



Scented Dust: A Postcolonial Perspective on Colonial India

Ayesha Zahoor¹, Muhammad Ajmal Khan²

¹ Lecturer, Department of English, Government Ibne Ameer College, Jalal PurJattan, Gujrat, Pakistan.

Email: ayeshazahoor1994@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, GIFT University, Gujranwala, Pakistan. Email: ajmal@gift.edu.pk

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: June 15, 2022

Revised: June 29, 2022

Accepted: June 29, 2022

Available Online: June 30, 2022

Keywords:

Post-colonialism
Colonial Encounters
Scented Dust
Colonial India
Colonialism

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ABSTRACT

Malik Feroze Khan Noon's novel *Scented Dust* provides a postcolonial perspective in retrieving India's local history, indigenous traditions, and social norms during colonial times. By asserting the cultural distinctiveness of India, Noon has negated not only European perceptions of the East as a mysterious, exotic, superstitious, irrational, and barbaric place but also countered European purport of superiority and centrality. The novel unfolds the disparity between colonizers and the colonized regarding their social, political, and cultural affiliations. By revisiting the historical colonial encounters represented in the novel, this study showcases colonizers' fallacious treatment of the natives as uncivilized and brings out the true colours of Indian culture and heritage. It has been found that the novelist has been able to distinctly provide a postcolonial perspective on colonial India by impartially documenting the colonial encounters between the Indians and the British.

© 2022 The Authors, Published by /RASD. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Corresponding Author's Email: ajmal@gift.edu.pk

1. Introduction

Post colonialism refers to the cultural impact and the dominance of British power from colonization to the present day (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002). For Terry Eagleton, in recent times, postcolonial studies have become the most flourishing sector of cultural studies, and that can be considered the essential breakthrough in cultural theory (Eagleton, 2003). Postcolonial literature instigates the subversive scrutiny of the colonial relationships and is a form of writing set to resist the colonial perspective in one way or another (Boehmer, 2005). This relationship between the colonized and the colonizers constantly ignites the interest of the postcolonial writers. According to Ashcroft et al. (2002), the colonizers always tend to maintain control of the colonized in political, social and imaginative spheres (p. 28). The works of western writers have been a tool in strengthening this control over the East. According to Said (1978), the culture of Europe gained its power, strength and identity by setting itself off against the orient as a kind of replacement (p. 3). For Said, this style of thought was based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the orient and the occident, but this understanding of the orient was not derived from first-hand observations; instead, it was a sort of European illusion about the eastern cultures and customs (p. 4). In this respect, the idea of the postcolonial theory emerged from the inability of the European intellectual approach to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of postcolonial writing (Iqbal & Rehan, 2020).

The study revisits the East-West encounters regarding culture, politics and social structures as portrayed and narrated by Noon in the given novel. Born in 1893 in Lahore, Noon belonged to a landowning family in Punjab. He started his career as a lawyer but soon shifted towards politics and served as Prime Minister of Pakistan from October 1957 to December 1958. His seminal work, *Scented Dust*, not only gives the authentic representation of Indian culture but also furnishes a counter-narrative to colonial/ orientalist narratives constructed

against India and its people. In his essay, "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," Chinua Achebe wrote about his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, that it was an atonement for the African past and homage to its prodigal son. The same can be said about *Scented Dust*, as it serves this purpose. The novel is a long story set in the background of early twentieth-century India and summarizes its political and social situation under the British Raj. It covers colonialism's psychological, social, cultural and political impacts on the colonized. Noon's detailed description of the characters from England and India gives us an insight into their unequal relationships/statuses in erstwhile colonial India. In the novel's preface, Noon reveals that the idea of writing this novel occurred to him during his encounter with an American lady who asked him to suggest a good book written by a native Indian writer about Indian culture. Thus, the novel is intended to give a panoramic view of Indian culture, politics, social structures and events happening in colonized India in the early twentieth century.

