



Ashraf Hegemony and the Erasure of Caste: Towards a Pasmanda Literary Criticism in South Asian Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the persistent erasure of caste hierarchies among South Asian Muslims within canonical postcolonial literature. While sociological scholarship extensively documents the stratification of Muslim communities into Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal groups, dominant literary representations consistently privilege elite Ashraf subjectivities. Through a comparative analysis of canonical novels by Ahmed Ali, Attia Hosain, and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz alongside the sociological interventions of Ali Anwar and Masood Alam Falahi, this study demonstrates how literary canon formation functions as a mechanism of cultural hegemony, homogenizing Muslim identity and rendering Pasmanda (marginalized) communities invisible. Even Progressive writers, while addressing class and gender, largely overlook systemic caste oppression. To address this epistemic exclusion, the paper proposes "Pasmanda Literary Criticism," an interdisciplinary framework integrating intersectionality, postcolonial theory, and the sociology of literature to recover neglected histories and challenge monolithic constructions of the South Asian Muslim subject.

Keywords: Pasmanda Muslims, South Asian Literature, Caste Hierarchies, Intersectionality, Cultural Hegemony

Introduction

The discourse on caste in South Asia has traditionally been situated within the framework of Hindu society, often rendering the persistence of caste-like hierarchies among other religious communities invisible. Although Islam is founded upon the theological principles of equality, fraternity, and the rejection of hereditary social stratification, the lived realities of South Asian Muslims reveal a markedly

different social order. Across India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, Muslim communities continue to be structured through hierarchical distinctions commonly categorized as Ashraf (socially privileged groups claiming foreign or high-status lineage), Ajlaf (occupational and artisan communities), and Arzal (communities historically associated with stigmatized occupations). These divisions have shaped access to education, religious authority, marriage, political representation, and economic opportunities, thereby



reproducing forms of exclusion analogous to caste-based discrimination (Falahi 23–27).

Despite the growing body of sociological and political scholarship, literary studies have seldom interrogated the relationship between Muslim identity and caste. Canonical South Asian Muslim fiction has predominantly represented Ashraf experiences, privileging narratives centered on aristocratic households, landed elites, urban middle classes, and the cultural nostalgia of declining Muslim nobility. Novels such as Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*, Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz's *The Heart Divided* have become foundational texts in postcolonial literary studies because of their nuanced explorations of colonialism, nationalism, Partition, and Muslim identity. Yet the Muslim identities they portray overwhelmingly emerge from socially privileged locations, while the lives of occupational, artisan, and Dalit Muslim communities remain conspicuously absent. Consequently, these texts contribute to the construction of a homogenized Muslim subject that obscures the internal hierarchies shaping South Asian Muslim society.

The marginalization of Pasmanda voices in literature reflects broader mechanisms of cultural production and canon formation. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, literary fields are structured by unequal distributions of cultural capital, determining which voices acquire legitimacy and which remain peripheral (37). The historical dominance of Ashraf intellectuals within publishing, education, and literary institutions has ensured that elite Muslim experiences have come to stand as representative of the entire community. Such symbolic dominance corresponds to what Antonio Gramsci conceptualizes as 'cultural hegemony' wherein dominant social groups naturalize their worldview as universal while suppressing alternative narratives (57–61). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

famously argues that 'marginalized groups are frequently spoken for rather than enabled to speak within dominant discursive structures' (271–313). While Spivak's formulation emerged from colonial contexts, it provides a useful framework for understanding the literary invisibility of Dalit and backward Muslim communities too. Their exclusion demonstrates not only the politics of representation but also the epistemic limitations of postcolonial literary criticism, which has often treated Muslim identity as internally homogeneous. Consequently, proving that this is a systematic exclusion from the processes through which literary identity is produced and circulated.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality emphasizes that systems of oppression operate simultaneously rather than independently, producing complex forms of marginalization that cannot be understood through a single axis of identity (1244–45). Applied to South Asian Muslim communities, intersectionality reveals how caste discrimination persists within religious minorities despite shared experiences of communal marginalization. The experiences of Pasmanda Muslims thus occupy an intersection where religious minority status coexists with internal structures of caste oppression, complicating simplistic binaries of majority and minority politics.

By juxtaposing sociological studies of Muslim caste with fictional representations in Anglophone, Urdu, and selected regional literatures, this article examines how literature has participated in constructing a monolithic image of the "Indian Muslim." It further investigates the rare moments in which marginalized Muslim identities emerge within Progressive Urdu writing and regional literary traditions, demonstrating that these representations remain peripheral to the mainstream literary canon. The paper advocates for the development of a Pasmanda literary criticism that



integrates insights from caste studies, postcolonial theory, sociology of literature, and intersectionality to recover neglected histories and expand the scope of South Asian Muslim literary studies.

Research Gap

Although caste among South Asian Muslims has been extensively studied within sociology, history, and political science, its representation in literary texts remains significantly underexplored. Existing postcolonial literary criticism largely approaches Muslim identity as a homogeneous category, emphasizing religion, nationalism, colonialism, gender, and class while overlooking internal caste hierarchies. Furthermore, no comprehensive literary framework currently integrates Pasmada Studies with postcolonial literary criticism to examine how canonical texts privilege Ashraf subjectivities and marginalize Pasmada experiences. This study addresses this gap by bringing literary analysis into dialogue with sociological and historical scholarship on Muslim caste.

