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Voices from the Margins: Theoretical Insights into Kaiser Haq's *Ode on the Lungi*

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates into Kaiser Haq's poetic masterpiece, "Ode on the Lungi", exploring its theoretical underpinnings and critical insights. The study employs a multidimensional approach, integrating postcolonial theories, literary analysis, and socio-cultural inquiry to unravel the symbolic significance of the lungi as a representation of subaltern voices. Haq strategically uses the lungi to challenge power imbalances, resist sartorial hegemony, and advocate for sartorial equality in the face of globalization. The research method includes qualitative analysis, theoretical engagement, and empirical evidence, aligning with postcolonial scholars such as Gramsci and Guha. The article underscores the poem's role in breaking down divisive dichotomies and promoting democratic ideals. Through theoretical insights and close textual analysis, the study explores how the lungi, as a symbol of the underclass, resists aggressive modernism, demanding equal standing in the postcolonial and globalized reality. The poet's call for "sartorial equality" transcends fashion, becoming a rallying cry for broader societal equality and recognition of marginalized voices. The research concludes by positioning Haq's "Ode on the Lungi" as a powerful articulation of the subaltern voice within the complexities of postcolonial discourse.

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1. Introduction

Kaiser Haq's *Ode on the Lungi*, a poetic masterpiece, explores deeper dimensions of lives in a very comprehensive manner. Haq, a much-reputed professor of English at Dhaka University, is popularly known as the South Asian poet tackling important issues like marginality, subalternity, and postcolonial problems. In *Ode on the Lungi* the subaltern voice emerges as a potent force challenging entrenched dichotomies and power imbalances in our interconnected world. Haq strategically employs the symbol of the lungi, a locally crafted garment rich in cultural significance, to advocate for its global recognition.

Beyond its textile intricacies, the poem serves as a manifestation of democratic ideals, striving to erase divisive postcolonial discourse and bridge the ever-present gap between the local and the global. By navigating the complex relationships between culture, power, and resistance within the context of globalization, the poem takes inspiration from the Subaltern Studies Group's bottom-up historiography, providing a platform for the socially, politically, and economically marginalized individuals who linger at the societal fringes. This research, entailing theoretical insights and critical analysis, endeavors to unravel the ways in which the lunggi, as a symbol of the underclass, resists the encroachment of aggressive modernism and sartorial hegemony. In doing so, it staunchly demands equal standing, respect, and a rightful place in our intricate postcolonial and globalized reality.

Aggressive modernism disorder can refer to the negative impacts that arise from the excessive or too aggressive application of modernism in society. Modernism, as a cultural and social movement that emphasizes progress, innovation, and rationality, brings many positive changes, but can also cause problems if applied without considering the social and environmental context. To overcome this disorder, it is important for society to apply the principles of modernism in a balanced way, paying attention to aspects of sustainability, inclusivity, and respect for cultural diversity.

Not only about Aggressive modernism disorder, fashion hegemony refers to the dominance of a particular culture in determining the trends, standards, and norms of dress that a society follows. This concept involves the power and influence that a particular group or country has in shaping and directing fashion preferences globally. The influence of Western culture, especially that originating from fashion centers such as Paris, Milan, New York, and London, is often the main reference in the global fashion industry. The styles and designs from these countries are widely adopted in various parts of the world.

Both of these global disruptions are also interesting topics in the world of literature, as in Kaiser Haq's poem *Ode on the Lunggi*. In Kaiser Haq's poem "Ode on the Lunggi," the theme of globalization is subtly woven into the fabric of the ode, reflecting both its impact and the disruption it causes. Here are some points that highlight the poem's message about the disruption of globalization.

Overall, "Ode on the Lunggi" by Kaiser Haq highlights the disruptions of globalization through changes in production methods, shifts in cultural identity, and the complexities introduced into daily life. The poem captures a sense of nostalgia for simpler times while acknowledging the ongoing relevance of traditional symbols like the lunggi in a rapidly changing world. This shows that poetry is a form of representation of the real world (Lestari, 2017).

