher at the M.A.O. College in Aligarh. He got to know British orientalist Thomas Arnold and other academics there, where he was exposed to contemporary Western ideas and concepts firsthand. In order to learn about the societies of the Middle East, he also traveled with Arnold to Syria, Egypt, Turkey, and other nations [5]. Nomani founded the Darul Mussanifin, also known as the House of Writers, in Azamgarh, and the Shibli National College in 1883. He also authored a two-volume biography of the prophet Muhammad Sirat-un Nabi.

He illustrates the other viewpoint in his sardonic parody of "Jang-e Europe aur Hindustani" (The War in Europe and Indians):

A German, overcome with pride, stated to me:
'Victory is not easy but it isn't impossible either
The army of Britannia is less than ten lakh
And not even prepared on top of that
As for France, they are a bunch of drunks
And not even familiar with the art of Warfare'

Shibli Naomi was the author of this poetry, and an arrest warrant was issued for him; however, he passed away on November 18, 1914, before the warrant could be carried out [6].

British Indian Urdu poet Brij Narayan Chakbast (1882–1926) was born in Awadh into a family of Kashmiri Pandits. He is recognized for having introduced a fresh approach to Urdu poetry that emphasized a deep and sincere love for one's country. A prominent proponent of Home Rule, he composed multiple poems centered around the general concept of division. He lamented the disappearance of hub-e-watan, or "love for the country," but the persistence of khak-e-watan, or "dust of the country," in poems like "Khak-e-Watan."

Annie Besant led a group of nationalist leaders in 1916 who were inspired by the Irish Home Rule Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They demanded self-governance and the status of a dominion within the British Empire, which was currently held by Australia, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, and Newfoundland. While it enjoyed significant popularity for a while, the rise of Mahatma Gandhi, his Satyagraha, and the civil disobedience movement demanding total independence hindered its expansion and activities [7].

The poem starts with:

The land of Hind is higher in rank than the highest skies
All because of the light of hope brought forth by Home Rule
This hope has been nurtured by Mrs Basant
I am a mendicant of this land and this is my song.
It's futile to wish for the thorn instead of the flower
We shall not accept even Paradise instead of home rule.
The poem continues:
We shall bring the essays of patriotic Martyrs
And we shall wear it as Surma in our eyes
We shall bear all manner of hardship for our poor Mother
And we shall give the message of fidelity to the people.

Here, the poet honors the World War One martyrs. He honors Mother India's soil since courageous souls have been born there in the past.

Syed Fazl-ul-Hasan, another ferocious revolutionary who wrote under the pen name Hasrat Mohani (1875–1951), was a journalist, politician, lawmaker, romantic poet in the classical ghazal style, ethical dissident, and freedom warrior. Inquilab Zindabad, which translates to "Long live the revolution!", is a famous slogan that he originated in 1921. He is recognized as having been the first, along with Swami Kumaranand, to call for total independence for India in 1921 during the Indian National Congress session in Ahmedabad. His compositions are all influenced by his profound admiration for the Russian Revolution. Being a genuinely devout guy who completed the Hajj thirteen times, he did not see any conflict between his nationalist, pan-Islamist, and Communist Muslim views. Mohani was a member of the Communist Party of India till 1927 and chaired the reception committee during the party's founding on December 25, 1925. He founded the Muslim Independent Party in July 1932 with Azad Sobhani, but in 1937 he became a member of the Muslim League. After the split, Mohani stayed in India as a liberal, self-reliant, and pious Muslim. Inquilab Zindabad! was the catchphrase he initially wrote down in writing and then used as a rallying cry at a labor protest in Calcutta in 1928. The journal Urdu-e-Moalla was edited by him [8].

His well-known poem on the "Montagu Reforms" bills begins as follows:

How replete with deception it is
This scheme of reform by Montagu
In the whole wide world it is known
That these aspects of the Constitution spell
Complete control over legislation
Force over actions, power over money
When there's not even a whiff of these
In this flower of reform.

With no khushboo ('fragrance') even for the namesake, the so-called reforms were little more than kaagaz ka phool ('paper flowers,' in this poem's harsh critique). The poem concludes with a passionate appeal that the Hindu people should not be seduced by the witchcraft of reforms:

If you couldn't take anything from them now
You're not likely to get anything at all.

Josh Malihabadi (1898–1982), another dissident writer from India, was born into an Awadhi noble family. His beliefs have always been provocative, and his poetry is flamboyant but extravagantly poetic. He was first recognized as a young, vigorous poet with his collection Rooh-e-Adab (1921), but in subsequent years he emerged as the indisputable Sahir-e-Inqilab, or the poet of revolt and insurrection. Devoted to the cause of nationalism, Josh used a combination of suggestion and forthrightness, seduction and sermonizing, extravagance and subtlety, to entice his audience towards the heady idea of independence like no one else had before. Josh has produced a number of poetry anthologies, each more lyrical, rousing, and passionate than the last. His body of work is a kaleidoscope of vibrant imagery that dazzle readers with their astounding and seemingly endless diversity [9].

