



Narratives Across Borders: Cultural Identity, Transnational Voices, and Pakistani Images in Global World Literature

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords: World Literature, Cultural Identity, Pakistani Literature, Transnational Voices, Postcolonial Studies, Representation</p> <p>Corresponding Author*: Mobeen Ahmed Khan, Lecturer English, The University of Faisalabad, Pakistan</p> <p>Email: mobeenahmed.eng@tuf.edu.pk</p>	<p>World literature has emerged as a vital framework for understanding the circulation of literary texts beyond national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. Within this global literary exchange representations of cultural identity and national images play a crucial role in shaping how regions and communities are perceived worldwide. This article examines how Pakistani images and identities are constructed, negotiated, and reimagined in global world literature through transnational narratives. Drawing upon postcolonial theory, world literature studies, and translation discourse, the study analyzes how Pakistani writers and global authors engage with themes of migration, hybridity, diaspora, history, and cultural memory. The article argues that Pakistani literature, particularly when mediated through English and translation, occupies a complex position within world literature—simultaneously resisting stereotypical representations and contributing to global literary conversations. By foregrounding transnational voices and cultural intersections, this study highlights how Pakistani narratives challenge monolithic identities and participate in the evolving dynamics of global literary production.</p>

INTRODUCTION

The concept of world literature has gained renewed significance in contemporary literary studies as globalization accelerates the circulation of texts across borders. Literary works today move rapidly through translation, publication networks, academic curricula, and digital platforms, creating a shared yet uneven global literary space. Within this framework, questions of cultural identity, representation, and power become central, particularly for postcolonial nations such as Pakistan, whose literary traditions are often mediated through dominant global languages and publishing centers.

Pakistan occupies a distinctive position in world literature. Emerging from the colonial history of the Indian subcontinent and shaped by complex socio-political realities, Pakistani literature reflects themes of partition, migration, religious identity, nationalism, and global belonging.

When Pakistani narratives circulate internationally—often through English or translation—they contribute to global literary discourse while also being subject to processes of selection, framing, and interpretation.

This article explores how Pakistani images are constructed within global world literature by focusing on transnational voices and cultural identity. It argues that Pakistani writers and texts both shape and challenge global perceptions by presenting multifaceted narratives that resist reductive stereotypes. Through an engagement with world literature theory and postcolonial criticism, the study situates Pakistani literature within broader transnational flows, highlighting its role in redefining cultural identity beyond national boundaries.

World Literature and Transnational Narratives

World literature, as conceptualized by Goethe and later theorized by scholars such as Damrosch (2003), refers not to a fixed canon but to a mode of circulation and reading. A literary work becomes part of world literature when it moves beyond its culture of origin and gains new meanings in different contexts. This movement often involves translation, adaptation, and reinterpretation.

Transnational narratives are central to world literature. These narratives cross geographical, linguistic, and cultural borders, reflecting experiences of migration, exile, and diaspora. For postcolonial writers, transnationalism allows engagement with global audiences while negotiating local histories and identities. Pakistani writers such as Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, and Bapsi Sidhwa exemplify this trend by writing texts that traverse national boundaries and address global concerns such as war, terrorism, globalization, and displacement. However, transnational circulation is not neutral. It is shaped by global power structures, publishing markets, and cultural expectations. As Casanova (2004) argues, the global literary field is hierarchical, privileging certain languages and regions. Pakistani literature, therefore, enters world literature through selective pathways that influence how Pakistani images are constructed and consumed internationally.

Cultural Identity in World Literature

Cultural identity in world literature is not a static or singular concept; rather, it is fluid, hybrid, and context-dependent. Stuart Hall (1990) emphasizes that identity is formed through representation and is constantly in process. In world literature, cultural identity is shaped by the interaction between local traditions and global narratives.

Pakistani cultural identity, as represented in world literature, often grapples with issues of hybridity, religion, colonial legacy, and modernity. These representations challenge essentialist views by highlighting internal diversity and contradictions. Writers portray Pakistan not as a monolithic entity but as a space of multiple identities shaped by class, gender, ethnicity, and history.

