

## Article

# Appropriation of Caste Spaces in Pakistan: The Theo-Politics of Short Stories in Sindhi Progressive Literature

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to understand the appropriation of spaces of Dalits by Sindhi progressive activists and short story writers in Pakistan as they construct, or rather undermine, caste at the anvil of religion and gender to reframe their own theo-political agenda premised on political Sufism or Sufi nationalism. I specifically discuss the narratives emergent of the three popular short stories that are reframed as having exceptional emancipatory potential for the Dalits. Assessing the emancipatory limits of the Sindhi progressive narrative, I argue that while the short stories purport to give fuller expression to religious, gender-based, and class dimensions of the problem, it elides the problem of casteism and the subsequent existential demand of Dalit emancipation. Given the hegemonic influence of local Ashrafia class, the internal caste frictions are glossed over through political Sufism or Sindhi nationalism. This gloss of politicized Sufism hampers Dalit agency and rather facilitates the appropriation of Dalit spaces by the Ashrafia class. This leads to the conclusion that the seemingly progressive literary-political narratives framed in theo-political idiom may offer to the oppressed no more than token sympathy, compassion, self-pity, and false pride in legends. Instead, they allow the appropriation of spaces and events of the oppressed, and the objectification of oppressed bodies by the oppressor.

**Keywords:** casteism; Ashrafia-Savarna patriarchy; appropriation of spaces; hegemony; progressive literature; everyday politics

## 1. Introduction

Sindhi<sup>1</sup> society and its rural culture is predominantly Sammat (*sammāt*) in its values. Sammat is the group of castes that share local political economy with Baloch castes (see Hussain 2019a, 2019b). At the periphery of this Sammat–Baloch nexus (mostly Muslims) live Dalit<sup>2</sup> communities (mostly Hindus in culture if not in religion). The construction and appropriation of local semi-historical narratives is one of the ways this discriminatory structural imbalance is regulated by Sammat, Baloch, and Sayed elite. This Muslim caste elite is generically referred to as Ashrafia (*ashrāfiyyā*)<sup>3</sup>, and of ‘upper caste’ Hindus as Savarnas. In Sindh, the province of Pakistan, the Ashrafia elite frames and presents its narrative through

<sup>1</sup> Sindh is a province of Pakistan having about 47.89 million population (Source: Bureau of Census Pakistan), and is located at 25.8943° N, 68.5247° E coordinates on the world map.

<sup>2</sup> Locally known as ‘Darawar’ (*darāwar*) and Scheduled Castes, there live estimated 2–6 million Dalits. Kolhi, Bheel, and Meghwar are three major Dalit castes that live in Sindh (see Hussain 2019a).

<sup>3</sup> Ashrafia class, i.e., Sayeds or the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and the castes claiming to be of Arab and Central Asian descent (see Hussain 2019a; Ahmad 2003; Kazuo 2004; Buehler 2012).

Sindhi<sup>4</sup>, the dominant language of the province<sup>5</sup>. The supposedly progressive section of Ashrafia elite frames its ideology in Sufi-nationalist idiom that I call political Sufism, ideology that asserts Hindu-Muslim harmony without necessarily confronting the issue of casteism and Dalit exclusion (see Hussain 2019a, 2019b). Inspired by the international modern progressive movement in politics and literature during the 1950s and 1960s, the Ashrafia (also Sindhi Savarna) writers identified themselves as ‘Taraqqi-Passand’ (progressives) (see Malkani 1993; Hussain 1997; Memon 2002; Junejo 2004; Siraj 2009; Paleejo 2012; Junejo 2015; Chandio 2016). ‘Progressiveness’ is explained by Dr. Ghafoor Memon, a Sindhi literary critic, as “an attitude, perspective and the movement that has been there in every era” (Memon 2002, p. 279). He explains it by giving examples of progressive rational movements that emerged against fanaticism, religiosity in Europe during Greek period, and against feudalism during the 18th and 20th centuries in France and Russia, respectively (Memon 2002, p. 279). Irrespective of seemingly egalitarian modernist impulses, the postcolonial theo-political terrain seems to have led the progressives to produce the literature that undermines the Dalit question and sanctifies the hegemony of Ashrafia-Savarna classes.

It gradually became evident to me during my fieldwork in 2016 in lower Sindh that Dalit issues were greatly influenced and impressed by the popular literature produced by that progressive class. It convinced me of not only the level of ‘hegemonic’ (see Gramsci 1971, Hussain 2019b) influence of Ashrafia<sup>6</sup> -Savarna class over Dalits, but also the epistemic freedom of the Ashrafia class to construct the narrative of their choice to relativize Dalit subordination and influence the Dalit’s self-perception. For instance, I observed that when the ‘Dalit’ question was invoked using the ‘Dalit’ and the ‘Scheduled Castes’ identity markers by the Dalit activists, the Sindhi nationalists and most of the contemporary Sindhi progressive writers and their followers attempted to reject Dalit activists’ re-identification and their claims. They discouraged the Dalit activists from problematizing Dalit exclusion beyond a certain threshold.

This neglect, or rather the denial, of casteism and Dalit exclusion was primarily legitimized through Political Sufism based on Hindu–Muslim harmony as against the two-nation of theory of Pakistan based on Hindu–Muslim binaries (see Hussain 2019a, 2019b). Consequently, the progressives did not consider casteism as the major problem, and did not make Dalit exclusion the subject of political debate or critical enquiry. Notwithstanding that, the progressives did indulge in Dalit spaces on occasion, particularly when Dalit agency compelled them. In this article, I contend that this occasional intervention into Dalit spaces by the progressives has been counter-productive for Dalits as it hampers Dalit agency and rather appropriates it. One of the potent ways to counter or legitimize narratives and, thus, dissipate dissonance is to use literary media, such as short stories to render the narrative accessible to the common people. I specifically critique the casteist aspects of the progressive literary-political terrain as it manifests from the presentation of short stories in everyday politics by the progressives, by the Ashrafia elite and by Dalits to create space for the Dalit. Despite occasional anti-caste and anti-patriarchal narration in a few short stories, the progressives primarily frame these issues in a manner that makes them correspond with their agenda of ‘political Sufism’ and facilitate

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<sup>4</sup> The bulk of the Sindhi literature is published in the form of books, magazines, and newspapers. To have an idea of the literature being produced in Sindhi language, see the following online libraries and Publishing houses: Sindhi Salamat. URL: <https://books.sindhsalamat.com/> (accessed on 6 June 2019). Sindhi Adabi Borad. URL: <http://www.sindhiadabiboard.org/Index.html> (accessed on 6 June 2019). Sindhi Language Authority. URL: <http://www.library.sindhila.org/home> (accessed on 6 June 2019). Roshini Publications. URL: <https://www.roshnipublication.com/>. Sindhika Academy. URL: <http://www.sindhika.net/English.htm> (accessed on 6 June 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Dalit worldview and their fundamental conceptions of self and society are essentially framed, for instance, in Gujarati or Parakari, Dhatki, or Rajasathani and Marvari or Kacchi languages. Therefore, they cannot express their deepest emotions and experiences in Sindhi language which they have adopted as the medium of communication under the ‘hegemonic’ influence of Ashrafia-Savarna culture.

<sup>6</sup> Ashrafia class, i.e., Sayeds or the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and the castes claiming to be of Arab and Central Asian descent (see Hussain 2019a; Ahmad 2003; Kazuo 2004).

the appropriation of the spaces and histories of Dalits. I interrogate this appropriation of Dalit spaces and Dalit identities as it is reflected in those short stories considered as having emancipatory potential for the Dalits, in general, and Dalit women, in particular. To that end, I discuss three Sindhi short stories as the typical cases of the narrativization by the progressives', who construct and publicize and represent the intersectionality of caste, gender, religion, and nation.

To shortlist the stories, I adopted the method of asking some 30 notable Sindhi literary scholars and the progressive-minded readers to identify the short stories that may help interrogate Sayedism and Dalit exclusion along with the oppression of Dalit women. After a month's exploration assisted by the Dalit activists, I could only gather a few short stories that seemed to explicitly intersect caste along with religion, class, and gender. I then analyzed three of them, namely 'Dust of Earth and Stars of Sky' by Amar Jaleel<sup>7</sup>, that related to the oppression of Dalit (women); 'Infidel' by Naseem Kharal, that brought into focus the trans-religious dimension of untouchability as it affects the Dalit's decision to convert to Islam; and Prisoner of 'Karoonjhar'<sup>8</sup> (Karoonjhar jo Qaidi), a short story written by Ali Baba (1994), which is based on the postcolonial reconstruction of the 18th century anticolonial event related to the supposed bravery of Rooplo Kolhi, a Dalit hero.

I further validate my claims by adding a few, but key, ethnographic insights to the literary analysis<sup>9</sup>. Weaving my analysis with the narrative of short stories, I discuss certain events when the Ashrafia class protagonist or the progressive intellectual intervened in spaces, events, and the narratives of Dalits, when they undermined the demand of Dalit emancipation, or when they underestimated the hegemonic impact of Sayedism and Ashrafia hegemony.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The Ashrafia-Savarna class of feudals, Pirs and Vaniyas (Hindu merchants) 'imagined' (Anderson 1983, p. 77) social solidarity essentially on the basis of a modern nation that could accommodate their tribal and casteist legacy. The 'Sindhi nationalist' narrative (see for instance, Sayed 1952, 1974, 2013), promulgated by these classes before and after partition has grown over the decades through the extensive use of print media, literary circles, and lately through social media to construct the social imaginary that it hardly identifies the Ashrafia-Savarna elite as the internal oppressor. The local Ambedkarites, however, do not wholeheartedly accept the Progressive's narrative and complain of its casteist bias. While holding the Progressives and the society and state, at large responsible for casteism, racism, and extremist tendencies, local Ambedkarites also criticize their own Dalit community for not reacting against oppression<sup>10</sup>. They urge Dalits to unite by forewarning them that they can succeed in their goal only through their own politically conscious efforts, and that 'no other Mahatma, or emancipator, will descend to change their lot, neither did it come in the past, nor it will ever come in the future' (Bheel 2017). This Ambedkarian trajectory of thought thus demands the explicitly self-reflective anti-caste stance from the social critics, academicians and scholars (see Ambedkar 2014, [1991] 2014; Guru 1995, 2000, 2011a, 2011b; Ilaiah 2010; Guru and Sarukkai 2012; Kumar 2018; Hussain 2018, 2019a, 2019b)<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Amar Jaleel received the Kamal-i-Fun award, which is the highest award in Pakistan in the field of literature. Apart from that he also received Pride of Performance (Pakistan) and Akhil Bharat Sindhi Sahat Sabha National Award of India.