Ashcroft et al. (2002) maintain that the function of postcolonial literature is to foreground natives' consciousness of their culture by asserting its difference from the imperial centre (p. 4). In the novel, Noon excels in making regional consciousness the critical aspect of his writing and representing native culture and its norms and values in a very unproblematic way. Whether Noon's intention was only to give a context to colonialists' perceptions or provide a literary resistance to colonial narratives, the book is groundbreaking as it impartially documents colonial occurrences. He unfolded the disparity between economic, cultural and social conditions of colonizers and colonized in colonial India, which offers the researchers a chance to revisit the colonial encounters. In this endeavor of documenting the historical happenstances, nothing goes amiss in the eyes of the novelist, be it the exploitation of native resources in the hands of colonizers or subjects' struggles towards the decolonization of their culture. Such postcolonial thematic parallels are woven throughout the novel. Consequently, the study argues that Noon's book is a postcolonial piece of literature written against the backdrop of colonial India. To support it, *The Empire Writes Back* has been employed as the critical framework for interpreting the novel as a postcolonial literary text.

The significance of the study lies in the fact that Noon was not merely an important literary figure but a significant political leader as well. Unfortunately, his literary work has remained neglected by researchers for a long time. This study pioneers to draw the attention of researchers to his other works to explore how his writings are an instance of 'writing back to the imperial centre'. Moreover, the chosen work gives such a bonafide portrayal of Indian society that it sometimes seems less of a fiction and more of a history book. The details of the tax system, village sports, education or lack of it, traditions, faith and values have been encompassed with such originality and locality that an occidental discourse can hardly surpass. The current study is expected to arouse further interest in Noon's writings in general and their role in resisting colonial discourse in particular. The value system of the Indian people has always been a treasure that they take pride in, and the novel has given this aspect of India its rightful significance.

2. Literature Review

The Empire Writes Back by Ashcroft et al. (2002) is the book which is credited with introducing post coloniality as praxis and critique. By taking the wide range of postcolonial texts and establishing their relation to the more significant issue of postcolonial culture, the authors and editors of this seminal work have opened up a debate about the inter-relations between literature, culture, power and language. They rightly argue that the emergence of postcolonial discourse as one of the critical fields in the study of literature and language in recent times has challenged the ongoing cultural hegemony of the west over the rest (p. 6). Four postcolonial writing models are described in the book to account for the distinct characteristics of postcolonial texts. First, national or regional models, as the name suggests, focus on the regional culture, and the second is the race-based models linked with identifying specific shared race characteristics such as racial inheritance. Then comes the comparative models of varying complexity, which engage with comparing two or more texts, and lastly, the comprehensive comparative models in which different features such as syncreticity and hybridity are considered essential for investigating postcolonial texts (p. 14). Finally, the book serves as a framework for the undertaken study in which the researchers strive to designate Noon's book, *Scented Dust*, as a postcolonial construct in colonial times.

Scented Dust, published in 1941, is a work which Tariq Rahman (1999) described as forgotten or foregone by the burden of history. This book presents a bird's eye view of India, and Rahman (1999) wonders whether the novel is written to provide context to the colonists' perceptions about India or the novelist aims to make colonial subjects visible. The novel has remained a less celebrated work because no significant research has been done on this so far. The scarcity of research validates the present undertaking. The researchers maintain that the present research will not only prove fruitful in drawing attention to this remarkable work of Noon but would also support other researchers in their future endeavours to explore his works from the perspectives of postcolonial theory. In his creative writings, Noon has depicted both the subjugation of colonized and the dominance of colonizers.

Ashcroft et al. (2002) have illustrated different thematic parallels commonly found in postcolonial literature. The role of foreign culture in invading and dominating the natives lies at the heart of any postcolonial work. Similarly, the struggle for independence is considered a leading concern in postcolonial works (Ashcroft et al., 2002). *Scented Dust* encompasses all opportunities and threats felt by the colonizers. In the novel, this has been the primary subject of discussion between most of the characters, especially Goswami and Ali (p. 341). Notably, Noon had first-hand experience of indigenous culture, and he fully enriched his work with it. Sincere orientalist writers like Paul Scott, E. M. Forster and George Orwell saw the natives across a smoke screen trying to peek at the reality of colonial encounters. Noon sits comfortably on the other side with the natives.