Research Objectives

The study aims to:

- Examine the representation of Muslim identity in canonical South Asian literary texts.
- Analyze the predominance of Ashraf perspectives and the marginalization of Pasmada communities.
- Compare literary representations with sociological studies on Muslim caste.
- Propose Pasmada Literary Criticism as an interdisciplinary framework for literary analysis.

Methodology

Research Design: The study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and interdisciplinary research design. It combines close reading, comparative literary analysis,

and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the relationship between literary representation and caste-based social hierarchies.

Corpus: The study examines three categories of texts:

- Primary Literary Corpus
 - Ahmed Ali – *Twilight in Delhi* (1940)
 - Attia Hosain – *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961)
 - Mumtaz Shah Nawaz – *The Heart Divided* (1949)
 - Selected short stories by Ismat Chughtai
 - Selected short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto
- Sociological and Political Corpus
 - Ghaus Ansari – *Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh* (1960)
 - Imtiaz Ahmad (Ed.) – *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India* (1978)
 - Ali Anwar – *Masawat Ki Jung* (2001)
 - Masood Alam Falahi – *Hindustan Mein Zat-Paat Aur Musalman* (2007)
 - Selected essays by Khalid Anis Ansari
- Secondary Corpus : The study also draws upon scholarship in postcolonial studies, sociology of literature, intersectionality, cultural studies, and Subaltern Studies to contextualize the analysis.

Sampling Technique: Purposive sampling is employed to select canonical literary texts that have significantly shaped dominant representations of Muslim identity, alongside foundational sociological works on Muslim caste and Pasmada politics.

Methods of Analysis: The study employs four complementary analytical methods:

- Close Reading: Examination of characterization, narrative voice, dialogue, symbolism, spatial settings, occupational identities, and social



relationships to identify explicit and implicit markers of caste.

- Comparative Textual Analysis: Comparative reading of literary texts alongside sociological and historical studies to identify convergences and divergences between fictional representation and lived social realities.
- Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Analysis of how literary discourse constructs Ashraf identity as normative while marginalizing Pasmanda subjectivities through narrative strategies, silence, and exclusion.
- Contextual-Historical Analysis: Interpretation of literary texts within the historical contexts of colonialism, nationalism, Partition, and postcolonial nation-building to understand how these developments shaped literary representations of Muslim identity.

Scope and Delimitation: The study focuses on twentieth-century South Asian literary texts in English and Urdu. It does not seek to provide an exhaustive survey of Muslim literature but instead examines selected canonical texts that have played a significant role in shaping dominant literary representations of Muslim identity.

Discussion and Analysis

1. Ashraf Hegemony and the Construction of the Canonical Muslim Subject

The overwhelming majority of canonical Muslim texts privilege Ashraf subjectivities - those associated with Syeds, Sheikhs, Mughals, Pathans, landed aristocracy, and educated urban elites, thereby producing a homogeneous image of the "Indian Muslim." This homogenization is ideological for it naturalizes elite experiences as universal while simultaneously rendering invisible the lives of occupational, artisan, and Dalit Muslim communities. As Imtiaz Ahmad argues, 'caste continues to regulate

social mobility, marriage, and status among Indian Muslims despite the egalitarian ideals of Islam' (Ahmad 18–20).

Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) offers perhaps the most influential literary representation of Muslim identity in colonial India. Frequently celebrated as an elegy for the decline of Indo-Islamic civilization, the novel depicts the gradual disintegration of Old Delhi under British colonial rule through the experiences of Mir Nihal and his family, capturing how "it was the city of kings and monarchs, of poets and story tellers, courtiers and nobles. But no king lives there today... and the old inhabitants, though still alive, have lost their pride and grandeur under a foreign yoke" (Ali 8). Critical scholarship has traditionally interpreted the novel as a meditation on colonial modernity, cultural nostalgia, and the erosion of traditional values. However, the "Muslim" identity mourned throughout the novel is, in fact, a distinctly Ashraf identity rooted in aristocratic lineage, cultural refinement, and inherited social prestige. Mir Nihal's household embodies the values of elite Muslim respectability: mastery over Persianized culture, elaborate etiquette (*tehzeeb*), family honour, property ownership, and social exclusivity, as Mir Nihal increasingly retreats into "his own world, and in the atmosphere of alchemy and medicine, a world which was still his own" (33). His grief over the changing city is therefore inseparable from the decline of Ashraf authority itself. The narrative repeatedly equates the loss of Muslim civilization with the loss of elite Muslim culture, observing that "only the coils of the rope, when the rope itself has been burnt, remain, to remind us of past splendour" (9), thereby excluding the experiences of those Muslim communities whose histories were never defined by aristocratic privilege.

