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NON-HUMAN NARRATIVE AGENCY

Textual sedimentation in Pakistani anglophone literature

Asma Mansoor

This chapter focuses on depictions of non-human narrative agency that blend with human narratives to create alternative conceptions of human subjectivities in Pakistani anglophone literature. My contention is that a post-postcolonial selfhood¹ can initiate a reconstruction of social and individual practices that see humans enmeshed within their immediate material contexts that temporally predate and outlast anthropocentric epistemologies. It is for this reason that I read Pakistani anglophone poetry and fiction to theorise a concept of Pakistani subjectivities which are constructed in terms of their engagement with their agentic material environment. I argue that Pakistani anglophone literature reflects the country's material environment in terms of a semiotic environment wherein diverse material phenomena engage in meaning-making processes which intervene in human, historical, and geopolitical narratives, and vice versa. Thus, Pakistani anglophone literature invites a rereading of representations of Pakistan's material environment within which Pakistani selfhood, in all its diverse forms, may be rethought. Interweaving the theoretical arguments of Karen Barad, Peter Sloterdijk, Felix Guattari, Michel Serres, Wendy Wheeler, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, and Timothy Morton, this chapter explores how fossils, rocks, and mountains function in the selected texts as narrative-generating 'nobjects' (Sloterdijk 2011: 467) whose intra-actions with humans permit the sedimentation (i.e. layered superimposition) of multiple stories and histories. The texts selected for this discussion reflect how human and non-human layers are enfolded and sedimented in each other. Thus, both human and non-human phenomena function intra-actively as historical archives, narrating stories together, framing an alternative sense of the self that exceeds anthropocentric history. The texts that I consider here are Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God* (2014) and Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* (2014), as well as selected poems written by Ilona Yusuf, Harris Khalique, and Rizwan Akhtar that are pertinent to this discussion. My argument begins by delineating the notion of post-postcolonial subjectivities in terms of the material environment. It then uses relevant theoretical tenets to define Pakistani post-postcolonial subjectivities, as evinced in Pakistani anglophone literature, by presenting the material environment as a reference point for theorising a post-postcolonial selfhood.

Therefore, in this discussion, the focus remains on Pakistani subjectivities that are heterogeneous due to various ideological, ethnic, and class factors. These subjectivities have generally been

defined in terms of glocal power structures, which range from Pakistan's economic, regional, and social engagements with countries like India, China, the United States of America, and Saudi Arabia, to its complex multi-ethnic spectrum, its unstable democracy,² and the complexities engendered by its participation in the ongoing war on terror.³ Contrary to this, my theorisation posits the non-human material environment as a new referent for rethinking Pakistani identities. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the material-discursive resonances of non-human phenomena represented in the selected texts. It highlights the audibility of these resonances as they constitute Pakistani subjectivities outside the binaristic framework provided by post-colonial theories which, in turn, operate within the paradigm of colonisation and its aftermath in former colonies. My argument centralises the Baradian notion of material-discursive resonances as it foregrounds the entanglement of biological, social, and cultural discourses with processual materialisations of matter and their 'agential contributions' (Barad 2007: 66) spanning the human and non-human spectra. I play with the idea that not only are entanglements of materiality and knowledge co-constitutive of each other, they are also co-responsible in accounting for a historicity of the land and a fluid human subjectivity. The main contention is that Pakistani subjectivities are constituted in terms of their material environment whose open-ended enunciations exceed hierarchal anthropocentric enclosures, as well as the exclusionary binaries that have outlined postcolonial discussions in South Asian contexts.

In the context of a postcolonial subject, which is haunted by the spectre of colonialism and its binaristic hierarchy, the realisation of belonging to such an open-ended world is extremely important. This is because this world functions as a reference point for thinking about one's subjectivity outside the referential plane of colonialism. This realisation also enables one to think of 'alternative futures' (Harari 2016: 59), particularly in the context of Pakistan's medial environment that functions as a 'semantic plasma' (Sloterdijk 2011: 316) which surrounds us Pakistanis and our narratives like an 'intra-uterine butler' that remains close and at the periphery, nourishing us, 'privy to all our secrets' (Sloterdijk 2011: 357). It generates an awareness that being-in-the-world does not merely mean recognising the materiality of the world, but also realising its semantic agency. Pakistan's specific topography, smells, sights, and embedded memories continue to frame the postcolonial subject's subjectivity, just as the womb functions as a sphere wherein sounds and nutrients catalyse the development of an inchoate subjective being. The realisation that the world is the non-human companion of our subjectivity, therefore, functions as a starting point for rethinking the subjectivity of postcolonial subjects. Post-postcolonialism could completely discard the idea of subalternity and rethink human subjectivities in terms of material *logoi* articulated by the material environment. In doing so, it would allow the juxtaposition of numerous temporal frameworks in one moment in time, thus displacing the primacy of any particular politico-historical phase, such as the age of colonialism, as the dominant referent of human identity. Post-postcolonialism would not see human subjectivity as a singular, positive ideological outcome of a particular epistemic phase in history alone, but rather as a processual product of multiple material histories.