3. Research Methodology

Ashcroft et al. (2002) have inscribed that the National or Regional Model of postcolonial writings is usually based on sketching an accurate portrayal of the indigenous culture of the natives and its difference from colonial cultures. We argue that this model fully applies to the novel because the book is undeniably one of the earliest narrative descriptions of Indian history and culture during British colonization. From the description of the local taxation system to *bunyas* (moneylender) business, Noon never loses sight of any subject of importance and seems to be the symbolic flag bearer of the colonized east. Such factors categorize the novel as a postcolonial text that can be analyzed under the national or regional model of postcolonial writings. Textual analysis of the novel is employed to examine the work from the vantage point of postcolonial theory. Multiple qualitative tools such as definitions, explanations and interpretation have been used to carry out this research.

4. Scented Dust as a National Model of Postcolonial Writing

Postcolonial literature instigates the subversive scrutiny of colonial relationships and is a form of writing set to resist the colonial perspective in one way or another (Boehmer, 2005). According to Ashcroft et al. (2002), the development of postcolonial literature is seen through its correspondence to the stages of both regional and national consciousness, and it is this project that assists in ascertaining the differences between regional and imperial canons (p. 4). The idea of asserting the difference of national culture from imperial culture by rebutting the claims of exclusivity of the imperial centre is what seems to be the primary objective behind postcolonial writings: "Indeed, the postcolonial theory put forward the idea that colonial literature omitted the history of the colonized by silencing them" (Iqbal, 2021).

The book has attempted to represent Indian society from a native's perspective, which insinuates the foundation of postcolonial literature as Noon considers all the prevailing segments of contemporary society. Ashcroft et al. (2002) have stated that the journey of a European interloper through an unfamiliar landscape under the guidance of a native guide is found in a wide range of postcolonial texts (p. 27). As the novel is the answer to a foreign lady's query about any literature on India written by a native writer, Noon is the native guide who takes any reader, particularly the one unfamiliar with the local traditions and landscape, on the journey of exploring colonial India.

Jamalpur, the setting of the novel, is the village where Ali, the protagonist, lives with his parents. The same village is visited by Mr. Linclon, an important European character in the novel as a settlement officer and is described as a beautiful piece of land for it has a rainfall of about twenty-five inches throughout the year and also enjoys the beautiful sunshine almost throughout the year (p. 224). The atmosphere is typically rustic with the lush green fields, mud houses and the smell of cow dung that Mr. Lincoln once described as "unpleasant and

sublime" (p. 148). Mostly, the shopkeepers in the villages would stack things in empty kerosene tins or boxes, and the buyers from these shops were farmers' wives who rarely paid any cash. Instead, they either borrowed things or paid in terms of cotton or corn (p. 84). It shows that the barter system originating from old times was still in practice in these villages. We also see that Noon has securitized these villagers' behaviour and lifestyles, and through his reportage of apparently very small actions, he has mirrored a realistic picture of his contemporary society. While documenting the modesty and shyness of village girls, he states that they strictly followed customs such as not talking about their marriages in public or even looking at their dowry articles (p. 192). Noon's description of a village gives us the idea of a society which might be rustic but contented in its nature. The book is brimming with important images that vividly portray the early twentieth-century colonial India's social milieu. For Ashcroft et al. (2002), such tendencies in postcolonial literature are an important source for constructing postcolonial writers' national identity (p. 16).

