



## Class Struggle and Theocratic Subalternity in The Spinner's Tale by Omar Shahid Hamid: A Postcolonial Marxist Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Omar Shahid Hamid's influential work 'The Spinner's Tale' through the lens of Postcolonial Marxism, highlighting the intersection of subalternity and theocracy in Postcolonial Pakistan. The research explores themes like power dynamics, class struggle, hegemony, state-imposed ideologies, and religion through two central characters – Omar Abbasi and Sheikh Uzair Ahmed. This study utilizes thematic analysis to explore class struggle, power dynamics, state-sanctioned ideologies, and theocratic subalternity. The study aims to highlight how state institutions like the police perpetuate social inequalities using Gramsci's (2007) concept of hegemony and Althusser's (2005) concept of Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs). This class division assisted the rise of extremism as a form of resistance to gain control and agency. The research claims that the novel dismantles the dichotomy of elite and lower working-class people or the colonizer and the colonized subjects, revealing the amalgamation of violence, ideology, and identity. The findings reveal that subalternity is imposed on the lower class by the prevailing forces while aiding the interests of the elite. This research contributes to the broader postcolonial narratives by enlarging the concept of subalternity beyond oppression through economic means and placing it in a theocratic framework. Finally, The Spinner's Tale reflects the fractured Pakistani society.

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## 1. Introduction

Colonialism refers to the physical control of other people's land and resources. The process of colonization is done systematically and systemically. Colonizers construct a discourse that is backed by state power, while common people willingly comply with the powerful discourse. That's how the colonizers exported all the raw materials from the subcontinent to their mother country, and their industries flourished. While they were relinquishing their role, they needed people to help them in completing their mission. So, they produced a class who were black in skin but white in thinking and behaviour. Colonizers restructured the economies of the colonized states before independence, and these states are still subject to external influences and interventions from Western powers, particularly Pakistan. The whole world is almost postcolonial; however, only the physical domination has ended, cultural dominance is still present. As Loomba (2015) states in her book, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, that there are countries that may be postcolonial as they are formally independent, and neo-colonial as they are economically dependent at the same time, and unfortunately, Pakistan is one of them. Colonialism is being duplicated within Pakistan. The elite or bourgeois class replicates colonialist views of people who are lower than them in terms of class, status, gender, or race, as they consider them subalterns, uncivilized, barbaric, and backward. In other words, they are like rebellious people who need to be brought into line with

the rest of the country. Many people living in Pakistan are still subject to the oppressions put in place by colonialism.

Omar Shahid Hamid is a senior police officer of the Police Service of Pakistan. He is the son of Shahid Hamid, who was the managing director of K-Electric, murdered in the Defence Housing Authority. The *Spinner's Tale* is his second novel, published in 2015, and won two prizes: Karachi Literature Festival Fiction Prize and Italy Reads Pakistan prize, both in 2017. The novel is selected as a case study because it is based on the real-life event of the kidnapping and murder of Daniel Pearl. The spinner's tale is the pictogram of Pakistani society, which makes it ideal for a postcolonial Marxist critique. The major themes in the novel are terrorism, extremism, identity formation, bureaucracy, and justice. The protagonist of the novel is ASP Omar Abbassi, who is a hardworking police officer and eventually a pawn of the state. His story embodies a terrifying depiction of how the state controls repression and abandonment. Omar is born into a humble family, and his ascension into the police shows that in postcolonial societies, limited opportunities are available to the lower and middle classes. He is the son of a schoolmaster from a rural background. He passes the civil services exams and joins the police force, yet due to the class division in society, he's considered 'other'. Another significant character in the novel is Sheikh Uzair Ahmed Sufi, a prisoner who comes from an elite family. He has attended the most esteemed institution of the country, named 'The School', which is also referred to as the 'Eton of the East'. Despite his turn to extremism, he had access to social networks and education, as he belongs to the privileged class that Omar could never achieve, even after all his diligence. This difference in their social classes shows the division of classes in postcolonial societies that are heavily dependent on the colonial legacies that continue to influence opportunities even today.

### **1.1. Research Questions**

1. In what ways does *The Spinner's Tale* problematize the interplay of class, theocracy, and subalternity?
2. How does the ideology of the elite class in *The Spinner's Tale* become a tool of control and reinforce subalternity in postcolonial Pakistan?

### **1.2. Significance of the Study**

This research is significant in literary and social contexts as it explores how this novel presents the intricate connections of class struggle and theocratic subalternity in Postcolonial Pakistan. Through a postcolonial Marxist lens, this research reflects how state apparatuses silence subaltern voices, which leads to the rise of religious counter discourses. The character of Omar reflects a corrupt and biased system where well-intentioned individuals become mere tools of the state. This research is relevant to the contemporary global world where extremism and manipulation in the name of religion are the center of political discourses. Therefore, the study offers a nuanced understanding of how postcolonial states regenerate identity and often challenge authority.

