

The Intriguing World of Sara Suleri

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Abstract: This paper seeks to explore the fascinating fictional world of Sara Suleri Goodyear. Suleri's memoirs offer a moving picture of the postcolonial world of India and Pakistan. Her memoirs are an attempt to revisit the past and understand the present. Suleri, daughter of a journalist who moved to Pakistan after India's partition and a Welsh teacher, emerges in her works as a doughty crusader against colonial and patriarchal discourses. Her family becomes the microcosm of the nation in her works and the clash between a domineering father and an obstinate daughter the tragicomic clash of two opposed worldviews. Postcolonial issues and debates dominate her worldview. The impact of postmodernism on the works of Suleri, who is professor at Yale University today, calls for an in-depth study.

Keywords: Boys will be Boys, Meatless Days, Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, Sara Suleri Goodyear

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I. INTRODUCTION

The world of Sara Suleri is uniquely positioned on the interstices of two antagonistic cultures. Her memoirs are indispensable for understanding how postcolonial writers are challenging cultural discourses that validate patriarchy, blind nationalist sentiments, moribund religious and social institutions, and the repressive mechanism of the state, all of which together ensure the domination of those who have power. Sara Suleri is among those notable postcolonial thinkers and writers of our century who are carrying forward the baton of postcolonial theory and literature today.

The paper tries to explore the contribution of Sara Suleri to the world of postcolonial literature and thought and underlines how she has enriched our understanding of the postcolonial world. Suleri's works are vital for understanding how the social matrix has undergone a change in the postcolonial era because of the intermingling of different cultures. Sara Suleri's writings focus on the multifaceted interaction of cultures.

Her memoirs, *Meatless Days* [1] and *Boys will be Boys* [2], chronicle the clash of two opposed discourses in the postcolonial world. On the one hand are the cultural discourses of domination that seek to reinvent and reinstate old hierarchies in a postcolonial world confronted with the challenges placed by marauding forces of globalisation today. Suleri gives a host of examples to substantiate the point – the deliberate Islamisation of Pakistan, fanatic attempts to forcefully thrust old religious and social institutions on mass-consciousness, and the sly and emotional defence of patriarchal order. The memoirs narrate the tragicomic tale of the conflict between an obstinate father and an equally obstinate daughter. However, this conflict is not merely a conflict between two individuals – this clash is actually the clash of two worldviews, two sensibilities, and two ways of approaching life. The petty tales of everyday life narrated by Suleri wonderfully succeed in capturing the historic collision of values that our postcolonial world is witnessing today. Thus, in her memoirs, the family becomes the microcosm of the nation.

On the other hand are spontaneously rising voices of cultural dissent that refuse to accept old dictums and age-old wisdom at face value. The direct result of globalisation and cultural imperialism is a cultural non-conformity, which is producing an interesting conflict of cultures, values, and codes of conduct. It is challenging conventional hierarchies and threatening the menacing empire of taken-for-granted cultural binaries and is giving rise to a new consciousness and sensibility. This sensibility is the sensibility of "in-betweenness" that defies rigid categories. Suleri epitomises this sensibility.

The paper raises questions about the far-reaching consequences of the impact of postmodernism on postcolonial literature in the era of cultural imperialism. It studies the theory of cultural in-betweenness and its philosophical limitations. The purpose of the paper is to understand the challenges that lie before postcolonial writers like Sara Suleri today and the long-standing question of commitment to the subaltern from which no writer can shy away.

II. TATTERED DEMOCRACY

Sara Suleri's writings are an attempt to comprehend the surreptitious alliance of culture in postcolonial societies with the state power, patriarchy, and religion. Secondly, her writings are a serious criticism of culture, and a ruthless attack on inhumane social institutions, cultural deceptions, and false binaries. They are a strong defence and a bold declaration of a rising sensibility of "in-betweenness" and a bold challenge to the world that has been taught to think in rigid binaries. This defiance fills her works with vitality and calls for an in-depth study. Her works have a rare freshness and force.