<sup>8</sup> Karoonjhar is an isolated mountain about 7 km in length at the center of Parkar, the hiding place for the rebels during the British occupation of Tharparkar.

<sup>9</sup> Informed consent was obtained from all participants. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical guidelines recommended by the Department of Anthropology, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. The permission was sought, where required, from the concerned persons to reproduce any picture, graph, table, or piece of information.

<sup>10</sup> To have an idea of how local Dalit activists in Sindh connect themselves with the Dalits and Ambedkarites in India or elsewhere and problematize politics, culture, society and the literature, read the literature on Dalits in Sindhi written by local Ambedkarites made available by me on Mendely, the online database (see Bheel 2017; Hussain 2019c, 2019d, 2019e).

<sup>11</sup> To have a comprehensive understanding of what I mean by Ambedkarian or Dalitbahujan perspective, read paper draft on 'Mainstreaming Dalitbahujan perspective in Pakistan' (2017). doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.23455.87200, URL: <https://www.researchgate.net>.

This way of analyzing casteism from the Ambedkarian perspective (see [Kumar 2016a, 2016b](#)) considerably improves upon the existing critical approaches to the sociological and literary-historical criticism (see [Behdad and Thomas 2011](#); [Damrosch 2009](#); [Eagleton 2002](#)). It differs from the Gandhian critique of ‘untouchable’ treatment of Dalits that was first adopted by Munhi Premchand who wrote short stories both in Hindu and Urdu (See [Upadhyay 2002, 2011](#)). Ghulam [Rabbani \(2016\)](#) writes:

The Harijan lives like dead soul, having accepted all the exploitation and atrocities as their destiny. They might develop a defiant attitude against these injustices but it remains confined to their minds. On the contrary, Ambedkar’s Dalit is audacious, courageous and infused with zeal and zest to fight against exploitation and live with dignity. His rebel doesn’t just imagine being one but steps into the real world.

This critique of literary-political landscape will explain how the hegemony of Ashrafia-Savarna classes functions at the empirical level in spaces that otherwise should serve as anti-caste anchor for the Dalit protagonists. It will enable to see if the historical narratives and their fictionalized characters allow Ashrafia intrusion in Dalit spaces; and it helps to invoke Dalits to protest against the oppressors, and achieve the egalitarian goal of caste-parity or social inclusion.

### 3. Situating Short Stories in Sindhi Progressive Literature

The Progressives boast of, and probably rightly so, that both in terms of quantity and as the instrument to create political awareness, after Urdu, the Sindhi language has the second richest stock of literature in Pakistan ([Paleejo \[1978\] 2016](#), p. 11). This richness to Sindhi literature, however, is not equally harmonized in terms of content and the sociopolitical location of the writers. Since the Sindhi Ashrafia-Savarna elite have dominated the literary-political domain for centuries, most of the prominent short story writers, poets and the scribes have hailed from Ashrafia castes. Inspired by the progressive movement that ushered in subcontinent in early 20th century, the Sindhi Ashrafia class also evolved its own version of progressive idiom framed in Political Sufism. Departing from their predecessors, they qualify their Sufism with the modern (Marxist-nationalist and romantic ideas (see [Memon 2002](#), p. 28; [Jaleel 1998, 2007, 2012](#); [Shah 2007a, 2007b](#)).

This modernist, but theo-political drift, also reflects in the short stories whereby they condemn *waderā* culture (feudalism) and Mullah (the superstitious religious cleric). For instance, feudalism is critiqued in stories such as in ‘*Billu Dadā*’ and ‘*Kutte jo maut*’ by Ayaz Qadri; ‘*Munh Kāro*’ and ‘*Pashoo Pashā*’ by Jamal Abro; ‘*Sheedo Dhārel*’ by Ghulam Rabani Agro. Similarly, religious fanaticism and extremism is busted in stories such as, ‘*Mān Insān Ahiyān*’ (I am human) by Ayaz Qadri, and ‘*Amān Mān School na Wendus*’ (‘Mom, I won’t go to school’) by Hafeez Shaikh (see also [Memon 2002](#), pp. 314–15). Notwithstanding the egalitarian import of when it comes to religious and gender-disparities, these stories or the narratives emergent of it do not intersect with the problem of casteism, and rather give an impression that casteism, particularly Dalit exclusion, is a normative phenomenon about which agents of social and political change need not worry about. Take as another example the story in which ‘upper caste’ Sammat-Baloch protagonist Pishu Pasha is depicted as a socialist revolutionary (see [Abro 2015](#)) against a local landlord. Pishu Pasha is depicted as the untouchable who dares to drink water in the glass of Raes Gul Khan, the local landlord. While narrating the incident, the writer uses the metaphor of ‘Chuhra’ (Dalit caste) to explain the reaction against Pishu Pasha’s daring act. He writes:

Once, [Pishu] passed by the guest of house Raes Gul Khan. He was dying of thirst. Without caring for consequences, he entered the guest house and grabbed the glass of Raes Gul Khan. All present on the scene tried to stop him, saying, ‘Nope, Nope!; But, by that time this gentleman had drunk two-three glasses of water. Putting down the glass, [Pishu] said ‘Brother why affront! Did that glass belong to any Chuhra?’

([Abro 2015](#))

The last sentence ‘Did that glass belong to any Chuhra?’, clearly shows that while untouchability against Chuhra (Dalits) was/is normative, it is not as such practiced against ‘upper castes’ to which Pishu Pasha belonged. Since Pishu Pasha was not a Chuhra, but an ‘upper caste’ and equal in status to the local landlord, therefore, they should not mind his drinking water in the same glass in which the landlord drinks. The real thrust of the narrative here is not to bring to light to untouchability against the Chuhra (Dalits), but the class difference within Ashrafia castes.

This portrayal of Pishu (upper castes) as the new ‘untouchable’, and the projection of socialist confrontation depicted as merely lying between the two protagonists of the privileged castes, one dominating the other, may not be vouchsafed by the Ambedkarites who, first and foremost, want to problematize caste-based discrimination and untouchability.

The progressives have also written a few remarkable short stories that expose the exploitative character of Sayeds. For instance, Jamal Abro (2015) story ‘*Shah Jo Pharr*’ (Projeny of Shah) first published in 1959 directly confronts Sayedism, in which the discriminatory differentiation between Sayed and *Ummati* (Subject Muslim) is depicted (Abro 2015, p. 325), and in ‘*Mau Ji Jholi*’ (Lap of Mother) an Ashrafia class woman is depicted as embracing a Bhangi (Dalit) child (Abro 2015, p. 326). Similarly, Noorul Huda Shah<sup>12</sup>, a Sayed woman herself, has written a few anti-Sayed short stories that indirectly defend the Dalitbahujan right to equal social treatment (Shah 2007a, 2007b; Memon 2002). Her short story ‘*Dozkhi*’ also brings to light the racism of Sindhi people against Sheedi caste of the Black African descent (Shah 2007b).

One highly critical short story ‘*Secrets of Mansion*’<sup>13</sup> by Manik depicts the nexus between patriarchy and Sayedism. In it, the writer shows how strict caste endogamy and patriarchy prevalent in Sayed families creates conditions of celibacy for women and sexual relations outside of wedlock. A progressive activist told that Manik was abused, ridiculed, and even socially boycotted to the limits to eventually commit suicide<sup>14</sup>. Some of the leading Sindhi progressive writers vehemently criticized him for his exposition of patriarchy embedded in Sayedism. Shaukat Shoro, a progressive short story writer opined that, ‘Manik is [a] merciless, murdering and oppressive writer. Amongst the comity of Sindhi writers, he stands apart and alone, to whom the most privileged Sindhi literary writers do not accept, while the readers, after having avidly read, begin abusing him’ (Manik 1992). This shows the level of the critique that Manik had mounted, and because of which he was deliberately alienated from the mainstream progressive circles as he did not even explicitly subscribed to Sufi nationalist narrative and delved in existentialism.

Notwithstanding her extraordinary self-critical and anti-Sayed stance and the feminist inclinations, these selective progressive writers do not draw the clear line between the level of exploitation and humiliation of the Sayed women and the Dalit women, or the Dalit Sindhi and Savarna Hindu. In fact, the Progressives applied their own standards of gender (dis)parity when it served their purpose. For instance, the two stories ‘*Mubārakhon*’ and ‘*Sagar je Laharun Te*’, which show Sindhi women rebelling against patriarchy and the forced marriage, are not held in good light by Progressives, such as Rasool Bux Paleejo, who considers it the prime illustrations of ‘negative’ rebellion (see Memon 2002, p. 319). Moreover, the scathing criticism that a few of these anti-Sayed Ashrafia class writers faced is also an indicator of the lack of ‘shared space’ for the Dalit intellectuals (mostly identified as Hindus as well) to expose Sayedism. Hence, although their ideological and discursive trajectory was highly

<sup>12</sup> Noorul Huda Shah is one of the most celebrated Sindhi short story writer, Pakistani playwright and former caretaker provincial minister of Sindh Government in 2013. See: <https://www.dawn.com/news/799025> (accessed on 6 June 2019). To have an idea of Noorul Huda Shah’s literary-political approach read her statements related to the literary production during General Zia’s regime, the period during which she wrote several drama serials for state-sponsored TV channel PTV. Further read in DAWN, URL: <https://images.dawn.com/news/1178036> (accessed on 7 June 2019).