The orientalist's ideologically stereotyping of India as a barbaric society is being countered by the representation of a society that might not be much equipped with advanced knowledge but surely knew how to make a way out of life's challenges with limited resources. The native characters that Noon portrays mainly belong to two different religious groups, Hindus and Muslims. The similarities they shared and the diversity they showed based on their religious associations have been a subject for exploration in this novel. For example, in a scene where Chandra (a Hindu lady) and Gulshan (a Muslim lady) are sitting and chit-chatting, Noon reports that Chandra had covered her head with *Saree*, but Gulshan was covering her head with *utla* (head cover) because it was uncommon for women to go before men without covering their heads (p. 112). In such a small incident, he not only described a social practice but also distinguished one religion from the other. Noon's dexterity with such brevity in the whole novel captivates the readers' attention. Ashcroft et al. (2002) state that studying national traditions is the first essential stage of rejecting the centre's exclusivity claims (p. 16). The same process of self-apprehension is reflected in Noon's way of documenting the simpler incidents, giving a very keen insight into the customs, behaviour and traditions of different characters in the novel. Fanon (2007) also recognized that the colonized need to assert their indigenous cultural traditions to retrieve their repressed past histories (p. 169). To express the culture and tradition of his place and people, Noon has retrieved history without directly aiming at it.

Noon uses Goswami's character as a mouthpiece to trace the origin of Indian history, particularly Hinduism. In his retrospect of ancient Hinduism, Goswami recounts Vedic Indo-Aryans, the ancestors of Hindus (p. 319). Goswami tries to convince his fellows that whatever good they find in Vedas should be adopted and whatever seems to cease their progress should be disregarded as impractical (p. 324). Like Goswami, Sher Khan's character aids the writer in elaborating Islamic ideology. When Sher Khan shares different tales associated with the saints buried at Ajmer, Pakpattan, Taunsa, Lahore and Sirhind, he introduces the indigenous Muslim culture and belief system to the readers. Fanon (2007) believes that retrieving history is an effective remedy for the colonized, for in doing so, they not only bring to the limelight their glorious past buried under colonial discourse but also extenuate themselves from their current misery and deprivation. The novelist has described Indian history and culture very sensibly, and the acuteness of his observation distinguishes his text from the colonizers' texts which, usually unfamiliar with the local ethos and manners, can be categorized as orientalist's ideological manifestations.

5. The postcolonial struggle for Indian independence

McLeod (2007) has explained that the simultaneous act of hate and dependence of the colonizers on the colonized always makes their relationships complex. He adds that for its success, colonialism always needed the strength of the colonized people and depended upon their skills and energies to meet the challenges of the workforce in colonial settings (p. 3). Ashcroft et al. (2002) have described a few thematic parallels in different postcolonial texts. For example, the theme of celebrating the struggle towards independence at the community and individual level is a shared and recurring theme found in diverse postcolonial works (p. 26). For them, the relationship between colonizers and colonized posits an essential question, particularly about the possibility of decolonizing the imperially or colonially celebrated way of writing literature (p. 28). In this respect, in his first encounter with Mr. Lincoln, Ali, dressed up in European clothes, defies the generally accepted respect practices that his father, Khadim

and other villagers used to give to the white people as he enters Lincoln's camp with his shoes on. He sits on the chair without asking while his father stands to show respect to the white officer. When asked about his plans for the future, he very defiantly tells Mr. Lincoln that he does not need a job because he wants to join politics and work for the independence of his country (p, 134).

To Boehmer (2005), the symbol of colonizers' narratives is the projection of their positive self-image in direct contrast to the colonized. In an ironically constrained realm of the Empire, any disagreement that emerged would always be due to the colonizer's desire to shape the world in his image. "His drama, the colonial drama, was the narrative. Narrative endorsed the struggles and triumphs of his self-making" (63). The same applies to the important colonial officer, Mr. Lincoln, who demands uncompromised submission from the Indian people. Nevertheless, Ali blatantly shows resistance against colonialism and tells Mr. Lincoln that Indians would no longer accept the English as autocratic rulers and that they already had their representatives in the parliament. The invaders had to accept the local ministers as their bosses (p. 140). To him, the bravest thing to do is to give the white men a piece of his mind whenever and wherever possible (p. 140). He is even angry with his father for showing unnecessary politeness to Mr. Lincoln. He is not even happy with his father's coveted job as village headman. In fact, for Ali, the job entails thankless slavery and drudgery (p. 29). He debates with his father on that issue and asks why he prefers to serve white people when he could get his livelihood from working on his piece of land (p. 32). His defiance underscores the indigenous desire to fight back against imperialism for the sake of independence.