The novel's representation of Delhi is imagined through mansions, courtyards, mosques, poetry



gatherings, pigeon flying, and upper-class domestic spaces, all of which contribute to an aestheticized nostalgia for Mughal culture, a world where "the air was filled with the shouts of the pigeon-fliers who were rending the atmosphere with their cries" (Ali 17). The labour that sustains these spaces remains largely invisible. Servants occasionally appear within the narrative, but they are rarely granted interiority or independent social identities. Their occupations exist merely to facilitate the lives of elite characters rather than to reveal their own experiences, as seen when Begam Nihal summons her domestic help: "Dilchain, O Dilchain, get up. The master has come" (11). Such representational strategies are significant because, as Pierre Bourdieu observes, 'literary fields often universalize the worldview of dominant classes while marginalizing alternative social realities' (39).

Equally revealing is the novel's silence regarding occupational and hereditary communities that historically constituted a substantial proportion of Delhi's Muslim population. Communities such as Julahas (weavers), Qassabs (butchers), Dhobis (washermen), Halalkhors (sanitation workers), and numerous artisan groups remain almost entirely absent from the narrative despite their undeniable historical presence, reduced at best to background scenery where "men lay on their bare beds half naked, tired after the sore day's labour" (Ali 7). This omission cannot simply be attributed to authorial preference or narrative economy. Rather, it reflects what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies as the epistemic exclusion of subaltern groups, whereby dominant discourses determine whose lives become narratable and whose remain outside the boundaries of representation (285–90). The absence of Pasmanda Muslims in *Twilight in Delhi* is therefore not an accidental silence but a consequence of a literary imagination structured by elite social consciousness.

Ali Anwar's *Masawat Ki Jung*, written more than six decades later, demonstrates that caste discrimination among Indian Muslims extends to marriage practices, access to mosques, educational opportunities, and political representation (Anwar 48–55). His work exposes a social reality fundamentally at odds with the harmonious Muslim community imagined in much canonical fiction. Whereas Ahmed Ali explores the decline of aristocratic dignity, Anwar's articulation of the Pasmanda movement reveals that the majority of Indian Muslims belong not to Ashraf elites but to historically marginalized occupational communities. The juxtaposition of these texts reveals that literature and sociology often narrate entirely different Muslim histories: one centred on elite cultural loss, the other on structural inequality and exclusion.

Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) similarly exemplifies the predominance of Ashraf subjectivity within South Asian Muslim fiction. Set against the backdrop of late colonial India and the years surrounding Independence and Partition, the novel follows Laila, a young woman negotiating questions of gender, education, family authority, and political transformation. Despite its sensitivity toward gendered oppression, the novel remains largely silent on caste as a constitutive feature of Muslim social life. Laila's struggles unfold within the enclosed world of taluqdars, educated professionals, and aristocratic families whose conflicts revolve around inheritance, marriage, nationalism, and modernity rather than hereditary social exclusion. As Laila reflects on her sheltered existence within this elite echelon, she notes, "I had lived in a world of women, in a house governed by the strict, unquestioned rules of my grandfather, Baba Jan" (Hosain 14).

The novel's domestic spaces illustrate this classed and caste-marked perspective. Servants, cooks, attendants, and household workers frequently appear within the



narrative, but they remain peripheral figures whose identities are defined by their service to elite families. The text underscores this distance by describing domestic workers merely as those who "moved like silent shadows, knowing their place and keeping to it" (Hosain 31). Their voices, histories, and social locations receive little narrative attention. Even when the novel critiques feudalism, it does so primarily from the perspective of those who inherit its privileges rather than those whose labour sustains it. Laila herself recognizes this deeply entrenched structural divide, observing of the household staff that "their lives were bound to ours by generations of service" (Hosain 23). Such representational choices are particularly significant because, as Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, 'systems of oppression cannot be understood through a single axis of identity alone' (1245). Although *Sunlight on a Broken Column* successfully interrogates gender inequality, its failure to engage with caste demonstrates the limitations of reading Muslim identity solely through gender and class while overlooking intra-community hierarchies.

Mumtaz Shah Nawaz's *The Heart Divided* (1949) extends this representational tendency into the political sphere. Written in the immediate aftermath of Partition, the novel has frequently been interpreted as an important fictional engagement with the ideological debates surrounding the creation of Pakistan. The novel's principal characters belong to educated, affluent, and politically influential families whose anxieties revolve around constitutional reforms, national identity, education, and leadership. This elite vanguardism is articulated explicitly when the characters assert their political entitlement, declaring that "it is the educated classes who must guide the destiny of our people" (Shah Nawaz 87). Their debates implicitly assume that they speak for all Indian Muslims, despite representing only a socially privileged minority, while occupational and marginalized Muslim communities remain almost

entirely absent from the narrative landscape. This absence is particularly striking because historical studies have shown that artisan communities, landless labourers, weavers, butchers, sanitation workers, and other occupational groups constituted a substantial proportion of the Muslim population in colonial India (Falahi 72–81). Nevertheless, these communities scarcely appear within Shah Nawaz's fictional world except as indistinct background figures. The marginalized masses are reduced to mere atmospheric spectacle, described broadly as the "nameless crowds that filled the streets" (Shah Nawaz 142). Such representational choices reinforce what Edward Said describes as 'the production of "essentialized identities", wherein internal diversity is subsumed under a singular and seemingly coherent category' (65–68). While Said developed this critique in relation to Orientalist discourse, it is equally applicable to literary texts that erase internal differences by presenting one social group's experiences as universally representative.