<sup>13</sup> See Haveli JaaRaaz, (Manik 1967), first published in Sindhi digest ‘Shuni’.

<sup>14</sup> Manik’s wife, however, maintains that Manik died of heart attack. Some of Manik’s close friends argue that although Manik was bitterly criticized for his writings, particular for his purportedly ‘sexually explicit’ depiction of patriarchal social reality and Sayedism, his circumstance of death has not much to do with it.

critical from the Ashrafia egalitarian or the Sufi nationalist perspective, it did not seem to qualify for the wholehearted approval by the Dalit-feminist intellectuals and or the Ambedkarites (see for instance, [Guru 1995](#); [Lata 2015](#); [Kundu and Maitreyee 2017](#); [Sripathi 2017](#); [Velaskar 2012](#); [Margaret 2012](#)). In the sections that follow, I would further explain through Ambedkarian perspective, the excerpts from these popular short stories by Amar Jaleel and Naseem Kharal with respect to how they (mis)fit as the anti-caste and anti-patriarchal progressives.

#### 4. The Reframing of ‘Infidel’ to Uphold Interfaith Harmony

‘Kāfir’ (infidel), a short story written in 1960s by Naseem Kharal, the Ashrafia class feudal, furnishes one of the exceptionally counterintuitive anti-caste narratives. The patriarchal import of the ‘Infidel’ is ignored, and often presented by the progressives as the explanation of both the religious and caste discrimination and untouchability that pervades across religions in Sindhi society, and to prove that Sufi nationalist path is the most appropriate one for the (Hindu) Dalits to mutually coexist in the predominantly Muslim Sindh. Before, further elaborating upon it, I quote from the story a dialogue between a supposedly Hindu Dalit convert to Islam and a Mukhi (a community head):

Mukhi, the panchayat headman of Oad [Dalit] community begged in the name of holy Gita and even threw his turban at Seetal’s feet, but Seetal just didn’t care much and replied:

“Mukhi! Do whatever you like, but I shall change my religion.

Mukhi: But why after all you want to change your religion?

Seetal: My choice, my wish simply.

Mukhi: Even then?

Seetal: I just don’t like my religion. That’s it.

Mukhi: Alas! Why on earth don’t you like your religion?

Seetal: Alright Mukhi. Tell me, who are we?

Mukhi: We are Hindus.

Seetal: Why then Hindus cremate the dead, whereas we bury them?

Mukhi: It’s our ritual.

Seetal: Alright. Why do we eat goat after butchering it (like Muslims)?

Mukhi: This too is our ritual—since the times of old ancestors.

Seetal: But these are the rituals of Muslims?

Mukhi: These are theirs. But ours too!!

Seetal: Then how can you say, we are Hindus?

Mukhi: Then what the heck are we, crank?

Seetal: Half Hindus-half Muslim. (We have) body of sheep, head of goat.”

(Excerpt translated from *Kāfir*, a short story by Naseem Kharal in [Nawaz 2007](#), pp. 113–14<sup>15</sup>)

In this conversation, Seetal stands accused before the Oad (Dalit) community of betraying communal norms to convert to Islam, and proclaim that the Hindu religion is based on falsity. Although infuriated, members of the Oad ‘panchayat’ (caste council) were not very harsh at Seetal, as they believed that Seetal had been bewitched by a Mullah (Islamic cleric). They tried to convince Seetal

<sup>15</sup> Source: ‘Naseem Kharal Joon Kahariyoon’ (2007), a compilation of short stories in Sindhi language by Danish Nawaz. Roshini Publications, Kandiaro. URL: [www.sindhshamat.com](http://www.sindhshamat.com). This story was written in the 1960s by Naseem Kharal, the renowned upper caste landlord (wadero), and one of the leading Sindhi progressive writers of the 1960s and 1970s.

that he had made a blunder, but Seetal remained adamant that he was happy with his conversion. Having seen his resolve Mukhi made the final attempt to convince Seetal saying, 'Remember Seetal! No matter how lavishly you harness donkeys like horses, they will remain donkeys, and never become horses.' (i.e., no matter how good a Muslim you become, you will remain untouchable in their eyes).

Seetal's adventure eventually ends up with his realization that in case his ailing wife (who had also converted along with him) dies, he cannot be given woman for marriage from Muslim castes, simply because he was considered as 'lower caste' or 'untouchable'. Ultimately, Seetal converts back to his former faith. The story, thus, ends with the bigoted disappointment of the Molvi (religious) at the re-conversion of Seetal, who says the 'Infidel is after all infidel'. Hence, from this narrative, it becomes evident that the writer of story conveys the social fact that although Mullah (religious cleric) primarily expresses his social imaginary through religious binaries, yet caste comes into the foreground when it comes to actual relations. Unlike a Mullah, the Hindu Dalit community is presented as more realistic as they imagine caste and religion as embedded in each other. They are presented as cognizant of the fact that they even cannot marry into Shaikhs (converts from Savarnas). However, what if Muslim Oad families also existed as do Shaikhs converts from Bheels, and Baghri Muslim families? The story/narrative does not help understand the consequences of the voluntary conversions in such cases.

Hence, although at the generic level, the story brings out very sharply that caste discrimination is a trans-religious phenomenon, and even stronger than religious affiliations, yet the Progressives try to bring into focus its religious dimension more than the caste-related. Rita Kothari (2009), a Sindhi (Savarna) based in Ahmedabad in India, has translated 'Infidel' from Sindhi into English, and has discussed primarily to show that such stories were the product of nostalgia of business class (Jati) Hindus and the post-Partition redemption of Sindhi Muslims who desired to reclaim their imagined syncretism that supposedly existed before Partition between Sindhi Hindus (mostly Savarnas) and Sindhi Muslims (see, Kothari 2009)<sup>16</sup>. With her emphasis on Sufi identity of Sindh<sup>17</sup>, Kothari, however, does not shed much light on the anti-caste dimension of the story and rather treats both religion and caste as being equally implicated<sup>18</sup>. In this particular case, deviating from the Progressive's typical stance, Dr. Ghafoor Memon, however, argues that major import of the story is to show that cultural and class/caste-based norms are stronger than religion. He argues that Muslims are proved to be hypocrites as on the one hand they believe that there is no discrimination in Islam based on caste; while on the other hand they continue to discriminate as do the Hindus (Memon 2002, p. 345). Rasool Bux Paleejo, a leading Marxist-nationalist also affirmed the factual relevance of the story:

One the one hand we surpass all limits of exaggeration and slogan mongering to prove that there is not caste system in Islam and on the other, in reality, we are the leading custodians of the system of untouchability and casteism.

(Rasool Bux Paleejo in Memon 2002, p. 346)

The recognition of casteism, however, does not bar the Progressives to resort to Marxist and nationalist explanations as an antidote to it. The moral of the story that is often upheld by them emphasizes 'interfaith harmony' instead of patriarchy and casteism that is embedded under the gloss of religion. As Memon argues, this story 'Infidel' supports the argument of the communists that social equality (devoid of casteism) can be achieved through socialist change or through communism, and

<sup>16</sup> Rita Kothari (2009) has translated from Sindhi into English some 22 short stories mostly written by Sindhi nationalist writers of (Jati) Hindu or Savarna Sindhi background (living in India or in diaspora) and Ashrafia Muslim progressives living Sindh.

<sup>17</sup> Unlike her writings on Indian society and culture, which are quite critical of casteism and Dalit oppression (see for instance, her article on 'Short Story in Gujarati Dalit Literature' (Kothari 2001)). In it Kothari frames the society of Sindh primarily from Sindhi Savarna-Ashrafia lens. See also her blog post 'Of Men, Women, Caste and Cinema' at <https://kafila.online>, in which she assuming the feminist standpoint problematizes the misogyny of the producer while criticizing the deliberate absence of caste in Hindu cinema and the pretension 'that the upper-caste characters are casteless.'

<sup>18</sup> Listen her lecture online, 18 | Prof. Rita Kothari | Sufism in Sindh | 18 April, (28 Aug 2017) published by IIT Gandhinagar. URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0sg\\_F6bZW0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0sg_F6bZW0) (accessed on 8 September 2019).

that would eventually eradicate casteism and untouchability (Memon 2002, p. 346). In this manner, this conventional Marxist-nationalist approach relegates the problems of casteism and untouchability to the second-order issues supposed to vanish away once communism would prevail.

‘Infidel’ is also presented as the explanation of caste discrimination by the Muslims against the Hindus in general to convince the Dalits that conversion cannot bear the requisite benefits. For instance, motivated by Taj Joyo (the Ashrafia Sindhi nationalist activist and the writer), who projected that story<sup>19</sup> to prove that the recurrent abortive attempts at conversion to get rid of ‘untouchability’ and religious discrimination do not work. Taj Joyo, for instance, wrote in Hemandas Chandani’s (Scheduled Caste activist and poet) book<sup>20</sup>:

I remember for sure that it was the night of 11 December 1977, when I met at Hemandas’ home. I had a chit chat with Kanji Mal (officer national bank), Ganesh Balani, Bhani Mal, Sarvan Kumar, Naraen and Heman [all Dalits of Meghwar caste]. If I remember correctly, either Ganesh Mal (or any of the friends present) put up a proposal that ‘we Meghwar are considered as lower-class Hindus, by caste Hindus. Therefore, our survival lies in converting to Islam’. There, I opposed that thinking that it is not the solution, because caste-based class discrimination also exists among Muslims. No Sayed Muslim will allow marry his daughter into any other caste, not to mention of Machi Muslim (fisherman caste considered the lower among Muslims). Although the days have much changed now, but even then, I narrated them the fiction story (based on social reality of casteism among Muslims) of Naseem Kharal.