Poetry as a representation of real life allows us to see the world through a more artistic and reflective lens. Through well-chosen and meaningful words, poetry can connect individual experiences with the collective experience of humanity, helping us understand and experience life in a more profound way. Poetry has the unique power to connect individual experiences with the collective experience of humanity. This is because poetry is able to capture the essence of the universal human experience and convey it through language that is full of emotion and meaning. Poetry as a bridge between individual and collective experiences shows how powerful language is in uniting us as humans. Through poetry, we can understand and feel the experiences of others, build empathy, and strengthen our human bonds. Poetry allows us to celebrate our differences while recognizing the similarities that connect us all.

2. Method

The methodology employed in this study follows a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to explore the intricate dimensions of Kaiser Haq's poetic masterpiece, *Ode on the Lungi*. The methodology integrates theoretical frameworks rooted in postcolonial studies with literary analysis, socio-cultural inquiry, and theoretical engagement. The primary objective is to unravel the symbolic significance of the lungi as a focal point for amplifying subaltern voices, understanding its role in resisting sartorial hegemony and advocating for sartorial equality in the face of postcolonial challenges. The study utilizes a combination of qualitative research methods, including close textual analysis of Haq's poem, exploration of relevant theoretical concepts in postcolonial studies, and an examination of socio-cultural contexts that influence the symbolic representation of the lungi. The analysis is underpinned by theoretical insights from postcolonial scholars such as Antonio Gramsci and Ranajit Guha. The study also draws on empirical evidence, such as real-world events like the lungi activism in response to societal stereotypes, to demonstrate the practical implications of Haq's poem. Furthermore, the research adheres to the guidelines outlined in the APA 7th manual for citation and references, ensuring academic rigor and consistency in the documentation of sources used in this paper. The inclusion of a list of references at the end of the article enhances the transparency and traceability of the sources cited in the study, contributing to the scholarly integrity of the research.

3. Result and Discussion

The focal point of the discussed poem revolves around expressing the subaltern voice through the symbolism of a lungi—a locally crafted garment formed by vertically stitching a rectangular piece of fabric to create a textile tube. The poet advocates for the global recognition of the lungi, emphasizing its prevalence among a population exceeding that of the USA at any given time. Despite its inherently subaltern nature, the poet contends that the lungi deserves equal status and respect alongside other popular Western costumes. In doing so, the poem becomes a manifestation of the poet's democratic ideals. As Hossain says: *Ode on the Lungi* is an exploration of the fact that democracy is still an unknown phenomenon in many instances. Haq's expression of democratic sentiment lends him the place of a true vanguard of democratic ideal (2013, p. 3).

It also seeks to eliminate the divisive dichotomies that are common in postcolonial discourse: the division between 'us' and 'them' (which stand for the developed West and the supposedly backward non-West), the power relations between hegemony and subalternity, and—possibly most importantly—the line between the local and the global.

Within the realm of postcolonial theory, the term 'subaltern' stands as a subject of extensive debate and discussion. Postcolonial Studies (2016) defines: "Subaltern, meaning 'of inferior rank', is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci (1930-2) to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class" (Mambrol, 2016). The anthology adds: "Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and the groups denied access to 'hegemonic power'" (Mambrol, 2016). A definition of hegemony is now required by the definition. Antonio Gramsci writes that hegemony is the power of the ruling class to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all. To put it another way, hegemony denotes cultural dominance. Subalternity and clothing are two areas where cultural

dominance is evident. Certain clothes are regarded as superior to others in cultures where dominance exists (Gramsci, 2004, p. 673).