A comparative reading of Ahmed Ali, Attia Hosain, and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz reveals remarkable continuity despite their differing thematic concerns. While *Twilight in Delhi* mourns the decline of Indo-Islamic aristocratic culture, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* explores elite Muslim womanhood during the transition to modernity, and *The Heart Divided* examines Muslim political consciousness during Partition, all three novels share a common social location. Their protagonists inhabit households characterized by education, inherited prestige, cultural refinement, and economic privilege. In these narratives, the dominant perspective remains rigidly upper-class, rooted in homes where "the past was a living reality of power and prestige" (Hosain 19). None of these texts substantially engages with hereditary occupations, caste discrimination, mosque segregation, or social exclusion among Muslims.



Masood Alam Falahi's *Hindustan Mein Zat-Paat Aur Musalman* strengthens this critique by demonstrating that caste among South Asian Muslims possesses deep historical roots rather than being a recent sociological phenomenon. Through an examination of Islamic legal writings, Persian chronicles, medieval histories, and colonial records, Falahi argues that Ashraf-Ajlaf-Arzal distinctions have shaped Muslim society for centuries (93–104). These historical findings expose the inadequacy of canonical literary representations that portray Muslim society as internally unified. The absence of such information constitutes a form of selective representation that privileges elite experiences while suppressing uncomfortable social realities.

This pattern may be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of “cultural capital”. According to Bourdieu, literary canons emerge not simply because certain texts possess aesthetic merit but because particular social groups exercise greater control over institutions of publication, education, criticism, and cultural legitimacy (42–45). Applied to South Asian Muslim literature, this framework suggests that Ashraf writers occupied positions that enabled their narratives to define the cultural image of Muslim identity. Their novels subsequently entered university syllabi, postcolonial criticism, and the broader literary canon, while narratives emerging from Pasmanda communities remained comparatively invisible. Canon formation, therefore, cannot be separated from the unequal distribution of symbolic power.

Antonio Gramsci's notion of “cultural hegemony” states that ‘hegemony operates by transforming the worldview of dominant groups into accepted common sense, thereby rendering alternative perspectives unnecessary or even unimaginable’ (59–61). Canonical Muslim fiction demonstrates precisely such a process. By repeatedly depicting elite households as representative of Muslim life, these texts normalize

Ashraf experience as the default expression of Muslim identity. Readers consequently come to associate Muslim culture with *Nawabi* refinement, Persianized etiquette, political leadership, and aristocratic nostalgia, while occupational communities remain absent from the literary imagination.

The findings of the present analysis indicate that the literary canon has participated in the symbolic production of a homogeneous Muslim identity by privileging Ashraf narratives and marginalizing caste-based diversity. This does not diminish the literary achievements of Ahmed Ali, Attia Hosain, or Mumtaz Shah Nawaz, whose works remain indispensable to South Asian literary history. Rather, it suggests that their narratives should be read critically, with attention to the silences that accompany their sophisticated portrayals of colonialism, gender, and nationalism. When these texts are placed in dialogue with the sociological interventions of Ali Anwar and Masood Alam Falahi, it becomes evident that the omission of Pasmanda Muslims is neither incidental nor insignificant. Instead, it constitutes a form of symbolic erasure that has profoundly shaped both literary criticism and public understandings of Muslim identity in South Asia.

2. The Erasure of Pasmanda Muslims: Reading Silence alongside Sociological Reality

Literary silence is never ideologically neutral. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995) argues, silences are produced through historical processes that determine what enters the archive and what remains excluded (49). Similarly, in literary production, omission often functions as a powerful narrative strategy that shapes collective memory by privileging certain histories over others. When canonical Muslim novels consistently foreground aristocratic



households while overlooking occupational and Dalit Muslim communities, they participate in constructing a selective version of Muslim identity that obscures internal structures of inequality.

Ali Anwar's *Masawat Ki Jung* provides one of the most significant interventions against this homogenized understanding of Muslim identity. Rejecting the conventional binary that divides Indian society into Hindus and Muslims, Anwar argues that caste constitutes the most decisive factor shaping the everyday experiences of Indian Muslims (43–48). The term "Pasmanda," literally meaning "those left behind," functions not simply as a descriptive category but as a political identity encompassing backward, artisan, and Dalit Muslim communities historically excluded from positions of religious, educational, and political authority. According to Anwar, the dominant leadership within Indian Muslim institutions has long been monopolized by Ashraf elites who have consistently presented their own concerns as those of the entire Muslim community (72–76). Consequently, issues such as Urdu, minority rights, personal law, and communal violence have received far greater public attention than questions concerning caste discrimination, hereditary occupations, educational deprivation, and social exclusion within Muslim society itself.