Finally, we came to a consensus that the solution of social discriminations lies in education and only education. Today I feel proud that it is the effect of my ideas and the fiction story of Naseem Kharal narrated by me, that Ganesh Balani’s four daughters have now reached the highest educational achievement: Shabnam Rathore made Sindh famous by doing PhD from Germany in ‘Underground Saline Water’. Another Pushpa Kumari has done M.Sc. from Agricultural University Tando Jam. Third daughter Nimrita, is a lecturer in Sindh University’s microbiology department. Fourth Sushhma Devi who did M.Sc from botany and serving as lecturer in Karachi.

(Taj Joyo, Preface to Hemanda Chandani’s *Humerche Hoongar*, p. 12)

As it is evident, Taj Joyo suggested the Dalits to get Sindhized without conversion. He tried to convince them that there was caste discrimination and untouchability even among Muslims. This suggestion was in line with the Sindhi nationalist ideology that desired unity between Hindus and Muslims, and that did not offer the political way out of the caste discrimination and untouchability. The best of the solutions that Joyo proffered to these structural and political issues was the uplift through educational achievement at individual level. Dalit activists seemed to take the suggestion of Joyo, as they began to discourage conversions.

Like Joyo did, the Progressives have convinced many Hindu Dalits not to convert and express their fidelity with the Muslim-dominated and Ashrafia-led Sindh through the Sufi nationalist medium. This has rather led Dalits to get Ashrafized or adopt certain norms of dominant Muslims that reflected in their expressed reverence for Sayeds, Pirs and Sufis. This form of ritual inversion to adopt Ashrafia values without conversion, however, does not seem to resolve the fundamental problem either, that is, caste discrimination and untouchability. Resultantly ‘dissonance’ (Hussain 2019b) persists between the assumption of being Sufi Sindhis and the empirically existing caste based discriminatory practices (see Hussain 2019b). Moreover, contrary to the claims of Progressives, the Ashrafia intervention into Dalit spaces of decision-making and identity (re)formation proves the persistence of hegemonic

<sup>19</sup> See online blog written by Sufi Ghulam Hussain (me) on 9 December 2017 titled Why Dalits in Pakistan are reluctant to convert to Islam en masse! URL: <http://roundtableindia.co.in/> (accessed on 19 March 2019).

<sup>20</sup> The book by Heman Das Chandani titled *Humerche Hoongar* (Sindhi) was published in 2017.

influence of Ashrafia elite. This, I argue, is tantamount to the appropriation of Dalit's epistemic space as it disallows and discourages Dalit activists to come up with their own alternative counter-hegemonic narratives (see [Guru 2011a](#)).

There are, however, very few among Dalit activists, particularly the Ambedkarites, that radically depart from Sufi-nationalist trajectory. Consciousness of being sandwiched in between Brahminic and Ashrafia hegemony, these Ambedkarites have turned into crypto-Buddhists, that is, while politically they tend to follow B. R. Ambedkar and cherish Buddhist practices, but also loosely adhere to the normatively sanctioned Hindu and Ashrafia practices. These varied approaches to live a dignified life, however, does not bar a common Dalit to try out conversion to Islam, Christianity, or Ahmadiya sect/religion. Generally, at the level of society, the voluntary conversions of Dalit families, particularly the poorest and the most vulnerable ones, continues unabated, and often go unnoticed (See [Wajid 2017](#); [CIFORB 2018](#)). This proves that while Progressive's politically motivated narratives may influence Dalit activists, particularly the Dalit middle class not to convert, such as through the specific rendition of short story 'Infidel', the poorest or the ultra-subaltern castes or sub castes and the most vulnerable Dalit families may often see conversion as an open option.

### 5. Invoking Self-Pity in 'Dust of Earth and Stars of Sky'

The short story 'Dust of Earth and Stars of Sky' (*Dharti ji Dhoor, Asman jaa Taara*) by Amar [Jaleel \(1998\)](#) arouses the compassion for Bali, a Bheel (Dalit) woman who had been seduced and raped by Shahu, a Sayed patriarch. Although, the story seems to be highly critical of Sayedism, which is a rare theme in the Sindhi literary domain, it does not sufficiently invoke Dalits to resist against it. The reasons for this epistemic and ontic lopsidedness can be partly attributed to the politico-ideological predilections of the writer, and the targeted Progressive audience receptive to Sufi-nationalist narrative. To give the reader an idea of the ideological lens of the writer, I am quoting below the translation of selective sections of the story.

[The following excerpts depict the beauty and social vulnerability of a Hindu Dalit woman]

The emotions of the youthful age cannot be controlled by the systems of caste or religion. The people of Rohri town could not escape the gorgeous youthful spark of Bali. Her startling beautiful body could barely be hid under her tattered clothes. (Jaleel, pp. 68–69)

[A dialogue between Shahu and Bali]

'And Sisters?' ['What did they do?' asked Shahu]

'They were harlots' (p. 74)

[ ... ]

'The eldest eloped with a Punjabi rascal ... and he engaged her in prostitution'

'The younger one eloped with a Baloch to Shikarpur' ... 'A few days later there was corpse of my sister lying on the river bank'. (p. 75)

[The following excerpts reflect on people's belief in Sayedism ... Two aged school teachers in a dialogue with Shahu]

'Junior Shah! Hope you are fine' [Teachers greeted Shahu while he having whisky]

'Fine, need your prayers' Shahu replied coldly.

'Why are you making we *ummat*s [subjects of yours] sinner'. One of the teachers even pleaded before him, saying, 'We solely rely on you for our wellbeing here and in the hereafter'.

Shahu remained utterly disinterested towards teacher's pleadings. (p. 80)

[Shahu seducing drunken Bali reflects vulnerability of Dalit women]

[Bali] 'I am not even a Muslim'

[Shahu], 'I am Sayed, who truly deserves to be in paradise'. He dragged her to herself, 'In Islam the greatest of bounty is to convert any non-Muslim to Islam. I will make you Muslim'.

... 'I will marry you and teach you how to behave in Ashrafia family'. ... 'Leave knitting nets.'

... Bali gradually slid her face on the breast of Shahu, and said 'I will leave knitting nets'. (pp. 84–85)

[Sayedism reflects from it as Shahu, being steeped in caste pride, does not accept Bali and the child girl begotten of him]

[Shahu's friend Siraj] 'Uncountable children of the Ashrafia are begotten and brought up this way among the Bheel'. Siraj tried to console Shahu, 'Why do you worry so much'.

'I am Sayed Siraj' Shahu rebutted in hard accent. (p. 88)

'Humiliation terrifies the honorable. Not to the worthless Bheel women who does not know about what dignity is'. (p. 89)

[Shahu' yells at Bali spitting casteist venom upon her]

'You, the despicable, lower caste, you are a worthless Bheel'. Shahu grabbed her from her plait and said, 'and do you know, I am Sayed, Sayed am I'. (p. 93)

'We do not even let our *ummatis* [Muslim subjects] to get so close to us, and this infidel Bheel dreams of marrying a Sayed'. (p. 94)

[Shahu goes to kill Bali's newborn child daughter. This reflects prowess of an Ashrafia patriarch and Dalit vulnerability]

He was consoling himself that he was killing a newborn daughter in the name of God, to save a Sayed child from wandering among the Bheels. In the afterlife, God will give him his due reward. In case it did not happen as planned, then at least he had that genealogical capital of being Sayed to intercede before God. (p. 101)

(Jaleel 1998, pp. 68–103)

The story depicts the tragic socioeconomic vulnerability of Dalit women due to which they are often raped by Ashrafia men. The writer enters into the minds of both the oppressor and the oppressed and brings out the casteist arrogance of the Sayed, and the haplessness and humiliation of the Dalit woman. In a highly pro-Sayed society in which even the Progressive writers are reluctant to speak against Sayeds, the writer has shown a great dare to impute Sayeds, the risk that no Dalit intellectual can afford to take. Dr. Ghafoor Memon writes in his review of the story:

There is a specific nature of the honor and the respect of Sayeds in Sindh, whereby people confer upon them the status of Murshid (spiritual leaders), and consider them as the continuation of Prophet Muhammad's progeny, and to themselves as '*ummatis*' (social subjects of Sayeds) thus assigning themselves lower status. No doubt, the respect for Sayeds in its own way is justified, but there have been Sayeds in history who has taken an undue advantage of that status. After the coming of modern progressive wave, the thinking has evolved not to discriminate on the caste and race.

(Memon 2002, p. 259)

The Ambedkarites may not accept that apology and the conferring of credit to the Ashrafia-laden Progressive class, and may raise certain fundamental concerns. They may acknowledge that although the story has considerable emancipatory value, yet may contend that the writer does not suggest any escape for the Dalits out of that situation thereby leaving them in the depressed state. Hence, it fails to invoke agitation against the structural violence meted out to Dalit women and infuse the spirit of resistance against Sayedism. For instance, Bali, as a Dali woman, is shown to give birth to the child, but her psychological strength is not depicted as to surpass the social and political prowess of his Sayed seducer. Fearing that her child could be killed by the Sayed(s), she even hides the act of seduction and the fact that a Sayed was a father of her child. Although this exemplifies the caste-based and religion-based structural violence of high order and the counter-resistance by the individual Dalit woman, the Ambedkarites may have liked to take it further into the collective domain of resistance to enthuse the spirit of collective resistance. Hence, the story ends up abruptly leaving the Ashrafia reader in a state of compassion for Dalits, and to Dalits in a state of self-pity.