At one time, Ali offensively retorts back to his father and asks him if he thinks a dog who is well-fed in chains is any better than the one who is free and can hunt as much as he likes (p. 35). Ali's repulsion about being enslaved or colonized lies at the heart of this postcolonial text. He further remarks that if he is to be a follower, he would like his liberty to be curbed by his people, not by some foreign invaders (p. 36). Goswami's repeated maxim, "How can we make our motherland free?" (p. 295) is a burning representative question of postcolonial literature. This obsession with freedom and history nurtures hopes for a better future. Fanon (2007) asserts that the colonized feel ensnared in wretchedness in which their colonizers have caged them by constantly reminding them of their inferiority. The colonized delve deeper and deeper into their discovery of something which can give them hope and redeem their sense of self-hatred and abdication. It may be argued that through Ali, the protagonist of the novel, and Goswami, the leading Hindu character in the novel, Noon has made the struggle for independence a recurring theme of his text as it was with real life in colonial India.

6. Switching Language in *Scented Dust*

Ashcroft et al. (2002) have maintained that language is a material practice governed and determined by a complex web of experiences and social conditions in which it is used (p. 40). Hybridized and syncretic nature of postcolonial experiences prohibits the possibility of standard code in the use of language by postcolonial writers. For Ashcroft et al. (2002): "the process by which previously distinct linguistic categories, and, by extension, cultural formations, merges into a single new form" (p. 14) is known as postcolonial syncretism. Although the infusion of multiple languages was earlier seen as a cultural threat by colonized writers/communities, it was later accepted and used as a tool to dismantle the authenticity of imperial or canonical language. Noon's text celebrates the possibility of using multiple language expressions to undermine the authority of English by indicating its inability to truly communicate the local ethos and culture-specific enunciations in the context of colonial India. It makes his novel a reflection of postcolonial hybrid text in terms of language use.

Noon has used language as a tool to dismantle the hegemony of the imperial centre. In fact, for Ashcroft et al. (2002), language is a medium of power, and its function in postcolonial writings is classified by how a postcolonial writer seizes the language of the centre and then replaces it in such a way that would fully be adapted to the benefit of the colonized populace (p. 38). Furthermore, indigenous postcolonial writers tend to utilize the local languages to assist them in expressing extensively different culture-specific experiences. Hence, abrogation of the privileged centrality of English and the employment of language variance in the text are the ways to dismantle the authenticity of the centre in postcolonial works (Ashcroft et al.,

2002). The novelist's use of 'untranslated words' as a language appropriation technique works to dismantle the supposed authenticity of English because the main objective of postcolonial literature lies in asserting its own culture. The use of 'untranslated' words in an English text is understood as a linguistic strategy to convey a sense of cultural distinctiveness. This technique not only acts to signify cultural differences but also helps assert the role of discourse in interpreting different cultural concepts and connotations (Ashcroft et al., 2002). For example, the word *Salaam*, a traditional greeting among Muslims, has been assimilated into the text and is frequently used by different characters in the novel. Another frequently used word in the novel is *Mem Sahib*. Although Sher Khan, also called *khidmatgar* (serviceman) in more than one instance, would call his master Mr. Lincoln as *Sahib* and his wife, Dorothy as *Mem Sahib*, this insertion of local terminology by the writer works as a cultural signifier in the text, which is otherwise dominated by the English language. It is a general belief that words embody the culture from which they are derived, so the use of untranslated words in English text is a way of rejecting the notion of the centrality of English, and they also hold power and presence of the culture they signify (Ashcroft et al., 2002).