It was largely inspired by the observations of Marxist cultural critic Antonio Gramsci and broadly describes people or social groupings that do not belong to the dominant power structures of the West and its colonies. As a result, these people find themselves cut off from the social, political, economic, and geographic cores of a civilization. As Kafeel Ahmed Choudhury says:

In postcolonial theory, the term ‘subaltern’ is a much-debated concept. It is mainly derived from Marxist cultural critic Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and it generally identifies those people or social groups who are outside the hegemonic power structures of the West and its colonies and therefore, are excluded socially, politically, economically and geographically from a society’s centre-stage. (2013, p. 62)

However, a paradigm shift occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s when a group of South Asian historians, collectively forming the Subaltern Studies Group, embarked on a novel approach to historiography. Departing from the traditional narrative centered on the colonizer, they pioneered a history crafted from the bottom up — from the standpoint of the colonized. Their objective was to amplify the voices of the masses, those residing at the societal peripheries, distinct from the social and economic elites. In alignment with this approach, Kaiser Haq, through his poem *Ode on the Lungi*, undertakes the task of providing a voice to those socially, politically, and economically marginalized individuals who, in their modest lungis, are often subjected to societal ridicule. Haq’s poetic endeavor aligns with the broader movement to offer representation and recognition to those living at the fringes of society, challenging conventional narratives and perspectives.

The principal aim of this study is to examine the ways in which the lungis, as a symbol of the underclass, fend off the aggressive modernism that is encroaching on them under the façade of globalization. This international force is always pushing and enforcing Westernized and upper-class cultural components. Examples of this include fashion, which includes clothing and makeup, as well as the ubiquitous impact of corporations such as Coca-Cola, KFC, and Pizza Hut. Native American communities have deeply embedded these cultural imports, coupled with the rise of fashion-focused events and nightclubs. Consequently, a particular economically affluent and educated ‘elite’ group, adopting and propagating these Western elements, tends to establish dominance akin to other foreign entities, thereby relegating their own people to subordinate or subaltern positions.

Disseminated via a variety of media channels, the Western cultural impact not only penetrates and modifies indigenous cultures, lives, and cognitive processes, but also gives rise to a class of indigenous people. Subaltern Studies pioneer Ranajit Guha might classify them as ‘elite’ within the framework of colonial historiography. As he says:

The term ‘elite’ has been used in this statement to signify dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous. The dominant foreign groups included all the non-Indian, that is, mainly British officials of the colonial state and foreign industrialists, merchants, financiers, planters, landlords and missionaries. (1988, p. 44)

The crucial issue now is: In this intricate situation, can the lungi, speaking for the subaltern, find a voice? The answer to this question may always be evasive and complex, reflecting the complex relationships between culture, power, and resistance in the context of globalization.

The problem persists, both within the society and, to some extent, visible externally—a lasting consequence of colonial history. The so-called 'elite' in former colonies often grapple with what can be termed as a 'colonial hangover' syndrome. This means that those who are backward, uneducated, downtrodden, politically excluded, and economically underprivileged are looked down upon by a more privileged class. This privileged group, comprising the educated, politically influential, and economically affluent, perceives themselves as superior to the common people.

This consciousness of being distinctly different is deeply embedded in the mindset, behavior, and actions of the privileged class, creating a sense of neo-imperialism. As Kaiser Haq rightly expresses in his poem, this reflects a contemporary reality where remnants of imperialistic attitudes persist, contributing to social disparities and an unjust social hierarchy. Haq's verse poignantly captures the enduring impact of colonialism on societal structures, shedding light on the complexities of postcolonial identity and the internalized power dynamics that sustain inequality in these former colonial regions.

Think too of neo-imperialism
and sartorial hegemony,
how brown and yellow sahibs
in natty suits crinkle their noses
at compatriots (even relations)
in modest lungis, (Haq, 2008, p. 140/ /Lines 49-54)

Walt Whitman, the well-known American poet who is revered as a defender of democracy, is jokingly mentioned by the poet. The poet envisions Whitman being asked to try on a lungi for a White House appointment rather than dressing in a traditional Western outfit. However, the amusing notion faces an anticipated rejection, as the 'laureate of democracy' would presumably favor a kilt over a lungi. The lungi, thought to be the clothing of non-white subalterns, stands in contrast to the kilt, which is linked with the West.