Sara Suleri deftly portrays the postcolonial psyche. She has closely seen and experienced the postcolonial world. She has personally seen these two cultures interacting in the shape of her parents and has experienced their formative influence on her life too. Her works try to explain how cross-cultural interactions that began during the colonial period molded the culture of modern Pakistan and redefined the key concepts of society like ethics, morality, and virtue. This postcolonial culture, dominated by conservative values, dogmas, and barbaric customs of the feudal period, validates the supremacy of man over woman, provides moral sanctity to ossified cultural institutions, religious bigotry, insular customs, and intolerance, and is still hinged on crude violence. Ironically, this culture has equally internalized consumerist values of the West, has allowed infinite changes in people's lifestyle, and has accepted the cultural monopoly of powerful tele-visual means of entertainment and communication. Rapid advancements in technology have also been culturally accepted.

Tattered democracy with a core of fundamentalism defines the national character and culture of modern Pakistan and most of the postcolonial nations today. Suleri's works portray the horrifying aspects of a culture that butchers humanity at every step. Her elder sister became its tragic victim, her dadi (grandmother) resigned herself to its whimsical commands, her mother had to build up walls around her, and Sara and her brother had to flee its territory to survive.

III. THEORY AND FICTION

Postcolonial issues and debates dominate Suleri's writings. Suleri's works reflect a clear influence of postcolonial theorists like Edward Said and Homi Bhabha. Her writings are a relentless battle against the false emotional halo built around ideas and beliefs that have become sacrosanct. Thus, Suleri deftly adapts Edward Said's theory of Orientalism and Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry to expose the entire framework of postcolonial culture. However, her works are not a mere repetition of Said and Bhabha. Suleri's beauty lies in the perfect assimilation of theory into her fictional world.

Fiction and theory are not two different things in Suleri's world; her works are complex theories rendered in the form of simple and touching tales. Her works are a seamless tapestry of postcolonial theory and fiction. Suleri's memoirs, which explore the culture of Pakistan, are theories transformed into the language of fiction; in fact, they are theories rendered into the idiom of fiction. She wonderfully succeeds in personalizing theory and theorizing personal life and miraculously fusing the two. Her writings are theories transformed into the magical language of fiction. There is virtually no boundary between fiction and theory in her works – she writes theory into her fiction. Consequently, the memoirs provide readers food for thought as well as for the heart. They are loaded with the richness of a theoretical debate and the charm of opalescent emotions.

A product of the so-called "Third world", Suleri makes her first impression as a sensitive human being who has a genuine concern for human suffering and misery and an equally deep dislike of all inhumane social institutions. In a moving passage she tells the readers about a heated debate, she once had with her father over Jinnah's two-nation theory. The agitated daughter told her father that she was not talking about the two-nation theory; she was talking about blood. The father would not reply, she tells. She explains how they went their separate ways after the incident, he mourning for the mutilation of a theory, and she for a limb, or a child, or a voice that meant nothing to the father.

Compelling, intense, and effective – Suleri is here at her best and at her height. The daughter has understood what father could not; a sympathetic heart has understood what a regimented mind could not. A theory removed from life has missed the essence that a simple soul has effortlessly grasped – the pain of partition.

As a writer who belongs to the new generation of postcolonial writers, Suleri is also aware of the pitfalls of postcolonialism. Therefore, while carrying forward the baton of postcolonialism, she is critical of it too. She understands that it is necessary to save the promising field of postcolonialism from regimentation and institutionalisation. In her highly widely acclaimed book, *The Rhetoric of English India [3]*, she warns against use of the tricky "discourses of alterism". Suleri's explores in-betweenness in diverse realms of life and society and views it as a source of "destabilising" energy. Her works are a quest for this destructive/constructive energy that she believes is capable of transforming the old world and its dilapidated and worn out structure. Therefore, her works are neither fiction nor reality; they are neither historical accounts nor biographies. They portray a world where everything appears to be turning topsy-

turvy. Thus, by sheer wizardry of narration, her mother proves to be more powerful than her domineering father, the commanding father becomes a victim rather than a victimiser, and her family (rather than the nation) becomes the centre-point of the tale that attempts to revisit the history of Pakistan.

Suleri is a determined advocate of the sensibility of in-betweenness. However, overemphasising the “third space” has its pitfalls too. Sara Suleri represents the “Third world” intelligentsia that has migrated to the developed West. Her works, therefore, are an opportunity to study the extent to which such writers have assimilated the cultural logic of the so-called First World. The “cultural logic” of the Western imperialist countries and their subtle impact on Sara Suleri can be read in her works too. The impact of postmodernism on postcolonialism cannot be ignored.