Masood Alam Falahi extends this critique by tracing the historical origins of caste among South Asian Muslims. In *Hindustan Mein Zat-Paat Aur Musalman*, Falahi refutes the common assumption that caste distinctions among Muslims developed solely through colonial administrative practices. Drawing upon Qur'anic commentaries, Hadith literature, medieval Persian chronicles, legal texts, and historical documents, he demonstrates that Ashraf-Ajlaf-Arzal distinctions evolved over centuries and gradually acquired institutional legitimacy within South Asian Muslim societies (Falahi 66–93). More importantly,

Falahi documents how these hierarchies influenced marriage alliances, religious leadership, burial practices, and occupational mobility. Such evidence fundamentally challenges literary representations that depict Muslim society as internally homogeneous.

The significance of Falahi's intervention lies not merely in documenting caste but in exposing the ideological consequences of denying its existence. Canonical literature often reproduces this confusion. Characters are represented as members of a unified religious community facing colonial oppression, nationalist uncertainty, or patriarchal control, yet the internal inequalities that shaped their interactions receive little or no narrative attention. Such representations inadvertently reinforce the widespread belief that caste among Muslims is insignificant or exceptional rather than systemic.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's formulation of the subaltern offers an important theoretical lens through which to interpret this literary silence. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak argues that 'structures of knowledge frequently produce representations of marginalized groups without enabling them to articulate their own experiences' (275–86). This insight is particularly relevant to Pasmanda Muslims. Pasmanda communities have seldom appeared as speaking subjects possessing historical agency. Even when lower-class Muslim characters appear within fiction, they often function as servants, labourers, or background figures whose existence facilitates the development of elite protagonists rather than constituting independent centres of narrative consciousness.

In each of the canonical novels discussed earlier, readers encounter Muslim society through the consciousness of socially privileged characters. Their observations define the moral and cultural universe of the text, determining which experiences deserve sustained attention and which remain peripheral. The



everyday realities of artisan families, sanitation workers, butchers, weavers, washermen, and other occupational communities never become central narrative concerns because they exist outside the protagonists' social world.

This process also explains why the category of "Muslim literature" itself requires critical reconsideration. Rather than representing the diversity of Muslim social life, much canonical fiction reflects the worldview of those groups that historically possessed access to education, publishing networks, literary institutions, and cultural authority. The canon thus functions less as a transparent record of Muslim experience than as an archive shaped by unequal relations of power. Reading literary texts alongside the sociological interventions of Ali Anwar and Masood Alam Falahi therefore reveals not simply the absence of Pasmada Muslims but the mechanisms through which that absence has been normalized.

Khalid Anis Ansari argues that one of the greatest limitations of contemporary Muslim political discourse lies in its inability to recognize caste as a constitutive dimension of Muslim social life. He observes that dominant Muslim institutions continue to foreground communal identity while marginalizing questions of caste-based inequality, thereby reproducing Ashraf privilege under the rhetoric of religious unity (114–18). This critique is equally applicable to literary studies. The repeated invocation of a unified Muslim subject within canonical fiction mirrors the political discourse criticized by Ansari, where internal social differences are subordinated to a singular religious identity.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality offers an additional framework for understanding why the absence of Pasmada narratives has remained largely unchallenged. Crenshaw argues that systems of oppression rarely operate independently; instead, individuals experience multiple, overlapping forms of

marginalization that cannot be adequately explained through a single category such as race, gender, or class (1244–49). Pasmada Muslims occupy precisely such an intersectional position. They experience discrimination not only as members of a religious minority within India but also as lower-status communities within Muslim society itself. An intersectional reading reveals that Muslim identity cannot be understood solely through religion; it must also account for caste, occupation, class, and gender as mutually constitutive structures shaping lived experience.

The findings of the present study therefore suggest that the absence of Pasmada Muslims from canonical South Asian literature should not be interpreted merely as a gap in representation but as a structural feature of literary production itself. Across *Twilight in Delhi*, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, and *The Heart Divided*, the protagonists emerge from socially privileged Ashraf households whose experiences are repeatedly universalized as representative of Muslim society. Occupational communities, artisan groups, Dalit Muslims, and other Pasmada identities remain almost entirely absent despite their historical presence. This absence is particularly significant because contemporary sociological studies by Ali Anwar and Masood Alam Falahi establish that caste has profoundly shaped Muslim social organization for centuries (Anwar 61–75; Falahi 93–104).

Another significant finding concerns the relationship between literary canon formation and social power. The study demonstrates that literary visibility is closely linked to cultural capital and institutional authority. Canonical texts did not become representative simply because of their aesthetic achievements; they also emerged from authors positioned within privileged social and educational networks. Their narratives consequently entered



academic syllabi, publishing circuits, and postcolonial criticism, thereby shaping successive generations' understanding of Muslim identity. Literary canon formation, therefore, has functioned as an important mechanism through which caste inequalities have been rendered culturally invisible.