This whimsical scenario prompts some intriguing questions: How could a white man, conditioned to perceive the 'kilt' as superior, embrace the subaltern 'lungi' as his attire? Would his conscience allow him to transcend cultural differences, or would it inevitably lead to a 'clash of civilizations'? However, Kaiser Haq, the poet, doubts the notion of any "clash of civilizations," a phrase established by Samuel P. Huntington. Such ideas of a "clash" between civilizations or cultures are denounced by him as essentially nonsensical:

Is it a clash of civilization?
The sheer illogicality of it –
the kilt is with ,us
but the lungi is with ,them!' (Haq, 2008, p. 140/ Lines 45-48).

Here, “us” and “them” are separated by an apostrophe because they allude to an Edward W. Said concept (1978). With these two terms, he has defined the occident and the orient. Whereas the Orient represents Asia and Africa, the Occident represents the colonists and the West. The marginalized are the colonized in a colony. It even alludes to them politically and culturally. According to Said in “Orientalism”: The Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period (2006, p. 24). In this instance, the local people wearing the lungis represent the oppressed and underprivileged. While the Westerner wears the kilt as a symbol of civilization, the subaltern wears lungi, which is an ethnic attire.

The poet responds with a forceful argument, pointing out that hundreds of millions of people wear lungis every day, under various names, from East Africa to Indonesia, such as sarong (a common ethnic dress in Indonesia), munda (also worn by Adivasis in Bangladesh and India), htamain (used in Myanmar), saaram (a traditional ethnic Korean dress), kitenge (an ethnic African dress), kanga (a vibrant African garment similar to the Indonesian sarong and mostly worn by women), and more. As Haq utters:

Hundreds of millions
from East Africa to Indonesia
wear the lungi, also known variously
as the sarong, munda, htamain, saaram,
ma’awaiis, kitenge. Kanga, kaiki
They wear it day in day out, (2008, p. 140/ Lines 24-29)

The poet underscores, with piercing clarity, that there are more persons in lungis than there are people in the United States of America at any given time. As Haq says: “there are more people in lungis, / than the population of the USA” (2008, p. 140/ Lines 33-34).

However, the poet expresses dismay at the encroachment of sartorial hegemony even within private spaces, recounting a disheartening incident involving a cousin in America who, upon returning home from work, would leisurely lounge in a lungi. This practice continued until his son, feeling embarrassed by his father, started concealing the so-called “ridiculous ethnic attire” (Haq, 2008, p. 141/ lines 68-73). This disheartening situation compels the poet to a point of desperation, sparking a fervent desire to advocate for the lungis’ equal importance and regard in all spaces. With pride, the poet boldly declares:

I AM A LUNGI ACTIVIST!
Friends and fellow lungi lovers,
let us organise lungi parties and lungi parades,
let us lobby Hallmark and Archies
to introduce an international Lungi Day
when the UN Chief will wear a lungi
and address the world. (Haq, 2008, p. 141/ lines 83-89)

An intriguing occurrence happened in Dhaka as a group of young guys, mostly dressed in different types of lungis, staged a lungi procession beside Gulshan and Banani to express outrage against the Baridhara Society's prohibition on lungi-clad rickshaw pullers in their upmarket area. The poet was forced to consider how his poem's words applied to actual events after receiving this unexpected reaction. As Kaiser Haq writes:

The Baridhara Society's decision to bar lungi-clad "rickshawallas" from their locality could be just as divisive, though mercifully devoid of violence. At the very least, it too roused city youths to use social media to organise a lungi parade, if not a lungi "mancha." It turned into a cheerful lungi sit-in and lungi fashion parade, but participants gracefully refused to engage the armed minions of the state. (2013, p. 1)

However, it's crucial to highlight that despite this resistance, those wearing lungis still face disdain not just from external forces but also from their own people who belong to the privileged 'elite' class—the local counterparts of the colonial brown sahibs. This scenario sadly underscores that, even after gaining independence and shedding the White sahibs, the colonies find themselves still under the influence of homegrown brown sahibs. It sheds light on the enduring power dynamics and social hierarchies that persist in the postcolonial landscape.