Although in many other short stories and public statements, Amar Jaleel certainly seems to stand against Sayeds and Pirs in so far as his own caste privilege (dis)allows him to be, yet the frequency and the number of such stories that depict Dalit oppression in relation to Sayedism is comparatively very low. This story, therefore, is the only one of its kind written by him that projects Dalit-women's oppression, but that too does not takes the reader towards Dalit emancipation and social protest deemed necessary by the Dalit activists (see Ramachandran 2004). This fact then complicates the writer's personal life at the level of commitment to eradicate caste discrimination or to emancipate Dalits. Playing the role of the Dalit liberator, Amar Jaleel, in fact, defines the Ashrafia definition of Dalit women's oppression. Colored in Sufi nationalist ideology of interfaith harmony, Jaleel condescends to take Sayed Patriarchy and misogyny to the task that does not help invoke Dalit women's emancipation as the Dalit women's depiction of her naivety and sexual vulnerability to Ashrafia patriarchy are not sufficiently counterpoised with the Dalits or Dalit women's agency to strive for emancipation. Resultantly, the Ashrafia reader of the story, instead of feeling remorse or shame on his or her patriarchy, is led to enjoy the Dalit woman's sexuality and body.

Hence, it can be safely assumed that the story does not specifically takes the anti-caste stance and wavers in its emphasis on Hindu-Muslim, Sayed-non-Sayed, Dalit-Sayed, women-men binaries. It, thus, casts the ambiguous and rather counterproductive impact on the public opinion as regards the nature and the level of religious and caste-based persecution. The sociopolitical consequences of this ambiguity can even be seen on the Sufi nationalists as well as on the Dalits impressed by the narrative offered by Amar Jaleel or the Progressives. For instance, Dalit activists were found to be carried away by the Savarna-Ashrafia narrative of 'forced conversion'<sup>21</sup> of Hindu and Dalit girls or women.

Despite the fact that most of such marriages and conversions are consensual, Dalit and Hindu girls were depicted as Marvis (oppressed women) of Sindh under the bondage of Umar, a mythologized Savarna/Ashrafia king of the yore who had kidnapped Marvi, a Dalit girl<sup>22</sup>. This re-framing of the folk narratives serves as the hegemonic instrument to reduce seduction, rape, consensual sex, or marriage-based conversion to a single libelous denominator of 'forced conversion', the religious connotation that is in line not only with Sufi nationalist ideology but also acceptable problem identifier for the protagonists of Political Islam and Hindutva ideology. Hence, in this manner, these narratives of force, coercion, seduction and rape derived from the folktales and re-framed by the Progressives

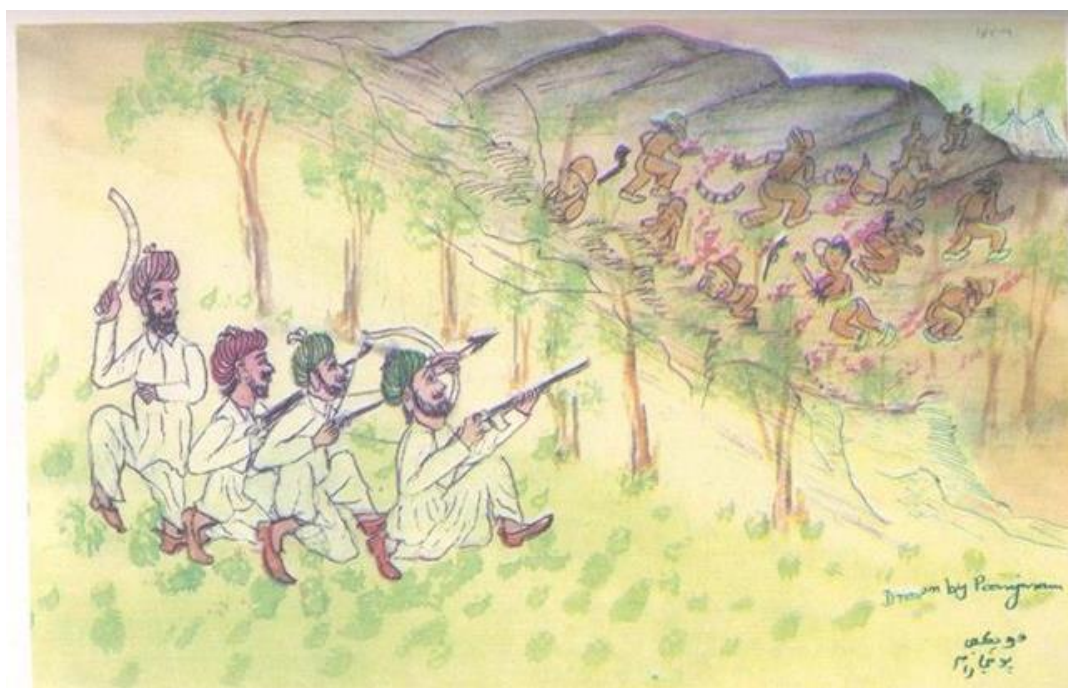
<sup>21</sup> The cry against forced conversions in Pakistan raised by the Savarna-Ashrafia Sindhi nationalists and the Christian elite in July 2019 made to the Congress of the United States. See: The Pioneer (21 July 2019) US Congressmen ask Trump to raise issue of Sindh with Pak PM Imran. URL: <https://www.dailypioneer.com> (accessed on 9 June 2019). See also India Today (22 July 2019) URL: <https://www.indiatoday.in> (accessed on 9 June 2019).

<sup>22</sup> The reinvigorated literary assertion of Sindhi nationalists during the 1950s that reframed the narrative of Marvi was also noticed by Levesque and Bui (2014) in their cinematographic study of first Sindhi movie 'Umar-Marvi' made in 1956. They argued that the movie 'contributed to the construction of a modern national imaginary for Sindhis in post-Partition Pakistan' (see Levesque and Bui 2014, pp. 119–21).

in Sufi nationalist idiom are conveniently and uncritically grafted upon Dalit women's vulnerability. This re-framing of vulnerability in Sufi-nationalist idiom hides both the casteist and patriarchal bias of Savarna-Ashrafia Progressives and the hegemonic class to which they primarily represent.

## 6. 'The Prisoner of Karoonjhar' and the Appropriation of Dalit Heroes and Spaces

The inversion of the history of a Dalit rebel/ fighter is exemplified in 'The Prisoner of Karoonjhar'<sup>23</sup> (Karoonjhar jo Qaidi), a short story written by Ali Baba (Rind Baloch by caste). In this story, Rooplo Kolhi is depicted as the hero of Sindh who fought bravely during the middle of the 19th century when the British attempted to establish its writ over Parkar, a small mountainous region surrounded by Rann of Kach to the south and the Thar Desert of Sindh to the north (see Figure 1, painted by a Kolhi for the book on Rooplo Kolhi). Rooplo Kolhi, as the locals believe, was a *Girasia*, that is, the tribal chief recognized as such by rulers of the time, particularly by the Mughals (see Mal 2000; Kolhi 2011; Kolhi 2014). Although the narrative depicted in Ali Baba (1994) story is not much different than most of the Kolhis and Sindhi people believe in, it becomes problematic when Dalit activists undermine its pro-Savarna history and let the Ashrafia elite appropriate their agency. Hence, it has both the emancipatory as well as hegemonic and counter-hegemonic aspects depending upon who patronizes whom.



**Figure 1.** The painting by Poonja Ram Kolhi, first appeared Paru Mal (2000) book Lok Sagar Ja Moti. It was popularized by Parkari Kolhis depicting Rooplo Kolhi along with his rebel friends attacking the British in Karoonjhar Mountains at Parkar (Source: Parkari Audio-Visual Project, PCDP).

Ali Baba (1994) narrative of Rooplo's bravery portrays Rooplo as if in direct confrontation with the British. For instance:

As if the British canons were roaring. [ . . . ] As if hearts of Samma, Soadha, Soomra, Thakur, Rabari and Kolhi women were being ripped asunder. [ . . . ] Rano, Tkhakur, Khoso, Rathore, Samon, Soomro, Parmar and Kohli all had sacrificed their lives for the sake of Karoonjhar (p. 14).

<sup>23</sup> Karoonjhar is an isolated mountain about 7 km in length at the center of Parkar, the hiding place for the rebels during the British occupation of Tharparkar.

[ ... ]

[The battle was not over yet] the English would trigger the canons because Ranas [Sodha Thakur rulers of Parkar] has not given up yet. Thousands of Kolhi, Bheel, Rathore, Samma and Khosa were roaming secretly in the valleys of Karoonjhar Mountain (pp. 14–15)

[ ... ]

No sooner did that night fall, Kolhis would began attacking the pickets of the British army. [ ... ] The British did not confront such kind of rebellion in any other part of the Hindustan [ ... ]. When captain Tyrwhitt received an indictment from Sir Charles Napier, he simply sent a reply, 'I regret. Here we are not fighting with the people but with the terrifying volcanic mountain'. The poor captain Trywhitt felt himself at his wits ends. He was unable to devise any way to control Ranas (Sodha Thakurs) and Kolhis (p. 15).

[ ... ]

[Compares Rooplo Kolhi with Hindu Vedic Gods]

That Kolhi was tall and dark brown like the Shri Kirshan Mahrarj of Hindu sacred books, and as resolved and steadfast as Arjun Maharaj (p. 15)

[The British new that whom they were fighting with]

'Roopa [Rooplo Kolhi] we do not want to kill you. You just simply tell us the whereabouts of Ladhoo Singh and his accomplices. We will confer upon you the fief as per your desire'.

[The writer begins reframing Rooplo as the self-motivated fighter who damn cares about Ladhoo Singh]

'This whole land is mine. Who the hell are you to give that back as a fief to me?'

'Were you not a slave of Rana Ladhoo Singh?'

'No, I would have shoot Ladhoo Singh, if I had felt that I were a slave of him' (p. 19).

[Rooplo's wife is depicted as steeped in patriotism]

'Roopa, I have come to see you the last time. Never ever make me the object of ridicule before Kolhi women. Never give up. Otherwise, I shall abandon you. Moving her hand over the pregnant belly I shall proclaim that this child is not begotten of Rooplo, but of someone else' (p. 17)

[Writer dilutes caste disparities by showing that Meghwars were anti-national and assisted the British]

'They were Ladhoo Singh and Rooplo, from whom you had escaped to seek refuge under the tannery of Meghwars' [p. 18]

[Ends the story by showing the colonialist minds as psychologically disappointed after Rooplo's resistance]

For the first time, Trywhitt felt that no alien nation can occupy the lands of foreign nation for more than 25 years, but they might be compelled to vacate Karoonjhar probably even before 12 years.