Code switching is one of the most common techniques that the postcolonial writers opt to inscribe the alterity that takes effect by the process of appropriation. By switching between vernacular and foreign languages, postcolonial writers strive to install cultural distinctiveness in their writings (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Noon's code-switching method mostly comprises native/local proverbs and maxims from vernacular languages translated into English. This move on the writer's behalf shows the richness of the native language and the wisdom of its speakers, whose wisdom-laden maxims can effectively counter the colonial narratives based on stereotyping the natives/locals as uncivilized and barbaric masses. A few examples of code switching from the book are as follows: *jatharami Khudakochor le gai* (if a farmer intends to hide the truth, he pretends thieves have stolen the God) (p. 216). Khadim uses this maxim while explaining to Mr. Lincoln the ongoing tussle between moneylenders and farmers. He wants to tell him that the latter is not always as innocent as they seem to be and that the farmers also take a lot of beating in the matter and never willingly pay moneylenders on time. Likewise, Goswami remarks, "we want our motherland free even if it means that we have to give up our religious dogmas and habits. A sinking man must do his best to take whatever support he can get from a floating straw" (p. 312). To express his idea more vividly, Goswami switches the code and uses the Punjabi proverb, *Mardi kinakardi* (a woman threatened with death, what she will not do?) (p. 312).

In another instance, Sher Khan and Mr. Lincoln discuss the financial challenges that the farmers faced and what measures the government could take to resolve them. When Lincoln disregards Sher Khan's suggestions as impractical and miscalculated, he, like any faithful servant, accepts his mistake and praises the discernment of his master by quoting a Persian proverb: "My bad, of course. I have not been able to think it this way. After all, not everyone can think as deeply as you can, Sir. We have a saying, *Bazurgi Ba AqalAst Nah Ba Sal*, (Wisdom does not go in accordance with one's age, but it goes in accordance with what has been put into his head by God)" (p. 223). All these examples of 'untranslated' words and 'code switching' illustrate how Noon's novel politically treats the language and thus contributes to its becoming a postcolonial text, lubricated with maxims and norms of the native Indians. Ashcroft et al. (2002) describe language variance as a metaphoric entry for the local culture into the English text. The adaptation of appropriated English is the insertion of the truth of culture into the text (p. 52). Hence, language variance in the novel might be metaphorically signifying the culture and traditions of the novelist's homeland occupied by the foreign invaders.

7. Conclusion

Scented Dust manifests Noon's remarkable observation of colonial encounters and the disparity between colonizers and colonized in colonial India. He has added extensive chunks of documentary material and language variance that consequently distinguishes his book from the canonical English texts. By reclaiming history, asserting the cultural distinctiveness of indigenous society, and unraveling the true colour of colonial relationships, Noon has successfully demonstrated the working of Indian society during colonial times. From colonizers' role in serving the imperial power to their mistreatment of the colonized, and from religious

conflicts between Hindus and Muslims to their combined resistance against foreign rule, Noon has done justice to the dimensions of the socio-political milieu of the colonized India.

References

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2002). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Boehmer, E. (2005). *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bowman, W., Chiteji, F., & Greene, J. M. (2016). *Imperialism in the Modern World: Sources and Interpretations*. New York: Routledge.
- Eagleton, T. (2003). *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fanon, F. (2007). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Iqbal, H. M. Z. (2021). Orientalizing the Orient: A Critique of Colonial Encounters. *Al-Hikmat: A Journal of Philosophy, 41*, 09-22.
- Iqbal, H. M. Z., & Rehan, N. (2020). Ambivalent colonial encounters: A postcolonial rereading of Mircea Eliade's Bengal nights. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review, 4(2)*, 32-43.
- McLeod, J. (2007). *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (Vol. 182). London: Routledge.
- Noon, M. F. K. (1941). *Scented Dust*. Lahore: Gulab Singh and Sons Publishers.
- Rahman, T. (1999). *A History of Pakistani Literature in English: 1947-1988*. Lahore: Vanguard.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism: Western concepts of the Orient*. New York: Pantheon Books.