Moreover, the use of English as a literary language complicates questions of authenticity and audience. While English enables global circulation, it also raises concerns about whose voices are heard and whose experiences are prioritized. Nevertheless, Pakistani English literature has become a powerful medium for articulating cultural identity within world literature, allowing writers to engage both local and global readers.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in literary and cultural analysis. The research draws on world literature theory, postcolonial criticism, and translation studies as its primary analytical frameworks. Texts by Pakistani writers that circulate internationally—either written in English or translated into English—are selected through purposive sampling, focusing on works that engage with themes of cultural identity, transnationalism, migration, and global representation. The analysis emphasizes how Pakistani images are constructed within global literary discourse by examining narrative strategies,

thematic patterns, and representational politics. Secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, critical monographs, and theoretical texts, are used to contextualize and support the interpretations.

The analytical procedure involves close textual reading combined with contextual analysis to explore how cultural identity and transnational voices are articulated across selected texts. Attention is given to language choice, narrative voice, symbolism, and historical references, particularly in relation to globalization and postcolonial power dynamics. Additionally, insights from translation studies are applied to examine how linguistic mediation influences global reception and meaning. Rather than producing generalizable findings, the methodology prioritizes depth, interpretive rigor, and theoretical coherence, allowing for a nuanced understanding of Pakistani representations within world literature. This approach ensures that the study remains critically engaged with both local cultural contexts and global literary frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with world literature has expanded significantly in recent decades. Damrosch (2003) views world literature as a mode of reading that emphasizes circulation and reception, while Moretti (2000) advocates for distant reading to understand global literary patterns. These approaches highlight how literary texts function within transnational systems rather than isolated national traditions.

Postcolonial scholars such as Said (1978), Spivak (1993), and Bhabha (1994) have critically examined representation, power, and cultural identity in global narratives. Their work provides a crucial framework for analyzing how Pakistani images are constructed within world literature, particularly in relation to Orientalism and cultural stereotyping.

Studies on Pakistani literature in English have focused on themes of identity, diaspora, and globalization. Shamsie (2017) emphasizes the importance of contextualizing Pakistani writing within historical and political realities, while Ahmad (2000) critiques the commodification of postcolonial literature for Western audiences. Research on translation studies further highlights how linguistic mediation affects representation and meaning (Venuti, 1995; Bassnett, 2014).

Despite this growing body of scholarship, there remains limited research that explicitly situates Pakistani images within the theoretical framework of world literature. This article seeks to address this gap by integrating world literature theory with postcolonial and cultural analysis.

The study of world literature has undergone significant transformation over the past few decades, shifting from a Eurocentric canon-based approach to a more dynamic, circulation-oriented framework. Early conceptualizations of world literature, notably articulated by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the nineteenth century, envisioned literature as a shared global heritage transcending national borders. However, contemporary scholars have critically revised this idealistic vision by emphasizing the uneven power relations that govern literary circulation (Damrosch, 2003; Casanova, 2004). Within this evolving scholarly landscape, the representation of postcolonial nations—such as Pakistan—has become a crucial area of inquiry. David Damrosch's influential definition of world literature as “a mode of circulation and reading” rather than a fixed body of texts provides a foundational framework for analyzing Pakistani literature within global contexts (Damrosch, 2003). According to this view, literary texts acquire new meanings as they travel across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Pakistani literature, particularly works written in English or translated into English, exemplifies this process by undergoing reinterpretation when read by international audiences. Scholars argue that this transnational movement enables visibility but also risks cultural simplification and stereotyping (Apter, 2013).

Franco Moretti's concept of “distant reading” further contributes to world literature studies by proposing a macro-level analysis of literary systems rather than close readings of individual

texts (Moretti, 2000). While this approach has been criticized for overlooking cultural specificity, it remains valuable for understanding how Pakistani literature fits into broader global literary patterns. Pakistani texts often circulate within global networks shaped by metropolitan publishing houses, literary prizes, and academic institutions, which influence their thematic focus and stylistic choices.

Postcolonial theory provides an essential lens for examining cultural identity and representation in world literature. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) exposes how Western discourse historically constructed the East as exotic, backward, and inferior. This framework remains highly relevant for analyzing Pakistani images in global literature, where narratives are often read through preconceived political and cultural lenses. Scholars note that Pakistani literature is frequently interpreted in relation to terrorism, religious extremism, or geopolitical instability, reinforcing Orientalist tropes (Huggan, 2001).