It is quite fascinating to study the cross-interaction of two opposed worlds in Sara Suleri’s writings. Suleri is sensitive about the issue of the continuation of colonial discourses in the postcolonial world and to the fractured modernity and tattered democracy that they have given birth to. However, she is also sensitive to Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and Barthes – theorists of the “First” world, who talk of a decentred and plural world, reversal of hierarchies, and the end of ideologies, history, and civilisation. These thinkers essentially distrust grand narratives and see reality and truth as cultural constructs. It is necessary to trace their presence in Suleri’s works to determine the extent of the influence of postmodern ideas on her.

IV. CULTURAL IMPERIALISM, POSTMODERNISM AND SULERI

Sara Suleri’s worldview, the message her writings deliver to her readers, and the appeal of her works, call for an in-depth study. There are many a question that her works raise, namely, what exactly does the cross-cultural interaction signify in her works? How to interpret the presence of postmodern ideas in Suleri’s writings? Do they signify a revolt against the hegemony of the West and the deceptive bourgeois discourses of humanism or the surreptitious inroads cultural imperialism is trying to make into postcolonial literature? Are these postmodern ideas and concepts tools of imperialism?

It cannot be denied that western imperialism is making inroads into the postcolonial world and cultures through its cultural discourses. The cultural invasion of the twenty-first century postcolonial world relies primarily on the manipulation of the logic and discourses of the postcolonial world. This “cultural logic” is being promoted, it seems, to convince the postcolonial world that global capitalism is unsurpassable and that an ambiguous “third space” is the only possible source of redemption. It is necessary for developed imperialist countries to teach postcolonial countries – where hunger, destitution, starvation, and unemployment is widespread – to distrust all ideologies, to abhor generalisations and “totalising” truths, to see reality as a cultural construct and the “objectivity” of truth as an illusion. In short, global imperialism wants to convince the discontented masses that there is no ideology that can bring about a social change.

Sara Suleri’s writings, while challenging ossified social and cultural institutions and exposing the role of seemingly “innocent” cultures, try to generate a complete disillusionment in her readers with all theories, philosophies, and ideologies that claim to change the world. It is necessary to ponder over the hidden implications of the postmodern theories. It is necessary, therefore, to ask what lessons Suleri as a postcolonial writer has drawn from the study of cross-cultural interactions and how has she interpreted it? It is clear that Suleri has adopted postmodern philosophy to interpret this phenomenon. Her language, method, style, and tools as well as her approach towards the questions of social disparity, gender inequality, history, nationalism, family and politics reflect a strong leaning towards postmodern theory. Like postmodern thinkers, she believes in mini-realities and is wary of metanarratives, she discards objectivity of truth and universalizing theories for a de-centered fluid world of shifting borders and realities. Like poststructuralists, she deconstructs traditional binaries and turns them upside down. A thorough analysis of the content of her writings as well as the form leaves little doubt that her present engagement with the culture of Pakistan is primarily a postmodernist engagement. A postmodern world-view guides her concern for the postcolonial world.

The question of ideology guiding postcolonial writers like Sara Suleri is of utmost importance because they have a great and difficult task to accomplish. As intellectuals and theoreticians, the onus of illuminating the path to liberation lies on them. The real question is that of the freedom of the subaltern from the chains of oppression and misery. This is exactly the point where the question of commitment makes its undeniable presence clearly felt.

V. THE QUESTION OF COMMITMENT

Postcolonialism is a vibrant and promising field that pledges its commitment to the underprivileged and deprived sections of the world. Here a question arises whether postmodernism is competent enough to accomplish this historic task? Can an ideology (that sounds so path breaking and iconoclastic), that was born in the imperialist world, guide the emancipation of the marginalised? These long-standing questions raise doubts

and suspicions regarding the role of postmodernism and make a serious and honest investigation of postmodernism and its agenda a necessity.

There are critics who see postmodernism as an anti-institutional ideology that seeks to end the hegemony of Eurocentric discourses; they believe that “postmodernism can best be defined as European culture’s awareness that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world.”¹ Another section of critics sees postmodernism as a deceptive tool of imperialism. It is, therefore, necessary to analyse the ideology of postmodernism and study both sides of this important issue to understand the basic idea that informs Suleri’s engagement with postcolonial cultures.