## **2. Literature Review**

Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Spinner's Tale* was published in 2015 in the genre of crime and political fiction. The novel explores themes of extremism, class struggle, identity formation and reformation, and radicalization, blending real-life incidents with fiction. Many reviewers and scholars have argued that the novel is based on the real event of the kidnapping and murder of journalist Daniel Pearl. Hamid depicts how the ideological and systemic forces transform the identities of the individuals. Sheikh Ahmed Uzair's transformation from a privileged schoolboy to an extremist shows the state-sanctioned ideologies that transform the identities of the people. Munir, Cheema and Bashir (2024) have analyzed the novel from a paracolonial lens, emphasizing how *The Spinner's Tale* criticizes the legacies of colonialism in Pakistan's socio-political context. They assert that the novel shows how the colonial mentality is internalized in the minds of Pakistani elites, most importantly, their obsession with the English Language and the Western values, leading to an identity crisis. This sense of 'unhomeliness' in both cultures leads to the complexities of forming an identity. Shakir (2022) infers Ausi's character as a symbol of resistance against the state's oppression. His physical and mental agonies symbolize the damage imposed by the powerful structures, placing him as a tool and an opponent of the forces that aim to control the subaltern bodies. This insight gives a deeper understanding of how personal psychological issues overlap with the discourses of resistance. The novel's

multidimensional approach provides a nuanced understanding of the socio-political realities of contemporary Pakistan. The key limitation of this study is its reliance on a single text, which may lead to overgeneralization of the findings. Moreover, the absence of interviews with the author may limit access to authorial intention. Further research could include interviews with authors and other stakeholders with similar texts.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Colonialism is an essential part of capitalist development. Some Marxist critics argue that colonialism is intermingled with capitalism; that's why it is highly exploitative. Marx and Engels (2023) considered colonialism as 'brutal precondition for the liberation of these (colonized) societies'. In *German Ideology*, Marx defines ideology in terms of false consciousness, as he believes these ideologies are only beneficial for the dominant social classes. He argues that the working class still believes that they'll get a reward for their hard work in heaven; this belief blinds them from seeing their own exploitation. In fact, ideologies and classes are interlinked. Morton (2007) argues that ideologies cut across different classes. He came up with the concept of hegemony in which power is achieved, maybe through force or consent, as there are individuals who willingly submit to be ruled. For Gramsci, 'ideologies are more than just reflections of material reality.' According to Althusser (2005), hegemony by force is achieved through 'Repressive State Apparatuses' such as the army and the police. He views ideology in terms of material effect in the context that 'an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices'.

This novel, *The Spinner's Tale*, can also be analyzed through the lens of theocratic subalternity. The word 'theocracy' was coined by Josephus Flavius in the first century AD. Initially, people were aware of only three kinds of government: monarchy, aristocracy, and a chaotic form. However, this way of governance didn't fit the Jews. Josephus argued that Jews were governed under a different system, which was theocracy. "Theocracy is a form of government in which God is recognized as a supreme civil ruler." (Marty, 2000). It refers to the idea of forming a government based on God's words present in the Bible. Later on, theocracy became very common, and people formed a perspective that this sort of government is ruled by religious leaders, where everything is allowed in the name of religion, for them, as the king was seen as an absolute authority or representative of God. This idea has been linked with the term 'subaltern', which comes from Antonio Gramsci, mainly referring to the people who are not part of hegemonic power. In the essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak (2023) uses the term 'subaltern' to refer to the people who are so marginalized and subjugated that they are systemically silenced. They are not voiceless; rather, their voices are silenced and erased when they try to raise their voices. So any discourse coming from the subalterns would already be mediated by someone more authoritative. Spivak (2023) bases her argument on Marx's distinction between *Vertreten* and *Darstellen*. The former refers to the political representation, which is speaking on someone's behalf, while the latter is re-presenting someone. She argues that Western critics state that they are representing the subaltern; however, they are also firming up the power dynamics that are subjugating them. She depicts that subaltern women are doubly marginalized as they face colonialism's supremacy along with patriarchal domination.

### **4. Research Method**

I have adopted a qualitative research method to conduct a thematic analysis of the class struggle, power dynamics, state-sanctioned ideologies, and theocratic subalternity as shown in the novel, *The Spinner's Tale*. Thematic analysis is a technique of analyzing qualitative data (information that is not numerical) to identify and understand recurring patterns or themes within that data. It involves systematically organizing and evaluating the content of data to identify similarities, differences, and meaningful patterns. The major themes such as religious extremism, state repression, hegemony, and ideological control are implied by close reading of pivotal passages.