As it is evident from the above excerpts of the story, Rooplo Kolhi is depicted as the independent freedom fighter that fought against the British to reclaim his '*Mulk*' (Parkar). The impression is created that Parkar was a part of Sindh and Rooplo, therefore, fought for Sindh. Karoonjhar symbolizes Sindh in miniature and the local castes symbolized the Sindhi nation that was resisting against the British. In a latest 'progressive' compilation of essays in Sindhi, Rooplo Kolhi's confrontation with the British is represented not just as fidelity to the local 'upper caste' rulers but to nation. For instance, equating tribal ethic to stand by the side of the local ruler with the national patriotism, Dr. Azad writes:

By having a look on the overall scenario during that period, it becomes evident that it was the period during which to remain loyal to the local ruler under the given tribal system was considered as loyalty to the nation. By and large the same kind of struggles can be evidenced during Mughal era against British.

(Qazi 2015, p. 11)

This nationalist reframing, that legitimizes the subordination of the oppressed castes to the local oppressor castes for the sake of freedom from or resistance to the external forces (the British), undermines the agency of the Dalits both in the historical past as well as in the present by suggesting Dalits to play second fiddle as loyal subordinates to the Ashrafia-Savarna castes. In contemporary Sindh, where these caste-based or the tribal relations of domination and subordination still exist with some minor variations, though this nationalist logic that has re-identified Pakistani establishment or Punjabi domination as the new 'other', in a way, allows the subordination of Kolhis or Dalits to Sodha Thakurs, Khosas, Mir Talpurs, and even to Sayeds. Hence, this tribal-nationalist ethic even applies today, and may continue to be applied by the Ashrafia-Savarna castes on the excuse of the external threats to the internal tribal-caste (dis)harmony.

Prior to that appropriation of Rooplo Kolhi by the Sindhi nationalists, it was almost vice versa. The review of the vernacular literature written by Parkari Kolhis, and the conversations held by me with the local Parkaris in 2019 indicate that Parkaris did not always imagine Parkar as a part of Sindh. A Tharparkar-based Dalit activist inverted the nationalist narrative in the following manner:

Mado Meghwar, who gave refuge to *Trawat* [Tyrwhitt<sup>24</sup>]. Do you know why he gave refuge to *tarawat*? Very few know. You must see, during that period, the poor classes ... in 1800s the first Dalit woman who wrote a letter ... she only was class VIII pass. She was ... Savatri Bai Phule ... she writes that they were the English people who came in and freed us from clutches of the upper castes. They see the coming of the British as the precursor of emancipation. They supported the British during the 1857 war, the Sikhs allied with the British to get rid of Mughal persecution. Similarly, Meghwar like Madhu, and the people of Parkar, particularly Dalits, sided with the British as the emancipators who got them rid of the domination of Sodha Thakurs. And this [Rooplo], who was the paid mercenary of Sodha Thakurs, is now reckoned as the hero in history. But those like Madhoo Meghwar who supported the British to get rid of Sodhas persecutors are condemned as the rebels.

Like Dalits themselves, this counter-narrative is also very marginal and very few even among Dalit activists subscribe to an essentially Ambedkarian perspective on history and historiography. Yet there are many points on which they converge and that deviate from the Ashrafia-dominated nationalist narrative. Before the partition of the subcontinent, Parkar was imagined by Kolhis, as well as by other Parkari communities, as '*Mulk*' (literally, a country different from Sindh) (Mal 2000; V. Kolhi 2011; B.M. Kolhi 2014). This social imaginary often sometimes reflects in the political claims of ownership of Parkar made by Kolhi activists (see for instance, pamphlet in Figure 2, of local Kolhi leader, which reads 'Parkar is not the private property of anybody, but our fatherland').

Given the profile of the characters, which look more of history turned into legend, this story by Ali Baba (1994) cannot be interpreted like the other two discussed above that are essentially based on fictitious characters. In this story history is inflated through fiction while, in the previous stories, fiction is created to depict contemporary social reality. Hence, the characterization of Rooplo Kohi through Ashrafia literary narrative has the historically real import for Kolhis, Dalits, and the Progressives alike. It has contemporary political relevance as it seems in line with the Dalit's tendency to Ashrafize (see Hussain 2019b; Mal 2000) by labeling Rooplo as 'Shaheed' (Arabic-Sindhi term for the martyr),

<sup>24</sup> Trywhitt was a British appointed captain and administrator at Parkar and was assigned the task to subdue Sodha Thakurs.

and by tracing the existing descendants of him. Off and on, individual Kolhis claim to be Rooplo's great-grandsons<sup>25</sup> and are invited in annual anniversaries organized to pay homage to Rooplo as guest speakers. This desire to associate with Rooplo is a post-1970s phenomenon, resonating with the Sindhi nationalist narrative as it was reframed through political speeches and the politico-literary writings as that of Ali Baba.



Figure 2. Local government elections (2013) pamphlet of Veerji Kolhi. Source: Author (2016).

The narrative of the story, however, loses its historical grounding and the authenticity as there is not much historical evidence to support the facts related to Rooplo or Kolhi community's role in the fight against the British. The historical chronicles, mostly written by the British officers, do not mention any such dramatic debacle involving Rooplo Kolhi (see, for instance, Raikes [1856] 2009). Although the narrative apparently looks emancipatory for Dalits as it highlights Rooplo Kolhi, yet it loses ground as it fails to fully discredit the dominant role of the Sodha Thakur rulers of Parkar.

Ali Baba (1994) narrative undermines the fact that Rooplo fought as a tribal chief of Kolhi's Gohel sub-caste under the supervision of Ladhoo Singh, a Kshatriya or upper caste Hind ruler (see Raikes [1856] 2009). Parkar had been under the control of Sodha Thakurs during the past several centuries. Talpur and Kalhora rulers of Sindh occasionally used to intervene in Tharparkar to establish their writ, which was often thwarted by the Sodhas. Sodhas of Parkar had their own communal system of management that they used to call 'Gurr Raj', and variant of land tax collection called 'Raney jo

<sup>25</sup> During the conversational interviews, Dalit activists were told that Satram Das of Atran Mori claimed that Rooplo is his grandfather. Comrade Bhagat Padhmon Kolhi of Sindhin-jo-wāndyo filed a case to get 50 acres of land of Parkar based on his claim that he was grandson of Rooplo. Veerji Kolhi (advisor to minister) and Krishna Kolhi (senator) claimed to have descended from Rooplo Kolhi. Lately, a team of local progressive-minded researchers led by Mir Hasan Arisar, Tahir Mari, Nawaz Kumbhar, Muhib Bheel, Sadam Dars and Ranshal Das attempted to locate the true ancestors of Rooplo Kolhi. According to their findings, Rooplo had a son called 'Harkho', and that Kheto Mal and Gulab Rai were the true grand-grandsons of 'Shaheed Rooplo'.

Jalang' (sack of Rana) was in vogue by virtue of which all Rajputs/Sodha Thakurs were exempt from the land tax (Qazi 2015, pp. 7–8).

While Parkar had its own semi-autonomous political economy, it was not completely independent of the influences of the rulers of Sindh and were given various exemptions and waivers to collect taxes from the local pastoralists and peasants. (see Ojha 1966, p. 104). When the British conquered Sindh in 1847, they reduced the Rana's right and share of taxes to a half, while allowing them to maintain their own *jagreers* (fiefs) (Qazi 2015, pp. 7–8). Similarly, both the Ali Baba as well as Parkari Kolhis do not bring into framework the fact that the Meghwar community (Dalits) had already submitted to the British to emancipate from the Sodha Thakurs.

They also undermine the fact that Talpur rulers of Sindh were also subdued by the British and even employed against the Sodha Thakurs (Mal 2000; V. Kolhi 2011; B.M. Kolhi 2014). They also neglect the fact that it was the army of Talpur rulers of Sindh that fought together with the British to crush Sodha Thakur resistance in Nangarparkar (see Raikes [1856] 2009). They do not acknowledge that Parakari Kolhis, in fact, fought as army men for the Sodha Thakur (Savarna) rulers of Parkar, who did not even consider Kolhis as proper Hindus.

The historically anomalous ethnic and geographical status of Parkar can also be confirmed from the fact that, before the annexation of Parkar to Sindh by the British, Parkar was under the jurisdiction of Bhuj (Katch, now in India), and that both the Dalits and the Savarnas of Parakar were ethnically and politically aligned more with their respective caste fellows and co-religionists in Kutch than with the land and people of Sindh the borders of which lied where from the Thar Desert began (see Mal 2000; V. Kolhi 2011; Raikes [1856] 2009; B.M. Kolhi 2014). Similarly, the local narrative about the British agent Tyrwhitt, who is now demonized as the persecutor, was hailed as local hero by Tharparkari people. Abdul Qadir Junejo writes:

Thari people have unique instinct of liking and making heroes for themselves. Mughal Emperor Akbar was a legendary figure for them only second to local deities, so was General Taroot (Tyrwhitt). Despite the fact that Taroot was the one who overwhelmed Sodha Rajputs and hanged Rooplo Kolhi, he was highly praised and eulogized by Tharis in folk songs, and folklore during and after Taroot's times.

(Junejo 2010, p. 126)

This pre-colonial narrative was gradually overtaken by the postcolonial nationalist narrative whereby the praise of Tyrwhitt was considered as symbolic of the slavish imperialistic attitude. Given this ambiguous history, it can be argued that the Progressives' narrative of Rooplo Kolhi, that is inadvertently, picked up by Dalits as well, is premised on the self-serving all-unifying nationalist fantasy that more than giving the emancipatory push to the Dalit cause rather hampers it. Kolhi activists consider this representation as the sort of recognition of the value and worth of Kolhi community within the comity of Sindhi castes, and see this re-nationalization of 'Amar (eternal) or 'Shaheed' (Martyr) Rooplo Kolhi', as the drive to create social and political space for their marginal community (Mal 2000; V. Kolhi, 2011; B.M. Kolhi, 2014).