The cultural concern of Suleri, like those of other postcolonial intellectuals, has its limitations. Although Suleri very effectively grasps and portrays the postcolonial culture of Pakistan, the conclusions that she draws and the pictures of the world she paints seem to be greatly influenced by postmodernism. Like postmodernists, she rejects hierarchical patterns, and upholds plurality of meaning; she complicates sense of time and space as objective units of measurement and like Harvey, demonstrates the phenomenon of time-space compression in the globalised world; she advocates the breakdown of all rigid boundaries and refuses to neatly arrange and order her narrative. She refuses to make her works ‘coherent’ and impose any system or structure on them, thereby allowing a complete free-play of meanings. She turns traditional binaries of domination inside out. She has little faith in high-sounding lofty theories, philosophies, and ideologies and puts faith instead in the fluid nature of reality that can never be grasped and communicated in language, very much like her mother’s powerful and tough fragility.

Sara Suleri does not enter the questions of philosophy directly in her memoirs. Abstract philosophical debates become tangible in her world where all she talks about is concrete incidents of real life. Her memoirs ask us to embrace a chaotic world where there are no certainties and no access to history and the past. She creates a world that has no fixed centres, where reality is constructed by the ruling national and patriarchal discourses, and where power exercises itself from a multitude of points. Both the dominant and the dominated remain eternally trapped in its meshes – ignorant and powerless – and together constitute a tragic-comic saga of life.

The minute and painstaking scrutiny of the life of Pakistan in Suleri’s works makes us not only understand but feel the tragedy of an underdeveloped nation that has experienced the pain of partition, communal riots, wars, and the horrors of military junta, as well as the ominous rise of fundamentalism. Suleri’s tale is a tale of a nation that has been repeatedly deceived by fanatic religious discourses and lofty nationalist speeches.

Suleri has her limitations too. These limitations are the limitations of a worldview that dismisses general truth for particular truth and the existence of a centre for multiple-centers. It denies all possibilities of an escape from this absolute network of power. This worldview suggests only a status-quo because it deconstructs every structure and offers no alternative.

Last but not the least, the most vital question before Suleri is that of commitment. The basic question that confronts postcolonial intellectuals like Suleri today is that of the actual wretchedness and misery of millions of people all over the world for which imperialism is responsible. Can a writer wash his hands of the callous disregard of human life, of the misery of people who become victims of state sponsored wars, genocides, communal riots, racist squabbles, and terrorist attacks and who die of hunger because there are a handful of people prospering at the expense of their lives? Can he or she wash his hands of the crimes against humanity perpetrated by a parasitic system that sucks people dry. We all are, after all, part of the system itself!

Literature without commitment is an arrow without a point. It requires little philosophy to see that the meaning of human life lies in using the knowledge available to construct a better world. The real meaning of life lies in man’s heroic struggles against hostile forces that threaten his existence and growth. Alessandrini quotes Quayson, saying, “We ought to take courage to make ethical judgments even in the full knowledge that we may be proved wrong.” Sara Suleri cannot stay safe forever in her world of in-betweenness!

VI. CONCLUSION

Suleri’s proximity to the discourses of the so-called “First” world has its advantages as well as disadvantages. Postmodern ideas have enriched her works by providing her with a new tool for attacking moribund patriarchal values, but they have also made her vulnerable to the subtle imperialist cultural discourses too. Her memoirs are moving and beautiful, but they have few answers and suggest a bleak future. The question of suffering remains unanswered and unaddressed. Her memoirs are full of nostalgia for a Pakistan that is no more, for a world that she dearly loved; but they do not attempt to explore the way out of the chaos and darkness that rule Pakistan today. Postmodernism has no answers. This paper was an

attempt to review the achievements of Suleri as a postcolonial writer, to understand her limitations, and point out the challenges that lie before her and other postcolonial writers today. The coming generation of writers will have to carry forward the task boldly and courageously and Suleri's works will always illuminate the path.

Nevertheless, her works will always be remembered as a plea for a world that has no place for old rivalries and antagonisms. Suleri dreams of a decentred, plural and hybrid world and the death of discourses that propagate hatred and animosity. She calls for a world without borders. Suleri's works wonderfully succeed in negating the supercilious assertion that "East is East and West is West/ and Never the Twain Shall meet." East and West do meet in her works, and interact and mould each other too. Her mother becomes its living epitome.

Suleri's appeal is moving and her humanism all-encompassing. Her works sensitise the readers and usher them to a new consciousness that pleads the cause of humanity. In a world fraught with bitter seasons, as Suleri says, her writings communicate dreams, hope, and a rare sensitivity. The world of Sara Suleri has many battles to fight and win!

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