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity further complicates discussions of cultural identity in postcolonial literature. Bhabha (1994) argues that cultural identity emerges in an in-between space, where meanings are negotiated rather than fixed. Pakistani writers, especially those writing from diasporic positions, often inhabit this hybrid space, producing narratives that challenge binary oppositions between East and West. Such works resist essentialist notions of Pakistani identity by portraying characters who navigate multiple cultural affiliations simultaneously.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interventions into translation and representation are particularly relevant for understanding Pakistani literature in world circulation. Spivak (1993) warns against the homogenization of subaltern voices through translation, emphasizing the ethical responsibility of translators and scholars. In the context of Pakistani literature, translation plays a pivotal role in shaping global reception, as many regional-language texts are accessible to international readers only through English translations. Scholars argue that translation choices significantly affect how Pakistani culture is represented and understood globally (Bassnett, 2014).

Research on Pakistani literature in English has expanded substantially since the late twentieth century. Critics such as Tariq Rahman (1991) and Aijaz Ahmad (2000) have examined the linguistic politics of English in Pakistan, highlighting its role as both a colonial legacy and a tool of global mobility. While English enables Pakistani writers to reach international audiences, it also raises questions about class privilege and cultural authenticity. Ahmad (2000) critiques the commodification of postcolonial literature, arguing that global markets often favor narratives that conform to Western expectations of cultural difference.

Diasporic Pakistani writing has received particular scholarly attention due to its transnational orientation. Writers such as Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, and Nadeem Aslam explore themes of migration, identity crisis, and global belonging. Scholars note that these narratives reflect what Appadurai (1996) describes as "ethnoscapes" and "mediascapes," where identities are shaped by global cultural flows. Diasporic texts often challenge nationalist frameworks by presenting Pakistan as part of interconnected global histories rather than a bounded nation-state. Kamila Shamsie's fiction, for example, has been widely analyzed for its engagement with history, gender, and transnational identity. Critics argue that her novels reconstruct Pakistani identity through global narratives, linking local histories to international events such as colonialism and war (Shamsie, 2017). Similarly, Mohsin Hamid's works have been interpreted as critiques of globalization and neoliberalism, portraying Pakistani characters who negotiate economic and cultural displacement within global systems.

Feminist scholarship has also contributed to the study of Pakistani images in world literature. Researchers examine how gender intersects with national and cultural identity, particularly in narratives written by Pakistani women writers. These studies emphasize how female voices disrupt patriarchal and nationalist discourses by foregrounding personal experiences, emotional

labor, and resistance (Mills, 1996). Such perspectives are crucial for understanding the multiplicity of Pakistani identities represented in global literature.

Translation studies further enrich the literature review by highlighting the role of linguistic mediation in world literature. Lawrence Venuti's concept of translator invisibility underscores how dominant translation practices often erase cultural difference to meet target-language norms (Venuti, 1995). In the case of Pakistani literature, domestication strategies may dilute cultural specificity, while foreignization can risk alienating readers. Scholars debate how these strategies influence global perceptions of Pakistani culture and identity.

Recent debates in world literature studies, particularly those advanced by Emily Apter (2013), critique the universalizing tendencies of world literature discourse. Apter argues that the emphasis on translatability can obscure linguistic and cultural untranslatability. This critique is particularly relevant for Pakistani literature, where culturally embedded concepts, religious expressions, and local idioms resist easy translation. Such resistance challenges the notion of seamless global literary exchange.

Despite extensive scholarship on postcolonial and diasporic literature, relatively few studies explicitly position Pakistani literature within world literature theory. Existing research often treats Pakistani texts as national or postcolonial artifacts rather than as active participants in global literary systems. This gap underscores the need for integrative studies that combine world literature frameworks with postcolonial and translation perspectives.