Finally, the comparative reading undertaken in this study indicates that sociological and literary archives narrate fundamentally different histories of South Asian Muslims. While sociologists document hereditary inequality, occupational stratification, marriage restrictions, and social exclusion, canonical literature overwhelmingly emphasizes nostalgia, nationalism, elite domesticity, and Partition. These divergent narratives reveal that literature is not simply reflecting reality but actively participating in the production of historical memory. The erasure of Pasmanda communities from literary discourse has consequently shaped broader public understandings of Muslim identity, reinforcing the dominance of Ashraf perspectives within both literary criticism and cultural imagination.

3. Towards a Pasmanda Literary Criticism: Progressive Voices and Future Possibilities

Important departures from elite narratives emerge within the Progressive Writers' Movement, whose authors sought to expose the realities of poverty, exploitation, labour, and social inequality. Unlike the aristocratic settings of Ahmed Ali, Attia Hosain, and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz, Progressive Urdu writers frequently turned their attention toward ordinary people — workers, artisans, domestic servants, peasants, prostitutes, refugees, and the urban poor. Their commitment to social realism expanded the range of literary subjects and challenged many of the romanticized representations that had previously dominated Urdu literature. Their works represent an

important transition rather than a complete break from Ashraf-centric literary discourse.

Among Progressive writers, Ismat Chughtai occupies a particularly significant position because of her uncompromising portrayal of social inequality within Muslim households. Her fiction consistently interrogates patriarchy, class privilege, sexuality, and domestic labour through sharply observed everyday interactions. Stories such as "The Quilt" ("Lihaaf"), "The Homemaker" ("Gharwali"), and "Roots" ("Jadein") expose the unequal relationships between elite Muslim families and the servants, maids, wet nurses, and labourers who sustain domestic life. Unlike earlier canonical novels, Chughtai allows these marginalized figures greater narrative visibility, revealing how class privilege is reproduced within intimate spaces. Domestic workers are not merely decorative background figures; they become active participants whose labour and emotional lives shape the social world of the narrative.

In "The Quilt," the servant Rabbo is indispensable to Begum Jaan's physical and psychological survival, as Chughtai notes that "Rabhu had no other household duties... She sat on the bed massaging Begum Jaan's back, or arms, or legs" (12). Rabbo's intimate presence disrupts the traditional domestic hierarchy, provoking resentment among the other servants who observe that "the witch! She ate, sat and even slept with Begum Jaan!" (Chughtai 13). Similarly, in "The Homemaker," the protagonist Lajo who is an unpaid maid who transitions into a mistress and wife subverts bourgeois morality. Chughtai highlights how Lajo's illegitimate social standing grants her a degree of autonomy outside elite conventions: "Being a bastard served her in good stead! God forbid, if she had been the legitimate child of her parents, she would have faced the music now!" (94). Even when divorced and cast out, Lajo's self-worth remains tethered to her domestic mastery over the household space: "Never



before in her life had she got the opportunity to become the mistress of a household. She missed the house... The place must be in a mess" (Chughtai 94). In "Roots," the matriarch Amma relies on the enduring labor and presence of domestic workers as she remains steadfast "like a banyan tree that stands upright" amidst Partition's devastation, agonizing over whether displaced families will ever "get the opportunity to develop their roots again" (Chughtai 138).

Despite this important intervention, Chughtai seldom identifies the caste locations of these characters. Servants and labourers are represented primarily through economic deprivation and gendered vulnerability rather than hereditary social status. This silence is particularly noteworthy because many occupations depicted in her fiction were historically associated with Pasmada communities. When studied in light of Masood Alam Falahi's historical study of occupational hierarchies among Muslims, Chughtai's domestic workers can be understood as occupying social positions shaped not only by class but also by caste (118–24). Yet the narrative itself rarely names these structures explicitly.

Saadat Hasan Manto similarly redirected literary attention toward those excluded from respectable society. His stories are populated by prostitutes, refugees, labourers, beggars, pimps, mentally ill individuals, and victims of Partition whose lives challenge bourgeois notions of morality and civilization. Manto's achievement lies in restoring dignity to individuals whom society had dismissed as disposable. In "Hatak" ("The Insult"), Manto illustrates the everyday humiliations experienced by women pushed to the margins of respectable social life. When the sex worker Sugandhi is rejected by a wealthy client with a disgusted "Oun!", she experiences an existential awakening, feeling as though "someone had struck her across the face with a

whip" (Manto 52), which ultimately compels her to cast out her parasitic lover Madho and reclaim her autonomy.

Manto's celebrated Partition stories showcase the devastating human consequences of communal violence rather than nationalist triumphalism. In "Toba Tek Singh," the absurdity of political borders is embodied by the lunatic Bishan Singh, who collapses in the no-man's-land between two nations: "There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh" (Manto 14). In "Khol Do" ("Open It"), Manto exposes the horror of sexual violence through Sakina, a traumatized young refugee. When the doctor attending to her unconscious body instructs her father to "[t]he window, open it!", Sakina's conditioned reflex causes her to mechanically respond: "With lifeless hands she slowly undid the knot of her waistband and lowered her shalwar" (Manto 76). Her father, Sirajuddin, screams with tragic joy, "She's alive! My daughter is alive!", while "the doctor broke into a cold sweat" (Manto 76). Similarly, "Thanda Gosht" ("Cold Meat") lays bare the dehumanizing effects of communal violence when Ishwar Singh confesses his inability to perform sexually after abducting a Muslim girl during a riot, realizing only after the act that "she was dead... cold flesh" (Manto 88).