This idea has not been investigated by either Pakistani or international theorists in the context of Pakistani anglophone literature, despite the fact that it could prove to be a means of opening up debates regarding Pakistani subjectivities in an era when we are aiming to move beyond the Empire and its aftermath. It is precisely this reason that makes my work timely, as it explores the 'intimate-spheric enclosedness' (Sloterdijk 2011: 542) between the human and the non-human, as evinced in Pakistani anglophone literature. This intimacy is evident in Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* whose main character, Viv Spencer, sees a stone statue of Buddha in a Peshawar museum as articulating a 'humanity beyond all other humanities' (2014: 226), a humanity that enunciates itself through the non-human, and vice versa. The non-human statue

is a concrete articulation of a human belief system which, in turn, functions as a symbolic buttress for humans reinforcing their belief in eternal wisdom, rebirth, and peace, as well as a reminder of the region's 5,000-year history. The statue, in its interface with humans, gains unique semantic agency as it coalesces with their belief systems. *The Geometry of God* also depicts this intimacy through a blind girl, Mehwish, who is immersed in an audible semantic plasma, a fact covered at length later in this discussion. In these texts, being-in-the-world implies recognition of the environment as a relationship in itself, where the perpetual interwovenness of all phenomena outlines the state of 'being-in' (Sloterdijk 2011: 579) the world and its multiple narratives. Within these works, all bodies are 'storied bodies' (Phillips and Sullivan 2012: 5). As storied bodies, the non-human phenomena in the selected texts counter anthropocentrism, which proclaims human uniqueness on the grounds of humans' ability to speak. I argue, therefore, that if anthropocentrism claims exclusivity on the basis of speech, then the textual enactments of nobjects in Pakistani anglophone literature negate anthropocentric exclusivity on account of their being articulate storied bodies enfolded in each other. Here, Peter Sloterdijk's idea of 'nobjects', which functions as a concept generator within this theorisation, merits some elaboration. Nobjects are things, persons, or media that function as 'intimate augmenters' (Sloterdijk 2011: 467) and allow the transformation of a subject within their frame, such as the placenta or the womb. Being neither subjects nor objects, nobjects, such as rocks, mountains, ores, winds, seas, etc., are medial mechanisms with which the human race is intimately enmeshed through a reciprocal process of reading and interpreting each other. The texts discussed in this chapter indicate this reciprocal narrative agency. If this agency is evinced in narrative enunciations, then phenomena like the Cirlet of Skylax, which galvanises the plot in *A God in Every Stone*, the fossil in *The Geometry of God*, and other non-human phenomena in the selected poems are storied agents that continue to move across time and space, blending into malleable individual and collective human histories.

The literary texts discussed in this chapter reflect this malleability of non-human phenomena and histories. Embedded within them, human subjectivity also functions as an irreducible singularity, allowing one to question the fixity of epistemological enclosures and their exclusionary politics. This realisation of being enmeshed within the material world opens up a space to recast one's sense of the self outside racial and cultural binaries, since the world and human bodies function as emergent phenomena, constantly opening themselves up to new futures.

Therefore, venturing in the direction of a post-postcolonial discourse, my discussion sees the present as a multi-'medial' (Sloterdijk 2011: 397) narrative in which phenomena generate asemiotic narratives intra-actively. Both Karen Barad and Sloterdijk characterise the world as a combination of multiple 'intra-actions' across diverse enmeshed media, or agentic phenomena (Barad 2007: 33). Barad argues, on the basis of quantum theory, that all bodies are radically interconnected, and thus challenge all restrictive categorisations. Her neological term 'intra-actions' accounts for '*the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*' (Barad 2007: 33; emphasis original) which emerge from phenomena interfacing with each other. Her idea of intra-actions differs from the idea of interaction, in the sense that intra-action posits the 'ontological inseparability' of phenomena across the spectrum of existence while interactions stem from a pre-conceived idea of their existence as separate entities (2007: 128). In short, her major idea is that agency does not precede interactions; rather, malleable phenomena are produced as a result of their intra-actions and account for the world's 'differential becoming' (Barad 2007: 149). Through these modes of differential becomings, material and discursive phenomena function as 'actants' (Latour 2004: 75), configuring the world's syntax which exceeds any linguistic, ontological, or epistemological enclosure. The term 'actants' refers to non-human agentic interventions within the ecological web, as well as to human actions that affect all modalities of

knowing and mattering in the world. These fluid, intra-active narratives require a blending of 'new micropolitical', 'microsocial', 'aesthetic', and 'analytic practices' (Guattari 2000: 51) that see the human and the non-human immanently enmeshed.