#### **4.1. Analysis**

Omar has been posted to a remote area, the Nara desert in Sindh, away from authority. He's a product of the system that does not value his rural background. It depicts how RSAs marginalize officers from lower-class backgrounds without acknowledging their efforts for upward mobility. His position actually reflects the role he is playing within the state apparatus. He is quite professional in his work, yet it somehow aids the interests of the ruling class in

maintaining law and order. Despite his immense efforts, he's still part of that same deficient system and symbolizes how the state restructures the economy and the power structures that only benefit the elite while oppressing the lower classes. Omar is ideologically conditioned to accept the values of society. The way he is allocated to the desert in the Sindh shows how the elite class offers less authority and control to those who belong to the marginalized communities. Omar is the reflection of the postcolonial ideology, as he believes that the function of the state is to maintain peace and justice. However, the state itself implements class oppression, and it fails to highlight the inherent follies that pervade the political systems. The police force serves the elite class only as for the lower class, justice remains unserved. The police force is a major institution of the state that maintains authority over the subaltern classes and only benefits the elite class. Despite Omar's honesty, he is just a pawn of the state. His agency is quite limited as he is confined in a system that is inherently exploitative. From a Marxist perspective, this demonstrates how, in capitalist structures, the restrictions are only imposed on the lower classes. His agency is controlled by his role in a capitalist and a postcolonial country.

Sheikh Uzair is a prisoner, positioned as a radical figure in opposition to the authority, and has a different kind of influence over the people. His believers worship him as a religious leader, and they are eager to perform violent acts for him. Despite his imprisonment, he is able to control people around him. He is able to influence people who have more power than him like the prison guards. Apparently, he is being subjugated by the state; however, he holds more power and can easily destabilize the authority. His subjugation is intertwined with his theocratic ideology. His power to dominate his followers, and make plans to escape the prison or suicide bombing is a kind of radical resistance that directly opposes the interests of the state. "The Sheikh had convinced the man to become a suicide bomber and blow up the prison." (Hamid, 2015). His turn towards religious extremism and masterminding violent acts can be taken as an attempt to challenge the capitalist and colonialist structures and create a state that is free from the shackles of capitalism. His resistance portrays his theocratic ideology that attempts to form a different sort of dominance that would be based on religion rather than the state. He wants to rebel against the capitalist country that is material and ideological, and replace it with a theocracy. His agency functions outside of the state apparatus, as he has the ability to mobilize others. This shows that even if he is imprisoned, he is not powerless. However, instead of revolutionizing justly, he chooses the wrong path of violence and extremism. His radicalism can easily construct a new authority based on religion instead of class exploitation. Both characters embody different responses to the postcolonial, capitalist system. Omar, as a representative of RSA, shows the limitations placed on the officers based on their social backgrounds, who, despite their hard work, become the product of the same corrupt society that perpetuates injustice. Sheikh Uzair becomes the symbol of extremism as he shows resistance to the state by creating his own violent methods, including killing or suicide bombing. The novel highlights issues like class exploitation, authority, and resistance in postcolonial capitalist societies where the state remains in authority and decides which lives matter and which do not.

In *The Spinner's Tale*, the character of Sheikh Ahmed Uzair Sufi shows a harsh depiction of violence, religious extremism, and the subjugation of other communities under the act of theocratic ideology. A compelling instance of theocratic subalternity is where Sheikh Uzair beheads a pregnant foreign journalist. This very act of violence against the victim in the media reflects literal as well as symbolic terms of power dynamics within a religious regime. Sheikh Uzair Sufi is a religious extremist who concretizes theocratic power. His act of brutally beheading a pregnant woman sums up the true essence of theocratic subalternity. This concept refers to a phenomenon where violence, dehumanization, and the marginalization of 'other' are justified under the name of religion. In this scenario, the journalist, as she is not part of the same religious ideology, is distinct or 'other', whose voice is silenced and her existence is disposable under the expressions of theocratic order. The author has described the execution of the journalist in vivid detail as her life was taken publicly in front of a camera, creating a sense of fear. The journalist is shown as a weak, pregnant, and pleading for life, incorporating the ideal depiction of the subaltern- a marginalized woman who is part of a vicious cycle of the oppressive forces of the system, who refuses to acknowledge their stance or voice, so they are silenced. Her being pregnant adds another layer of vulnerability, reflecting the powerlessness of women under oppressive regimes where the system is not only controlling the bodies but

also erasing them when they don't conform to the established ideals of society. The image of the journalist aligns with (Spivak, 2023) idea of the subaltern woman as she is doubly silenced by the patriarch and the state.