Yet Manto's radical humanism remains predominantly grounded in class and existential suffering rather than caste. His marginalized characters frequently exist outside structures of social respectability, but the specific historical experiences of Pasmada communities remain largely unarticulated. The artisan, butcher, weaver, washerman, or sanitation worker rarely appears as a character whose hereditary social identity becomes central to the narrative. Instead, marginalization is represented as a



consequence of poverty, displacement, gender, or political violence. This emphasis reflects the ideological priorities of Progressive literature, which interpreted social inequality primarily through Marxist analyses of class exploitation. Although immensely valuable in exposing economic injustice, such an approach often overlooked the persistence of caste as a distinct form of social organization within Muslim communities.

Nevertheless, even within these socially conscious texts, caste among Muslims seldom becomes an explicit object of literary inquiry. Characters experience deprivation because they are poor, displaced, or exploited, but the historical structures that organize Muslim occupational communities remain largely unnamed. This absence does not diminish the progressive achievements of these writers; rather, it reveals the intellectual horizons within which they were working. The Progressive Writers' Movement emerged in response to colonialism, capitalism, feudalism, and fascism, with Marxism providing its dominant analytical vocabulary. Consequently, class frequently overshadowed other forms of structural inequality. Contemporary Pasmanda scholarship demonstrates, however, that caste cannot simply be subsumed under class, since hereditary status, endogamy, and ritual exclusion continue to shape Muslim social life independently of economic conditions (Anwar 63–70).

Ahmed Ali, Attia Hosain, Mumtaz Shah Nawaz, Chughtai, and Manto, collectively broadened the representation of Muslim life in important ways. Yet none of them possessed the conceptual vocabulary later developed through the Pasmanda movement to identify caste as a central category of analysis. It is precisely this gap that contemporary literary criticism must address by bringing sociological knowledge into dialogue with canonical texts rather than treating

literature and social history as separate intellectual domains.

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that the absence of Pasmanda Muslims from mainstream South Asian literature cannot be explained solely by the literary preferences of individual authors. Rather, it reflects a broader intellectual tradition in which Muslim identity has predominantly been conceptualized through religion, nationalism, class, and gender, while caste has remained either invisible or insufficiently theorized. The emergence of the Pasmanda movement in the late twentieth century fundamentally challenges this tradition by insisting that Muslim society cannot be understood without acknowledging the historical realities of Ashraf dominance and the structural marginalization of Ajlaf and Arzal communities. Consequently, the present study argues for the development of Pasmanda Literary Criticism as a distinct interpretative framework capable of re-reading canonical texts through the lens of caste. Such a framework does not seek to replace existing approaches within postcolonial literary studies but rather to extend them by incorporating a dimension of social experience that has long remained neglected.

Pasmanda Literary Criticism begins from the premise that literary representation is inseparable from social power. Every narrative privileges certain experiences while marginalizing others, and the construction of literary canons is itself a political process shaped by unequal access to education, publication, and cultural authority. Following Pierre Bourdieu, literary production must therefore be understood as a field structured by competing forms of symbolic capital rather than as a neutral repository of aesthetic achievement (Bourdieu 37–45). Elite Muslim experiences acquired cultural legitimacy not merely because of their artistic sophistication but because they emerged from social groups possessing greater



institutional influence. Pasmanda Literary Criticism consequently shifts attention from what literature represents to what it excludes, treating silence itself as an object of critical inquiry.

Such an approach also necessitates a reconsideration of the relationship between literature and history. Literary texts have frequently been treated as transparent reflections of historical reality, particularly in studies of colonialism and Partition. Ahmed Ali's nostalgia for Mughal Delhi, Attia Hosain's portrayal of aristocratic domestic life, and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz's engagement with Muslim nationalism each illuminate important dimensions of twentieth-century Muslim history. Yet these narratives remain incomplete because they exclude the everyday realities of artisan communities, hereditary occupations, and caste-based discrimination documented by Ali Anwar and Masood Alam Falahi (Anwar 61–75; Falahi 93–104). Such an interdisciplinary methodology enables scholars to identify the ideological assumptions underlying literary representation and to recover histories obscured by canonical discourse.

The framework further benefits from the insights of intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw's argument that systems of oppression intersect rather than operate independently is particularly relevant to Pasmanda communities, whose experiences cannot be reduced either to religious minority status or to economic deprivation alone (Crenshaw 1244–49). Pasmanda Muslims frequently negotiate multiple structures of exclusion simultaneously: they encounter discrimination as Muslims within a majoritarian society while also experiencing caste-based marginalization within their own religious community. Gender further complicates these experiences, as Pasmanda women often confront the combined effects of caste, class, patriarchy, and communal discrimination. An intersectional

Pasmanda framework, by contrast, recognizes that identities are historically constituted through overlapping systems of power, thereby enabling more nuanced analyses of character, narrative voice, and social space.