Pakistani anglophone literature and material textuality

As established above, humans and non-humans exist in a state of intimacy as they mutually engage in both material and semiotic meaning-making practices. Customs, ideologies, experiences, landscapes, histories, expressions, etc. are all congealed as assemblages across an extended geological time span (Ahmed 2010: 246). Pakistan's topographical changes across various historical epochs bear witness to this congealment. As Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and British rules succeeded each other, the material landscape changed and medially articulated the fluctuant ideological patterns of changing times. The rise of stupas, temples, mosques, churches, and changing cityscapes at the behest of succeeding dynasties have all functioned as indicators of such changes that repeatedly framed the political, social, and economic infrastructure of the country over the centuries. Such changes are evident even today, as Pakistan enters a vital trade link, the China-Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC), with a neighbouring country. Under the umbrella of the CPEC, it is the material infrastructure of the country that is altered as it operates as a vital participant catering to the needs of this corridor which, in turn, impacts on the lifestyles of people in the region. As wealth comes in and new business opportunities arise, the materiality of the land and the people become participants in the country's changing geo-strategic partnerships as Pakistan moves away from the USA and inclines more towards the economic patronage of China.

In this process of material meaning-making and exchange, language, and by extension textuality, becomes an extended concept suffused with an 'ecological consciousness' (Cohen 2015: 6) in a confined sense, as well as imbued with a material force that allows a constant de- and reterritorialisation of signs, both material and conceptual, so that new narratives are generated. This de- and reterritorialisation is evident in *A God in Every Stone*, which focuses on a British archaeologist, Viv Spencer, and her search for a historical artefact that moves across time and space. From the Persian invasion of India under Darius, which pushed as far as Caspatyrus, modern-day Peshawar, the artefact finally falls into the hands of a revolutionary Pashtun woman, Zarina, who is fighting the British colonisers. In each era, the artefact has been a site of struggle for the natives of the land against foreign invaders. The cirlet thus undergoes a constant de- and reterritorialisation as it moves from one spatial and historical context to the next. During this movement, it becomes a part of the lives of the humans who discover it, and an integral component of their ongoing narratives. This is evident in the character of Viv's assistant, Najeeb, another participant in a long line of historians and storytellers who have chronicled the events shaping the land since the accounts of the Indus Valley Civilisation given by Herodotus in the fifth century BCE. Historical narratives undergo constant de- and reterritorialisation through both human and non-human phenomena (i.e. through the artefact, Herodotus, Zareena, Viv, and Najeeb) across millennia. Pakistanis, therefore, are not defined by narratives constituted by those in power alone. Their subjectivities are constituted through their material heritage too. What *The God in Every Stone* indicates is that the material world is intra-actively alive, composed of 'Stone made flesh; no, stone made bone and skin', and seemingly a 'heart beating within' (Shamsie 2014: 139), thus interfacing with the people intra-actively embedded within this material frame. What this movement affirms is that humans and non-humans have a shared 'placenta' of existence (Sloterdijk 2011: 44), owing to the medial power of non-human actants in the constitution of their world views as they reconceptualise their

relationship with their material environment. In doing so, they rethink themselves as actors situated within a matrix of transtemporal material, cultural, historical, and economic institutions, in dialogue with actors that are not human. The medial power of non-human actants reminds us of a heritage that precedes our cultural and socioeconomic beginnings. The material-semiotic agency of our landscape thus becomes the predominant factor framing our living mechanisms and our perceptions of whom we are as subjects within a history that is mobile.

Khan's *The Geometry of God* also focuses on this agency of non-human actants as it depicts the suppression of independent thought during Zia's Islamisation. Revolving around two sisters, Mehwish and Amal, their palaeontologist grandfather, and a whale fossil, their stories coalesce with the epochal narrative of evolution and its conflict with obscurantist religious interpretations. As the fossil travels through time, it gets wrapped up within multiple histories, ranging from the pre-human era to the present time, when it interweaves with the debates regarding human evolution in modern-day Pakistan and becomes the fulcrum of political conflicts. While the fossil vindicates the belief of palaeontologists like Amal and her grandfather that the human race evolved out of the animal kingdom, they come into direct conflict with government-backed religious zealots who believe in the divine origin of the human race. Thus, the fossil is a sedimented archive of historical narratives, both individual and collective, geological and political, as Amal establishes 'co relation(s)' among bones extending across time different times (Khan 2014: 171). These texts show these natural formations and cultural artefacts telling their own stories, rhizomatically weaving across the grid of history⁴ and thus exceeding the official historical narratives imposed by those who have been in power in the country in different eras, both before and after its independence in 1947.