The theocratic ideology plays an essential role in theocratic subalternity. They have built this ideology on the basis of a radical interpretation of Islam that perceives violence against the enemy as sacred under the name of 'jihad'. This belief places them as an opponent of the liberal values of the West, as the foreign journalist symbolizes the West. Her existence as a woman, as a foreigner, and as a journalist shows the freedom of expression, or freedom that is a curse to the oppressive forces exemplified by Sheikh Uzair. He justifies that it is not something personal; rather, it is an act of religious purification. His action paves a path for his followers to go to any extreme for the sake of the correct interpretation of religion. In this case, the journalist is not only murdered brutally but physically and symbolically erased from the canon, constructing her subaltern as her screams are silenced by the political and ideological oppressive forces that surround her in her final moments. This is the crux of theocratic subalternity in which religion is used as a powerful weapon to oppress, marginalize, subjugate, silence, and ultimately erase those 'others' who do not conform to the beliefs of the powerful people.

The media also plays a critical role in propagating the subalternity of the victim. The media replayed the footage of the beheading repeatedly without considering ethical implications. They turned that act into a spectacle to commodify the violence. This is highly important because it presents that even the media is actually being controlled by power. Media often conspires with superstructure, in Marx's terms, to maintain hegemony over the people to marginalize or silence them. For instance, the suffering of the pregnant woman became a consumable image, her autonomy and voice silenced permanently, and her death turned into a religious victory for the Sheikh and those who believe him. The way the media is showing graphic content repeatedly while disregarding ethics shows how the subjectivity of the woman is denied. This is an important aspect of theocratic subalternity, where the victims of violence are reduced to a mere spectacle, hence dehumanizing them. Sheikh is presented as a figure of power. To understand the concept of theocratic subalternity, Sheikh's calm and bold attitude while executing that woman is a crucial element. He remains unclenched in the act of violence, keeping his head high, representing the level of extremism with which he holds to strong religious ideologies. "Only he remained defiant. He had emerged from the building with his head held high, staring directly at the dozens of TV cameras that he knew would be there. He did it deliberately, so that they could capture the ferocity etched on his face, and those black eyes burning without a hint of remorse." (Hamid, 2015).

The execution is not merely an act of violence; rather, it dictates who has the power to control life and death, an assertion of power or authority that rejects to acknowledge any sort of higher moral standard other than his very own interpretation of the religion. After the incident, Sheikh shows no signs of remorse or guilt. Even in the face of this brutal act, it shows to what extent this religious extremism can isolate individuals from humanity. He is acting according to what he considers is the ultimate truth, as he recognizes himself as the weapon of God's will. This sense of being righteous is the characteristic the moral absolutism, in which individual lives are secondary while the theocratic government is supreme. His remorseless 'gaze' suggests that he thinks of himself as a judge who determines who is worthy enough to live and whose life is disposable. In Sheikh's black eyes, there is no uncertainty or reluctance. This absence of guilt reflects how intensely these oppressive regimes can become stuck in violence while executing subaltern bodies who are nothing more than disposable pawns in a vicious cycle of religious struggles. The act of execution works as a precaution to others, emphasizing the hierarchical superstructure that gives advantages to theocratic structures over the freedom of an individual. It also depicts the subjugation of women under such oppressive forces, where their voices are silenced in the name of religious control. The murder of a journalist symbolizes radicalization under theocratic influence, where people who challenge the established ideal of society are erased and their identities become mere representations of the conflicts. In this way, the journalist's death sums up the crux of theocratic subalternity in which theocratic authority not only rules the individuals but also silences their voices.

The execution of the journalist in *The Spinner's Tale* presents a harsh representation of theocratic subalternity where violence in the name of religion is used as a tool to reinforce

dominant ideologies, silencing opposition, and brutalizing those who refuse to conform to the dominant social order. In this violent act, the subaltern's life is disposed and her death becomes nothing more than a mere spectacle to assist the propaganda of extremism. The Sheikh thinks of himself as an authority who justifies violence in the name of divine will, while presenting a dichotomy of religion and power through which he subaltern or 'other' are reduced to consumable beings. The author is criticizing the dehumanizing effects of religious extremism and its capability to subjugate, silence, and murder those who refuse to obey.

## 5. Conclusion

This research has analyzed *The Spinner's Tale* from the postcolonial Marxist lens, emphasizing the themes of class struggle, authority of the state, theocracy, and subalternity. Through the analysis of characters like Omar and Ausi, the research discloses the hidden inequalities within Pakistan's socio-political landscape in which class and state ideologies join to form an identity of an individual in the society. The research also reveals that religion is used as a tool to reinforce subalternity. Sheikh's transformation from a privileged schoolboy to an extremist is not only based on his personal traumas but also on class struggles and ideologies imposed by the state. The way the prison guards get swayed by his religious speeches, it shows how theocracy challenges the hegemonic discourse in a postcolonial context. In addition, the novel also shows how the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), which are the police in the novel, silence the subaltern voices while aiding the interests of the elite. These institutions were made to maintain order in the country; however, these very institutions are perpetuating systemic inequalities. The novel criticizes the state for reinforcing class oppression, which can lead to 'jihad' or extremism as a resistance against the state.

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