Kaiser Haq's poem endeavors to accord the subaltern or marginalized groups their rightful status in society. The concept of 'sartorial equality' it advocates is essentially a manifestation of broader equality among all people, grounded in a democratic ideal encapsulated in the phrase, "All clothes have equal rights" (Haq, 2008, p. 139/ line 14). According to the poet, the lungi, in this context, represents:

In short

the lungi is a complete wardrobe

for anyone interested:

an emblem of egalitarianism,

symbol of global left-outs

Raised and flapped amidst laughter

It's the subaltern speaking. (Haq, 2008, p. 143/ lines 155-161)

The poet doesn't express opposition to the use of specific garments in appropriate settings, such as jackets and ties in fancy dress parties or sports attire for the spirit of the game. His primary concern lies in advocating for 'sartorial equality,' as mentioned earlier. To pursue this objective, he selects the lungi as a symbol to resist 'sartorial hegemony.' In essence, it represents a broader effort to resist various forms of dominance. It mirrors the struggle of the marginalized, akin to the wretched of the earth, asserting their right to an equal share, dignity, and a rightful position across all spheres of life. The poem becomes a form of resistance against hegemony in all its manifestations.

The lungi is represented by the rectangular cloth tube, which is useful in a variety of weather situations and makes a valid claim to equitable treatment. One basic size fits everybody, and it may be

easily tied around the waist. In addition, an extra lungi may be easily folded into a scarf, fashioned into a Sikh turban, or worn as an Arab-style headdress. Its versatility also carries over to athletics, where it may be used as a G-string for sports like kabaddi and wrestling.

In situations of natural disasters, such as the frequent floods in Bangladesh, this subaltern cloth can take on a life-saving role. By hand-pumping air into it, the lungi transforms into a humble ark, capable of buoying and safeguarding lives. In essence, the lungi emerges as a ‘complete wardrobe,’ offering not just clothing but a multifaceted utility that spans various aspects of life, from fashion to sports and even emergency situations.

The simple lungi, in its unpretentious form, symbolizes equality on all fronts—be it in terms of humanity, society, politics, or economics. As a representation of the excluded and marginalized, often referred to by the poet as ‘global left-outs,’ the lungi confidently voices its plea for equal standing, respect, and a rightful place in the global community. Despite embodying the struggles of the overlooked subaltern, when proudly lifted and waved, the lungi becomes a compelling advocate for equality.

In practical terms, the poem meticulously works to break down the divisions that characterize our divided world today—whether social, political, economic, or cultural. By choosing the lungi as a spokesperson, the poet effectively channels the voice of the subaltern, expressing their desire for a respected position in our complex postcolonial and globalized reality. Undoubtedly, as a true symbol of the global left-outs, the lungi becomes a potent representation of the subaltern, loudly addressing societal inequalities.

4. Conclusion

Kaiser Haq’s poem *Ode on the Lungi* emerges as a poignant articulation of the subaltern voice within the intricate tapestry of postcolonial discourse. By employing the symbolism of the lungi, Haq advocates for the global acknowledgment of this locally crafted garment, challenging the prevailing dichotomies and power imbalances in our interconnected world. The research has delved into the resistance posed by the lungi against the encroachment of aggressive modernity and sartorial hegemony, shedding light on the broader socio-cultural implications of Western influence. Haq’s work not only highlights the enduring impact of colonialism on societal structures but also emphasizes the persisting challenges of neo-imperialism and internalized power dynamics within former colonies. The call for “sartorial equality” in the poem transcends mere fashion statements, becoming a rallying cry for broader societal equality and the recognition of marginalized voices. In essence, the humble lungi becomes a powerful symbol, representing the struggles and aspirations of the global left-outs, demanding equal standing, respect, and a rightful place in our complex postcolonial and globalized reality.

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