Hence, except the minor antipathy towards Ashrafia-dominated Sindh that sometimes reflects in Kolhi's hidden script, Parkar is largely imagined by them as the integral part of Sindh, and Rooplo as the foremost Sindhi national hero, the recognition that could not be had without the approval of 'authentic nationalists' (i.e., Ashrafia-Savarna elite).

To reciprocate that recognition and to reaffirm their fragile bonding with the Ashrafia class, Kolhis invite Mirs, Sardars, and Sayeds as special guests in their programs held to commemorate the martyrdom of Rooplo. See, for instance, Figure 3 in which Nawab Yousif Talpur (a local Ashrafia politician from the ruling elite stands in the middle surrounded by local Kokhi activists during the 157th Anniversary of Rooplo Kolhi at the Ghousia Complex, Umerkot on 20 August 2016). Yousaf Talpur, in his capacity as the member of National Assembly announces additional school building for a Kolhi village. To demonstrate their closeness to and confidence in Yousaf Talpur, local Kolhi activists Nemdas Kolhi, Poonjho Mal

Bheel (Ex, MPA), Asu Bai Kolhi and other Dalit activists stand close to Yousaf Talpur on the stage. The innovatively deceptive inversion of caste identity was observed when Sardar Shah (Sayed) proclaimed in a procession that ‘he is Kolhi’ (Dalit). Such an affirmatively egalitarian rhetoric, for instance, follow from the mouth of Ashrafia elite in the following manner.



**Figure 3.** Ashrafia Picture taken during the 157th Anniversary of Rooplo Kolhi at the Ghousia Complex, Umerkot on 20 August 2016. Source Dalit Sujaag Tehreek (2016).

‘To be Kolhi is the matter of pride. Civilization cannot be erected by becoming Sayed.’  
(Sardar Shah)

‘I will try to convince my party leadership to ensure representation of Kolhi community in the parliament.’<sup>26</sup>  
(Sardar Shah)

‘Rooplo Kolhi fought the battle against the British forces for the Sindh, and sacrificed his life. The youth should follow the example’.  
Nawab Yousaf Talpur

‘We are proud of Rooplo Kolhi. He fought the war for the survival of Sindh’.  
Nawab Taimur Talpur (MPA)<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Source: Daily Ibrat (Sindhi newspaper, Dated, 28th August, 2017. URL: [http://www.dailyibrat.com/beta/pages/jpp\\_28082017015347.jpg](http://www.dailyibrat.com/beta/pages/jpp_28082017015347.jpg) (accessed on 8 July 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Source: Sindh Express (daily), Monday, August, 28, 2017. URL: [http://sindhexpress.com.pk/epaper/PoPupwindow.aspx?newsID=130546486&Issue=NP\\_HYD&Date=20170828](http://sindhexpress.com.pk/epaper/PoPupwindow.aspx?newsID=130546486&Issue=NP_HYD&Date=20170828) (accessed 8 on July 2019).

‘Rooplo Kolhi memorials will be built in each major city including Karachi’.

(Ibrat daily, Sindhi newspaper)

‘The Dravidians and politicians of Sindh declared immortal Rooplo Kolhi, the son of the soil.’<sup>28</sup>

This ritual of inversion by Ashrafia elite to arbitrarily identify with the Dalits, under the influence of the Sufi nationalist narrative, dilutes the question of casteism such that Rooplo Kolhi (a Dalit), Hoshoo Sheedi (an Afro-Sindhi descendant of slaves), Dodo Soomro (Sammatt ruling caste elite), and Raja Dahar (7th century Brahmin king of Sindh)<sup>29</sup> are represented as standing on the horizontal socioeconomic plane that demands of them to struggle for Sindh. It creates the false dichotomy between the two groups of Ashrafia-Savarna classes, namely the Sindhi nationalists and separatists, and the pro-state feudal Sindhi Ashrafia class. For instance, a Kolhi activist aligning himself with the nationalists as against the ruling feudal class of Sindh uploaded a Facebook status:

The 159th anniversary of Shaheed Rooplo Kolhi was celebrated by Jeay Sindh Mahaz at Sachal village, Karachi. Chairman of Mahaz, Abdul Khaliq Junejo said that Raja Dahar, Hoshoo Sheedi and Rooplo Kolhi are our valiant heroes, and that Muhammad-bin-Qasim is historically condemned as the imperialist. He said that the anniversaries of Rooplo are being celebrated lately by the ruling elites since the last two-three years to appropriate Rooplo for their vested interests. But they must remember that the resistance of Rooplo was not simply for capturing seat in legislative assembly or to appease any specific sect, but for his land Sindh, the legacy of which rule-hungry elite cannot be the inheritors.

(Ranshal Kolhi, Facebook Status, 24th August 2019)

These acts of counter-appropriation, condensation and equalizing Savarna-Ashrafia and Dalit heroes in the name of resistance against the non-nationalist ruling elite are not liked by some of their co-Dalit activists, best classified as Ambedkarites. For instance, an Ambedkarite interviewed by me lamented:

It’s not just that simple, that democracy fascinates Dalits. Under it, they eagerly sell out their heroes to nationalists, and give away their gods to Brahmins and *Lohanas*; they are willing to banish all their ancestral gods to exclusively worship Ram, Krishana and Ganesha.

(A Dalit activist, Personal Interview, 2016)

The unabated influence of the Sindhi Progressive narrative had been lately (between 2016 and 2019) disturbed by the group of activists affiliated with Dalit Sujaag Tehreek, who were working within several other splinter groups. The change was noticed during the 160th anniversary celebrations held at Judho and Hyderabad by Sindhi Kolhi Itihad and Pakistan Kolhi Itihad in which they consciously took the decision not to invite, as chief guests, the feudal or political class person elite. Yet this not yet institutionalized and abrupt change is not without ideological problem as the majority of Dalits continued to imagine Rooplo and Dalits through a Marxist-nationalist lens instead of an Ambedkarian one. Pahlaj Kolhi, the organizer of anniversary at Jhudo, posted on Facebook a happy note:

This was apolitical anniversary. In this anniversary there was no minister, advisor or senator. Despite that the sea of people flooded in, which proves that people have now do not accept this *waderko-bhotarko* (feudal) system.

<sup>28</sup> Source: Daily Sobh (Sindhi newspaper), Dated, 28th August, 2017. URL: [http://www.dailysobh.com/beta/epaper/news/news.php?news\\_id=236](http://www.dailysobh.com/beta/epaper/news/news.php?news_id=236) (accessed on 8 July 2019).

<sup>29</sup> Some historiographers depict Dahar as an unpopular Brahmin king that ruled over Buddhist majority, and Chach, Dahar’s father is believed to be the usurper of Buddhist Rai Dynasty (see Nicolas 2006; Naik 2010, p. 32.)

This supposedly apolitical statement about the program in which they awarded Dalit activists affiliated with different political parties for raising voice of indigenous 'Darawar' communities, framed the issue in the Marxist language of class struggle that obfuscates the problem of casteism. Hence, this Dalit agency that is carried away by the Marxist–Ashrafia ideology, many Kolhi activists see this re-nationalization of 'Amar Rooplo Kolhi' as the drive to create social and political space for their marginal community (Mal 2000; V. Kolhi 2011; B.M. Kolhi 2014). Given this ideologically-confused nature of Dalit activism, many of them are not particularly optimistic that the social hierarchies would alter in any fundamental ways.

Looking from the Ambedkarian perspective, this anti-colonial narrative could have been truly emancipatory, if it had also brought into focus the internal colonialism based on exclusion of Dalitbahujans. Since, it was not the case, and the Sufi nationalist representation of the Progressives undermined caste (also gender) as the political factors of oppression and exclusion, the postcolonial emancipation from the British imperialism cannot be understood by the Ambedkarites as the Dalit emancipation from the internal colonialism. Hence, the story of Rooplo Kolhi, as it is depicted and reframed, seems quite the reverse of Ambedkarian way of hero-making. For instance, it is quite the opposite of the battle of Koregaon, often mentioned by local Ambedkarites in Sindh, in which about 500 Mahar (Meghwar) of Bombay Native Infantry of the East India Company fought against the Peshwa rulers. The event is considered as the revenge of decades of treatment of Mahars as untouchables, and which is reframed as the source of revolutionary inspiration by the Ambedkarites. Millions of Dalits gather each year on the 1st of January in Bhima-Koregaon village in Pune, India to celebrate the event (Zelliot 2011; Kumbhojkar 2012).<sup>30</sup>

To sum up, the symbiosis of the Dalit and Ashrafia Progressive narratives seem counterproductive for the Dalit's own emancipation, as it does not allow Dalits to protest against the Ashrafia-Savarna elite and rather dilutes the question of existing caste discrimination, reciprocal respect, social inclusion, and justice. By showing that Rooplo stood for Parkar, the geographical region which is now projected as the integral part of Sindh, the Progressives suggest to stand for Sindh against the external enemy that may be the British or the Punjabi-Pakistani establishment. Many Dalit activists, mostly Parkari Kolhis, however, do not buy the Progressive's narrative wholeheartedly, and do not consider the Pakistani establishment as their enemy. Moreover, they could not have forgotten the persecution that they suffered at the hands of the local Ashrafia and Savarna elites of Parkar. For instance, Mavo Kolhi, in the anniversary of Rooplo Kolhi lamented the fact that:

A decade after Rooplo's martyrdom, in 1964 when the British was still there in Parkar, the incident happened in *Holi Garho* in *Pithapur* where Thakurs of *Dedhvero*, and Khosas of *Kabri*<sup>31</sup> attacked the Chatro Kolhi and his son (would-be groom). Thereafter, many Kolhis decided to leave Parkar migrate to Barrage area of Sindh to settle there permanently instead of returning back seasonally<sup>32</sup>. Top of Form

The Progressives' reconstruction of history could have been truly emancipatory for the Dalits if they had also brought into consideration these narratives of the Parkari that implicate the local Ashrafia and Savarna elite; or, for instance, Rooplo along with his community of Dalits had been depicted as fighting against the British or 'Company' with the consciousness of the fact that the Dalits were internally colonized and humiliated by the Sodha Thakurs and Ashrafia castes. Sindhi short story

<sup>30</sup> The Battle of Bhima Koregaon Documentary Film Official Release | Director—Somnath Waghmare, Published by Roundtable India on 20 Aug 2017, Direction and Camera—Somnath Waghmare, Editor -Deepu (Pradeep K P), URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDw43hJf\\_IY&feature=share](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDw43hJf_IY&feature=share) (accessed on 8 July 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Holi Garho is small village in Pithapur which is union council of Nangarparkar. Dedhvero and Kabri are also villages of Nangarparkar that were dominated by the Thakur (Savarna) and Khosa (Baloh Ashrafia) caste groups.