The material world, in its reciprocal relationship with evolving human narratives, thus functions as the site where changes in human subjectivities manifest themselves. Khan and Shamsie use the fossil and the Circllet of Skylax, respectively, as points where multiple histories converge and new senses of the self emerge. As Amal reads the fossil, and Zareena re-buries the circllet, the novels raise important questions pertaining to who we are as citizens with specific material histories that rhizomatically interweave with various historical narratives of the world at large, and who we are as humans in relation to non-human actants. What they suggest is that, as Pakistanis, we are more than what our official histories say we are. We are at one with our land and vice versa; and as our 'entangled state of agencies' (Barad 2007: 23) with the non-human world shifts, our awareness of the self also undergoes a diffraction. In presenting the artefact that originated in Darius' court around 515 BCE and the whale fossil emerging out of an age preceding human beings, these texts open up avenues into rethinking what it means to be Pakistani, while Amal's grandfather declares, 'Pray five times a day and be a *real* Pakistani! Speak Urdu and be a *real* Pakistani!, or English and half as Pakistani! Well, here's my answer. Study whales and be Pakistani!' (Khan 2014: 5; emphasis original). Being Pakistani is not about complying with a particular ideology; Pakistani subjectivities rise out of the land in which the fossil was embedded. They predate politics and history, and thus are inherently malleable. In studying the whale, we study ourselves across millennia, not centuries or decades. Pakistan is a geopolitical enclosure of land that predates geopolitics and its assigned nomenclature. As inhabitants of this land, we too are like the whale fossil; we are also sedimented beings moving through time. The whale fossil is in motion, and so are Pakistani subjectivities.

In highlighting this mobile materiality of the environment, Pakistani anglophone literature presents history as an ongoing narrative, defying completion and resisting confinement within any political, human discourse, and thus granting mobility to human subjectivities. As the whale fossil and the Circllet of Skylax move through time, they participate in different historical events, suggesting an ongoing continuity of history, even when human actors are no longer there to

call the shots. In *A God in Every Stone*, Zarina's act of burying the Cirlet does not signify an end to history; rather, it reaffirms the fact that the Cirlet will continue on its travels through time. During their historical itineraries, these actants illustrate the malleability of political identities by disrupting and extending the concept of time. Since human subjectivities emerge out of specific historical narratives, they do not remain embedded within political history alone, they become embedded within a cosmological history that provides a wider space to think of ourselves not only as citizens of a political and religion domain, but as citizens of a much more extensive geological domain. Since geological time is mobile, it cannot be reduced to a stagnant value. Pakistani subjectivities are thus defined in terms of this geological time.

As civilisations died out in the region, such as the Indus Valley Civilisation, the Buddhist dynasty in Northern Pakistan, followed by numerous invasions by the Huns that were succeeded by the arrival of Persians and Turks, the subject identities of inhabitants of the land varied as belief and political systems underwent alterations as new masters replaced each other. The only factor that remained constant was the land in all its ongoing material configurations. These configurations created 'thingly' narratives (Cohen 2015: 4) that could neither be shut down nor confined within rigid ideological enclosures. It is these 'thingly' memories embedded within these artefacts that allow the excavation of deleted historical narratives, producing different asemiotic narratives that blend with the numerous historical narratives of the land. Thus, the material phenomena defy their supposed subalternity and no longer remain silent participants in the ongoing history of Pakistan and the region. As the materiality of the landscape changes, so do meanings and their enunciations, which demands a discarding of history seen only in human terms. It is for this reason that the non-human material environment and textual practices function as reference points to redefine a Pakistani selfhood.