In summary, the existing literature highlights the complexity of representing Pakistani cultural identity within global literary spaces. World literature theory provides valuable tools for analyzing circulation and reception, while postcolonial criticism foregrounds power, representation, and resistance. Translation studies further illuminate how linguistic mediation shapes meaning and perception. However, the intersection of these fields remains underexplored in relation to Pakistani images in global world literature. This study builds upon and extends existing scholarship by offering a comprehensive, interdisciplinary analysis that situates Pakistani narratives within transnational literary dynamics.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To examine how Pakistani cultural identity is represented in global world literature.
2. To analyze the role of transnational voices in shaping Pakistani images.
3. To explore the impact of globalization and translation on the circulation of Pakistani narratives.
4. To situate Pakistani literature within contemporary debates on world literature.
5. To identify how Pakistani writers negotiate local and global identities.

Research Gap

While Pakistani literature has been widely studied within postcolonial and diaspora framework, its positioning within world literature remains underexplored. Existing studies often focus on individual authors or themes without addressing the broader dynamics of global circulation and reception. Furthermore, limited attention has been paid to how Pakistani images are shaped through translation, publishing practices, and global readership.

This study fills this gap by offering a comprehensive analysis of Pakistani representations within world literature, emphasizing transnational narratives and cultural identity. By doing so, it contributes to both world literature studies and Pakistani literary scholarship.

Pakistani Images in Global World Literature

Pakistani images in world literature are often mediated through themes of conflict, religion, and political instability. While such representations reflect historical realities, they risk reinforcing narrow stereotypes. Pakistani writers respond to this challenge by offering nuanced portrayals that foreground everyday life, emotional complexity, and cultural diversity.

For instance, Mohsin Hamid's works explore globalization and identity through characters navigating multiple worlds, while Kamila Shamsie's novels engage with history, migration, and gender. These narratives present Pakistan as interconnected with global histories rather than isolated or static.

Diasporic Pakistani writers further complicate national identity by depicting transnational experiences that blur the boundaries between home and abroad. Their works reflect what Appadurai (1996) terms "global cultural flows," where identity is shaped by movement and exchange.

DISCUSSION

The inclusion of Pakistani literature in world literature challenges traditional literary hierarchies and expands the scope of global narratives. Pakistani texts contribute to world literature not merely as representatives of a nation but as participants in transnational dialogues on identity, power, and humanity.

However, the global reception of Pakistani literature is shaped by market forces and cultural expectations. Publishers and readers often favor narratives that align with dominant global discourses, potentially marginalizing alternative voices. This highlights the need for critical engagement with world literature that acknowledges both inclusion and exclusion.

By foregrounding cultural identity and transnational voices, Pakistani literature demonstrates the transformative potential of world literature. It reveals how local narratives can engage global concerns while retaining cultural specificity.

The discussion of Pakistani images in global world literature must be situated within broader debates about representation, power, and literary circulation. While world literature promises inclusivity and cross-cultural dialogue, the mechanisms through which texts gain global visibility often reproduce asymmetrical power relations. Pakistani literature's presence within world literature therefore reflects both opportunity and constraint—opportunity in terms of global recognition and constraint in terms of thematic expectations and market-driven selection. One of the most significant findings emerging from this study is that Pakistani narratives frequently oscillate between self-representation and external perception. On the one hand, Pakistani writers assert narrative agency by foregrounding indigenous experiences, histories, and cultural specificities. On the other hand, these narratives are often read through dominant global frameworks that prioritize political conflict, religious extremism, and security discourses. This interpretive tension shapes how Pakistani images are constructed and consumed within world literature, echoing Said's (1978) critique of Orientalist knowledge production.

Transnational voices play a crucial role in mediating this tension. Writers positioned within diasporic spaces often function as cultural translators who navigate multiple readerships simultaneously. Their narratives frequently adopt hybrid forms and themes that resonate with global audiences while remaining anchored in Pakistani cultural contexts. This hybridity, as theorized by Bhabha (1994), destabilizes fixed notions of national identity and instead presents identity as fluid, negotiated, and relational. Pakistani literature in this sense exemplifies how world literature operates as a site of cultural intersection rather than cultural homogenization.