<sup>32</sup> Transhumance has been a common migratory practice among Parkaris, who used to migrate from Parkar to the plains of Indus (locally known as 'barrage area'). Before Partition of the Sub-continent and the sealing of borders, they used to migrate to Kutch and Malwa in Maharashtra (see Mal 2000).

writers, being under the influence of Ashrafia Sufi nationalist narrative could not have gone to that extent to frame their narratives against their own political and literary class.

Given the epistemological disparity between the huge volumes of the Progressive literature that ignores casteism, and the politically significant demographic strength, this Ashrafia (Savarna) intervention into Dalit spaces seems highly problematic. Ali Baba's (1994) depiction of Dalits and women, as it is inspired by their Gandhi-influenced Progressive predecessors, is comparable to the Hindi short stories of Munshi Premchand<sup>33</sup> who have given space to Dalit characters and brings forth Dalit exploitation in his stories, but his antidote was inspired by the functionalist approach of Arya Samaj, Dayanand Saraswathi, and Gandhi, and supported the idea of *shuddhi* (purity) and was against religious conversion (Rabbani 2016; Trivedi 2017). Their narratives are unlike of Ambedkar's Dalit, who is courageous and infused with zeal to fight against untouchability and exploitation and to live with dignity.

To evade this sociological reality, the Progressives give forth the post-hoc interpretations of the historical narratives, such as in the case of Rooplo Kolhi, or appropriated Dalit oppression for their Sufi nationalist cause that diluted the problematization of casteism (also of gender discrimination) and highlighted the problem of religious persecution, fanaticism, and also feudalism. The narrative of Rooplo Kolhi has both emancipatory as well as hegemonioic and counter-hegemonic aspects depending upon who patronizes whom. Since Rooplo did not primarily fight against Savarna-Ashrafia domination, and instead fought for restoring the Ashrafia-Savarna hegemony against British (colonial) domination, he cannot be invoked as a Dalit hero in an essentially Ambedkarian sense. Its dominant nationalist representation creates false pride in Rooplo and rather undermines the agency of the Dalits both in the historical past as well as in the present. By suggesting Dalits to play second fiddle as loyal subordinates to the Ashrafia-Savarna castes, Rooplo's narrative, in a way, dilutes the relations of domination and subordination existing between the ruling Ashrafia-Savarna and the ruled Dalit castes.

## 7. Conclusions

The analysis of the discourse emergent of popular Sindhi short stories reveals that even seemingly pro-Dalit narratives do not adequately expose the problem of casteism in the manner that could lead to Dalit emancipation. It was evident that although the Sufi ethic of interfaith harmony arbitrarily invokes Ashrafia morality, and temporarily creates an anxiety in Ashrafia consciousness to confront casteism, yet, at the empirical level, it facilitates the Ashrafia (but also Savarna) elite to appropriate heroes, histories, events, and spaces of Dalits, and invokes token sympathy and compassion for the Dalits and women. Hence, the Progressive Ashrafia reader and the activist, instead of feeling remorse or shame on his or her casteist patriarchy, is led to objectify Dalit bodies and appropriate Dalit agency and spaces.

Given this hegemonic influence of local Ashrafia class, the internal caste frictions are glossed over through political Sufism or Sindhi nationalism. The seemingly pro-Dalit narratives are, in fact tropes of inter-faith harmony, such as in the case of the exchange of persuasive dialogue in 'Infidel', which is often interpreted by Sindhi nationalists and the progressive writers as a caution against the threat to an 'exemplary' interfaith harmony that once existed between (Savarna) Hindus and (Sindhi) Muslims; or they, at best, proffer self-pity as in the case of the short story 'Dust of Earth and Stars of Sky'.

These narratives could be imagined out of the semi-historical narratives, such as in the case of Rooplo Kolhi's reframing as the Sindhi national hero along with Dalit heroes, to graft the oppression upon the external 'other'—that previously was the British Colonial power, and now it has been identified as the Pakistani state. Hence, it does not help expose the internal colonialism that predated the British. An Ambedkarite might have taken these stories or the narratives further and have inverted

<sup>33</sup> To read online some notable short stories of Premchand, see: URL: <https://www.rekhta.org/stories/eidgah-premchand-stories?lang=ur> (accessed on 6 June 2019).

the individual Dalits' tension into the collective resistance at the level of community. They may make the counterintuitive demands from the Progressives to invert both the pure fiction and the fictionalized history so that the frictions of caste and gender, or the embeddedness of caste, gender, and religion, could be brought to the fore. Most of the Progressives seem incapable to fulfill that demand as it conflicts with their Sufi nationalist narrative.

Contrary to what Ambedkarism may demand, the stories, in general, did not seem to sufficiently grasp the Dalit lifeworld. Resultantly, instead of giving Dalits emancipating thrust, the stories end up abruptly leading the Ashrafia reader (for whose consumption they primarily write) to pity the Dalits and sympathize with them, while leaving Dalits in a state of self-pity. The occasional appearances of Dalit men and women in Progressive narratives rather prove the peripherality of Dalits in Ashrafia-dominated spaces, and rather furnish the Ashrafia reader and the activist with the reasons to objectify the Dalit's vulnerability, helplessness, and womens' bodies. This Ashrafized and appropriated reframing of Dalitness by the Progressives and Sindhi civil society leads to the conclusion that although Dalits assert against the caste oppression by priding in their past, their agency to subvert Ashrafia-Savarna hegemony is considerably hampered and appropriated to sever the interest of their oppressors. It can, therefore, be argued that, colored in Sufi nationalist ideology, the progressives' definition of Dalit's oppression does not help invoke Dalit agency to emancipate from Sayedism or Ashrafia domination.

Moreover, the Progressive's narrative resonates with the functionalist approach that does not allow for radical questioning of caste. Amar Jaleel (2007, 2010, 2012), Naseem Kharal (see Nawaz 2007), and Ali Baba (1994) or even Noorul Huda Shah (2007a, 2007b) depiction of Dalits and women, as it is inspired by the Progressive predecessors who were influenced by Gandhi, is comparable to the Hindi short stories of Munshi Premchand. Premchand has given space to Dalit characters and brings forth Dalit's exploitation in his stories, but his antidote was inspired by the functionalist approach of Arya Samaj, Dayanand Saraswathi, and Gandhi. It seemed supportive of the idea of 'purity' and was against religious conversion. The same holds true of the Sindhi progressives. This ideological trajectory goes against the fundamental premises of Ambedkarian ideology that aims at inspiring courage and zeal to resist not merely against untouchability but for the annihilation of caste and the dignified life. In the context of Sindh, Progressives, unwittingly or wittingly following Gandhian line, come up with the post-hoc explanations and the narratives of history of the oppressed for fulfilling their Sufi nationalist goal of uniting caste or, rather, diluting casteism without necessarily confronting casteism and gender discrimination. Hence, it is evident that while the 'Progressives' in their writings and the ruling Ashrafia elite in their political acts apparently assume a critical posture towards religious suppression, casteism, and/or Sayedism, they are largely apologetic in their tenor, and do not show any commitment to the annihilation of casteism and inclusion of Dalits into privileged spaces of politics, society, and culture. Given the epistemological disparity between the vast volumes of Progressive literature that ignore casteism, and the politically significant demographic strength, this Ashrafia (Savarna) intervention into Dalit spaces seems highly problematic.

Related to this epistemological disparity is the lack of privileged space afforded to Dalit writers to express their feelings and emotions that no Ashrafia writer can. Except a few, which lie at the margin, there are no noteworthy Dalit short story writers found among the comity of the Progressives in Sindh. This situation, at least, at the level of epistemic justice or equality, continues to be heavily tilted in favor of the Progressive Ashrafia writers whose primary aim, even while giving voice to the Dalits, has been to suggest the unity of all Sindhi castes, including Dalit castes, against the external Ashrafia oppressor.

The literature produced in Sindhi language essentially gives voice to the Ashrafia-Savarna sentiments and cherishes Ashrafia value systems that are fundamentally premised on the superiority of Sayeds, Sammats, Baloch, and Savarna (Lohana, Brhamin, Thakur) castes. The Dalit middle class finding herself incapable to cope with the highly elaborate Progressive narrative either takes sides with the Sufi nationalists (Sindhi separatists, Marxists, pro-Pakistanis) of one type or the other, all of whom are invariably pro-Ashrafia in their social and political orientation and indifferent to the plight of Dalits. Given this Dalit predicament, it can be argued that the Progressives' social imaginary defies

the Ambedkarian approach to society and politics that argues for the eradication of casteism through concrete measures and conscious engagement. It can, therefore, be concluded that the seemingly progressive narratives framed in theo-political idiom may offer to the oppressed no more than token sympathy, compassion, self-pity, and false pride in history turned into a legend. Instead, they allow the appropriation of spaces and events of the oppressed, and the objectification of oppressed bodies by the oppressor.

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