His well-known poetry "The Dream of a Defeated Prison," Shikst-e Zindaan ka Khwaab, begins with:

How the prison of Hind is trembling and the cries of God's Greatness are echoing
Perhaps some prisoners have got fed up and breaking their chains
The prisoners have gathered beneath the walls of the prisons with
A storm of thunder in their beasts and swords reflected in their eyes…

During this time, Josh Malihabadi earned the nickname "shair-einquilab," or the revolutionary poet. He speaks with much energy and vigor about the impending revolution that will upend the British Empire. The poem's epilogue forewarns of the British Empire's brutality:

Beware, for that prison is resounding, pounce for that prisoner has escaped

Rise for those walls have fallen, run for those chains have broken.

Working as a naib tahsildar, Akbar Allahabadi (1846–1921) advanced rapidly through the legal system, becoming a munsif, sessions judge, district judge, and, in 1894, Khan Bahadur. He committed himself to poetry and a fervent study of the social and political concerns of his day after retiring. Akbar's poetry reflects the inconsistencies of his day by using the metaphor of Budhu Miyan, for the Indian Muslim (a confused, not too brilliant sort of tiny person), in some places, and Shaikh, for the arrogant English lackey, sometimes a parody of Sir Syed, in other places [10].

Rabindranath Tagore's ideas are echoed in Allahabadi's lengthy poem "Kulliyat," which is an indictment of Indian colonial rule. In "The Roots of War," which was published in the journal Sobuj Patra, Tagore expresses the opinion that the First World War was a conflict between Kshatriya and Vaishyas, as well as between soldiers and merchants. Using the Kurukshetra conflict and the Indian caste structure as theoretical springboards, he connects European mercantilist ambitions to the Empire's growth into Asia and Africa. Allahabadi speaks with a similar strain as well:

Real goods are those that are made in Europe
Real matter is that which is printed in the Pioneer
Though Europe has great capability to do war
Greater still is her power to do business
They cannot install a canon everywhere
But the soap made by Pears is everywhere.

Muhammad Iqbal, a well-known poet, philosopher, and visionary who lived from 1877 to1938, made use of the finest educational resources available to liberal Westerners. After graduating from the esteemed Government College in Lahore, he studied philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge in Heidelberg, Munich, and Bar-at-law in Germany. He chose to dedicate himself fully to reading and writing, earning little more than a meager living as a lawyer, despite returning to teach for two years before completely leaving government employment. Remarkably, despite his harsh criticism of the imperial administration, he accepted a knighthood in 1922. He was chosen to serve on the Punjab Legislative Council in 1927. He went to the Round Table Conference in London in 1931 as part of the Aga Khan's Indian Muslim mission. Many collections contain his extraordinary poetry.

In his poem "Tasveer-e Dard" (also known as "A Picture of Pain"), the renowned poet Iqbal, who was at the height of his powers and activity during the Great War, cautions Indians to exercise caution and to pay attention to the following signs:

The sight of you makes me cry, O Hindustan
For your tale is most admonishing among all tales
The tears you have given are all you have bequeathed
The pen of destiny has placed me among those who mourn you…

The poem concludes with a call to action to take advantage of the current situation and the unchanging truth that the troops' history will not be recorded in the annals of time:

Look, watch what is happening, see what is about to happen
There's nothing to be gained from the stories of past glories
If you still don't understand you will be erased o people of Hindustan
Even your tales will be removed from the annals of the world history.

Ahmaq Phaphoondvi Born in Phaphoond, in the Etawah district of Uttar Pradesh, Muhammad Mustafa Khan Maddah (1895–1957). Haddam Muhammad Mustafa Khan was his true name. After completing his medical studies at Tibbiya College in Delhi, Phaphoondvi joined the non-cooperation movement against British authority before he could open a clinic. He actively participated in the liberation movement in India, which resulted in his imprisonment. One of the greatest humor and satirical poets of all time, Phaphoondvi targeted social, political, and cultural topics for his satire. In addition, he composed ghazals and nazms, many of which are nationalistic and express disapproval of British rule. In addition to penning poetry, Phaphoondvi also produced an Urdu Hindi lexicon, Urdu Hindi Shabd Kosh, which was released by the Uttar Pradesh government [11].