The implications of this framework extend beyond the specific texts examined in the present study. Future research may recover neglected representations of Pasmanda life within regional literatures written in Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Punjabi, Kashmiri, and other South Asian languages. Equally important is the study of contemporary Dalit Muslim autobiographies, oral histories, memoirs, and digital narratives that challenge the cultural authority of established literary institutions. Such texts have the potential to reshape the existing canon by introducing voices historically excluded from mainstream publishing and academic criticism. In this regard, Pasmanda Literary Criticism is not merely an analytical method but also a critical intervention into the politics of canon formation.

Another important implication concerns the teaching of South Asian literature within universities. Current curricula frequently include novels such as *Twilight in Delhi* and *Sunlight on a Broken Column* as representative texts of Muslim experience in colonial India. While these works undoubtedly deserve their canonical status, they should be taught alongside sociological writings by Ali Anwar, Masood Alam Falahi, and Khalid Anis Ansari so that students can recognize the distinctions between literary representation and social reality. Such an approach would encourage critical engagement with the internal diversity of Muslim communities rather than reinforcing the assumption of cultural homogeneity.

The findings of the present study therefore suggest that Pasmanda Literary Criticism has the potential to make a significant contribution to postcolonial studies, comparative literature, and South Asian



literary criticism. The objective of Pasmanda Literary Criticism is neither to reject the existing literary canon nor to diminish the artistic achievements of canonical Muslim writers. Rather, it seeks to expand the boundaries of literary inquiry by incorporating voices, experiences, and histories that have long remained outside dominant frameworks of interpretation. Recognizing these silences allows literary criticism to move beyond essentialized notions of Muslim identity and toward a more inclusive understanding of South Asian literature—one that acknowledges not only religion and nation but also caste, occupation, labour, and social inequality as fundamental categories of analysis. Such a reorientation is essential if literary studies are to engage meaningfully with the complex realities of Muslim life in South Asia and to ensure that the "missing narrative" of Pasmanda Muslims is no longer excluded from the region's literary imagination.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the marginalization of Pasmanda Muslims in mainstream South Asian literature is not an incidental omission but a structural consequence of Ashraf dominance in literary production and canon formation. A comparative reading of Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*, Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz's *The Heart Divided* alongside the sociological works of Ali Anwar and Masood Alam Falahi reveals a clear divergence between literary representation and social reality. While sociological scholarship consistently documents caste as a defining feature of Muslim social organization, canonical fiction largely presents a unified Muslim identity shaped by aristocratic culture, elite domesticity, political leadership, and middle-class respectability. The histories and lived experiences of artisan communities, hereditary occupational groups, and

Dalit Muslims remain largely absent from these narratives.

The study further argues that this absence is sustained through the unequal distribution of symbolic power and cultural authority. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, it shows that literary canons are shaped not only by aesthetic value but also by the social locations from which narratives emerge and acquire legitimacy. The exclusion of Pasmanda communities therefore reflects broader processes of cultural hegemony that normalize Ashraf experience as the representative expression of Muslim identity while obscuring the diversity and inequalities within South Asian Muslim society.

The analysis also identifies important departures within the Progressive Writers' Movement. Writers such as Ismat Chughtai and Saadat Hasan Manto, redirected literary attention toward labour, poverty, displacement, and social marginalization. Yet their critique remained largely confined to class, patriarchy, and economic exploitation, without consistently recognizing caste as an autonomous structure shaping Muslim social life. Their writings expanded the social landscape of Urdu fiction but did not substantially challenge the invisibility of Pasmanda identities.

A central contribution of this study is the formulation of Pasmanda Literary Criticism as an interdisciplinary framework for reading South Asian Muslim literature. Integrating insights from Pasmanda Studies, postcolonial theory, Subaltern Studies, intersectionality, and the sociology of literature, this framework treats caste as an essential category for literary analysis and reads silence, omission, and selective representation as meaningful forms of cultural production. Rather than displacing canonical texts, it invites their re-evaluation by placing literary



narratives in dialogue with historical and sociological scholarship. Such a reading reveals the ideological assumptions embedded within canonical representations and broadens the understanding of Muslim identity beyond religion, nationalism, gender, and class to include caste, occupation, and social hierarchy.

Future research should extend this inquiry to Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Punjabi, Kashmiri, and other regional literary traditions, where the experiences of marginalized Muslim communities remain insufficiently examined. Greater attention should also be given to Dalit Muslim autobiographies, oral histories, memoirs, contemporary fiction, and digital narratives that articulate Pasmada experiences from within the community. Such scholarship can

contribute to a more representative literary archive and encourage a critical reassessment of the processes through which canons are constructed and sustained.

Recovering the "missing narrative" of Pasmada Muslims is therefore not simply a matter of expanding literary representation; it requires rethinking the assumptions that have shaped South Asian literary criticism itself. A critical engagement with caste exposes the limits of homogenized conceptions of Muslim identity and offers a more historically grounded understanding of South Asian Muslim society. Recognizing these internal diversities opens new possibilities for postcolonial literary scholarship and moves the discipline toward a more inclusive and analytically rigorous interpretation of the region's literary traditions.

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