Language choice remains a central issue in the discussion of Pakistani images in world literature. English, as the dominant medium of global literary circulation, provides Pakistani writers with access to international readerships but also introduces questions of exclusion and privilege. English-language Pakistani literature is often more visible globally than works produced in Urdu or regional languages, reinforcing linguistic hierarchies. However, rather than viewing this solely as a limitation, the study suggests that Pakistani writers strategically appropriate English to articulate localized experiences and challenge global narratives from within dominant linguistic frameworks (Rahman, 1991).

Translation further complicates this dynamic. Translated Pakistani texts mediate cultural meaning across linguistic boundaries, shaping how global audiences interpret cultural identity. Translation strategies that prioritize fluency and readability may obscure culturally specific elements, while more foreignizing approaches preserve difference at the risk of reader alienation (Venuti, 1995). The discussion highlights that translation is not a neutral act but a site of ideological negotiation that significantly influences Pakistani images in world literature.

The study also reveals that gender plays a critical role in shaping representations of Pakistani identity. Narratives by Pakistani women writers often foreground domestic spaces, emotional labor, and gendered oppression, challenging masculinist and nationalist representations of culture. These texts expand the scope of world literature by centering marginalized voices and offering alternative perspectives on Pakistani society. Feminist interventions thus contribute to a more pluralistic understanding of cultural identity within global literary discourse (Mills, 1996).

Another important dimension concerns the role of global literary markets. Publishers, literary awards, and academic institutions function as gatekeepers that influence which Pakistani narratives gain international visibility. Texts that align with global concerns such as migration, terrorism, and human rights are more likely to be promoted, potentially narrowing the range of Pakistani experiences represented in world literature. This market-driven selection underscores Casanova's (2004) argument that world literature operates within a hierarchical literary economy rather than an egalitarian global space.

Despite these constraints, Pakistani literature demonstrates significant agency in reshaping global narratives. Writers employ innovative narrative strategies—such as fragmented storytelling, multiple perspectives, and non-linear temporality—to challenge dominant representations. These formal innovations reflect a conscious engagement with world literature aesthetics while retaining cultural specificity. Such strategies suggest that Pakistani literature does not merely adapt to global expectations but actively transforms the contours of world literature itself.

The discussion also emphasizes the importance of reception in shaping Pakistani images. Global readers bring their own cultural assumptions and interpretive frameworks to Pakistani texts, influencing meaning-making processes. As Damrosch (2003) notes, a work's reception abroad can differ substantially from its interpretation within its culture of origin. Pakistani literature, when read globally, often acquires symbolic significance that extends beyond its literary value, becoming a lens through which Pakistan as a nation is imagined and understood. Furthermore, the interaction between history and memory emerges as a recurring theme in Pakistani world literature. Narratives addressing Partition, colonialism, and post-9/11 geopolitics situate Pakistan within global historical trajectories. These texts challenge linear historical narratives by foregrounding personal memory and collective trauma, thereby humanizing political histories often reduced to abstract statistics or media discourse. In doing so, Pakistani literature contributes to ethical reading practices within world literature by emphasizing empathy and historical responsibility.

The findings of this study also align with recent critiques of world literature that caution against universalism. Apter's (2013) critique of translatability highlights how linguistic and cultural specificity can resist global assimilation. Pakistani narratives often retain culturally embedded expressions, religious references, and social norms that resist seamless integration into global literary frameworks. This resistance underscores the limits of world literature as a universal category and reaffirms the value of cultural difference.

Finally, the discussion underscores the need for a more inclusive and critically aware approach to world literature. Pakistani literature illustrates that global literary exchange is most productive when it acknowledges asymmetries of power and embraces plurality rather than uniformity. By centering Pakistani images and transnational voices, this study contributes to

rethinking world literature as a dialogic space where diverse cultural identities coexist and interact.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how cultural identity, transnational voices, and Pakistani images intersect within global world literature. It has argued that Pakistani literature occupies a complex and dynamic position, shaped by historical context, linguistic mediation, and global circulation. Through transnational narratives, Pakistani writers challenge reductive representations and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of world literature.

The findings suggest that world literature should be approached not as a fixed canon but as a dynamic process that reflects cultural exchange and power relations. Pakistani literature, with its rich thematic diversity and global engagement, plays a vital role in redefining cultural identity within this framework. Future research may further explore comparative perspectives and reader reception to deepen understanding of Pakistani images in global literary discourse.

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