In "Angrezi Zehnki Tezi," he mockingly praises the British intellect while, in reality, cautioning the audience about the dangers of division. The poem begins as follows:

Look at the turmoil and bloodshed among our people
The cleverness of the English mind is used up in all such schemes
This murder 'n mayhem, wars 'n battles, cruelties 'n malice
The country's garden is barren, with nothing but dust and desolation.

Another well-known Indian poet, Zafar Ali Khan (1873–1956), was also a journalist, political activist, translator, freedom fighter, and editor of the significant periodical Zamindar, which was crucial in educating Indians about the perils of colonial authority. The general consensus is that Khan founded Urdu journalism. He was an ardent supporter of the Khilafat movement and was clearly against Mahatma Gandhi's concept of non-violence. He also believed in direct confrontation with the British and was sentenced to five years in prison for his involvement in the independence campaign. Poetry served as a means of sociopolitical opposition for Khan. The majority of his writings use literary devices to depict modern history. Among his poetry collections are Biharistan, Nigaristan, and Chamanistan.

His poem "The Bugle of Freedom," "Azadi ka Bigui," begins with a foreboding note:

The world has changed, so must you
Beware, for the time past won't return
But the heat and the flow of your blood must be so
That it should melt even a mould of ice.
The poem continues:
Holding aloft the flag of complete freedom
Go forth playing the bugle of belief,
Some crumbs have fallen from the table of Britannia
O Toadies, go crawling on your bellies to pick them.

He is alerting us to the Toadies, a hated term for servile Indians who will readily accept any crumbs in the shape of reforms, while simultaneously warning his fellow Indians to change with the changing winds that are sweeping across the nation as the conflict drags on.

Agha Hashar Kashmiri (1879–1935), a renowned Urdu poet, dramatist, and playwright, rose to prominence when several of his plays were adapted for the big screen. Rustom-o Sohrab, Laila Majnu, and Yahudi ki Ladki are the most well-known of them. In addition, he is recognized for having translated several of Shakespeare's plays into Hindustani, including Safed Khoon (White Blood), which is based on King Lear, and Khwab-e Hasti (A Dream of Existence), which is partially based on Macbeth.

Harshar Kashmiri thanks Europe in a satirical ode in his poem "Shukriya Europe" (meaning "Thanks for Europe") for turning the world into a "mourning chamber" and for effectively turning the east into an example of hell.

Punjab, which sent 360,000 soldiers to fight in the First World War, had the highest recruiting rate. Folk songs about the conflict and recruitment are what remain. These folk song excerpts were retrieved by renowned Punjabi poet Amarjit Chandan, who published them in "How they suffered: World War One and its Impacts on Punjabis." Chandan and Amin Mughal have transcribed these folk songs. During the 2009 "South Asian Experiences of World Wars" conference in London, Chandan sang the song in Punjabi.

The collection of Punjabi folk songs by Amarjit Chandan is a subterranean stream of memory that must be explored in order to comprehend their experiences during World War One. These oral histories, folk songs, qissa kahanis, and ditties bring back voices that have been lost and bring back memories of bygone eras. Their accounts of their experiences—both forced and voluntary—on the battlefield provide light on significant societal influences that historians tend to ignore. Folk songs about the two World Wars abound, but there is very little oral history or folk music on the 1947 Partition. The oral culture's topics range from grieving for the loss of close ones to biraha, or the divorce of wives from spouses who were compelled to enlist in the military [12].

In conclusion, it can be claimed that language serves as a vehicle of expression in the poetry and oral songs that highlight the brutal treatment and persecution of British Indian soldiers throughout the British Raj. This is the literature that challenges the Eurocentric perspective on language, culture, and history. Their cultural identity is strengthened via literature. Through the writings they created, their cultural identity and psychological composition have been preserved. This class is estranged. They are the first signs of opposition. The poetry of oppression gave life to India's national legacy. During the First World War, Indian poets sided with the soldiers who were fighting for their country.

Modern historians have paid little attention to the oral histories and "war poems" that poets from united India wrote about their different experiences on the battlefield and how India sent their sons, either willingly or involuntarily, to a faraway place. The voices of the underprivileged are now being heard through these stories. They were silenced and prevented from criticizing the'master' British troops for torturing people inhumanely. Rich oral histories and poetry demonstrate the subaltern's ability to communicate, but can we contemporary men actually hear them? The Indian contribution to World War I is still behind schedule, even after a century has passed since the conflict began. An increased interest in this hitherto overlooked facet of the history of the Indian peoples will result from research on how Indians have responded to war. Similar literature from the united India describes the experiences of the troops from South Asia. A single illustration of the extensive sociocultural legacy of Indian cultural tradition is the diverse and sophisticated literary output.

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