Entangled agencies and transversal subjectivities

I have already established that the world is a compendium of 'enunciative assemblages' that articulate themselves in multiple 'registers'. As a consequence, all these assemblages remain in a state of 'transversality', intra-acting across expressive substances which are both linguistic and non-semiotic (Guattari 1995: 24), such as DNA helices, computer algorithms, information-laden photons and quanta, fossils, and tree rings. This transversality, or transindividual intra-actions, is evident in many Pakistani anglophone poems. Elements of Yusuf's poems, such as 'images from the Karakoram', 'slum', 'cloudscape', 'history', and 'modern times', present different modes of transversality as the human and the non-human come together in the ecologically diverse Pakistani landscape. In her poems, memory is a narrative whose syntax is constituted through Yusuf's intra-action with the material environment and its internalisation. Yusuf's history resides in her alloyed genes, transversally transferred from a Western mother and an Eastern father:

So folded am i in my own complexity
Folded as a foetus upon itself.

(2001: 34)

Pakistan and its landscape are internalised, prompting Yusuf to learn another language, as she decodes the language of the material world in the context of her own situation. The language that she registers is encoded in different physical stimuli with which she intra-acts by way of 'cognitive transference' (Guattari 1995:101). Subjectivities are medially transformed as different bodies engage in an intersubjective transference in her work. The human and the non-human

enunciate each other differentially as the forbidding layered mountains of the Karakoram move in a fluid syntax along fault lines where the subcontinent collides with the Eurasian plate. All the while, the human has 'sketched his fingers his path his mark / along the map of centuries' (Yusuf 2001: 76). What becomes evident is that, as time moves on, the 'medial' (Sloterdijk 2011: 295) environment of Pakistan continues to shape human subjectivities. This is also evident in Khalique's poetry. His poem 'Lahore Airport' defines life as a multilayered 'running text' (2012: 34), and all that people leave behind is articulate imprints of their departure on a tarmac runway. In Khalique's poetry, trees and rivers remain active reminders of the country's paradoxical problems, such as class stratification, political uncertainties, and ideological conflicts. With the country's 'liquid history flowing everywhere' (Khalique 2012: 84), the material world appears to be spreading 'rumours of happiness / in a nation brooding on despair' (Khalique 2012: 56), while the radioactive mountains of Chaghi and Pokhran symbolically inscribe the volatile relations between India and Pakistan at the time of their nuclear tests in 1999. History is thus a malleable narrative composed of flowing material-semiotic encoding and decoding practices.

In similar manner, the Cirplet of Skylax in Shamsie's *God in Every Stone* enacts this material-semiotic coding and recoding through time. Material and discursive stories connect histories embedded in the material and sociopolitical worlds. As the Cirplet moves across geo-temporal scales from Caria to India, passing through the hands of Alexander, Asoka, Maya the Buddhist Nun, Najeeb, and finally Zarina, multiple narratives are sedimented within the artefact. It is more than a thing; it is a conveyance device that, in Jeffery Jerome Cohen's terms, can be described as a 'storied materiality that lasts' (2015: 57). This lasting materiality is also evident in Akhtar's depiction of the landscape in his poem 'Lahore 2009'. Lahore presents a melting of human and non-human phenomena into each other, displaying a conscious energy that creates meanings. This is also evident in his poem 'Noise', where a whining crow, screeching cars, and screaming vendors all become a comment on the beggar who is flanked on all sides by a world of material wealth and indifference (2017: 199). In 'Lahore 2009', Akhtar reminisces about Lahore, a city embedded in his family's history and in his blood, and he writes how 'Words drop into another's words' while the '*azan* / throbbed at our door'; sounds and words, bound in a 'lingual embrace' (2017: 138; emphasis original), collectively create a symphony specific to a city. Cities like Lahore are quilted in poems; therefore, the city speaks and is spoken to. The acoustics produce a material-semiotic symphony that wafts into the human consciousness, as he writes in his poem 'Behind Rain': 'Cicadas' tymbals deny evening of its privacy suddenly I woke to sounds behind windows ... a euphoric rain over-weepers broadcasting a bawling melee of consonants each tree effuses its pitter-patter' (Akhtar 2017: 95). In a country where freedom of speech has been rigidly curtailed by successive military and democratic governments, human language becomes 'a mutilated wick' (Akhtar 2017: 127), an aspect that Akhtar depicts in 'The Porcelain: In Memory of Faiz Ahmed Faiz'. In such a scenario, it is the world of matter that becomes a spokesperson for the human condition, as depicted by Akhtar's poem 'Ways of Reading':

Deep in winter's trees
a slow story of leaves
finds your hands
poking words on pages ...
These are ways of reading
lost treasures of silence
same as bodies do not yell
and become interpretations.
(2017: 23)

In this game of mutual interpretations, Akhtar's work reflects how sights, sounds, and smells all synchronise to establish a vibrant material syntax of the world, which the human mind processes to create new combinations of meanings that allow one to reread oneself in terms of one's individual self as embeddedness within an articulate material world.

In this material environment, meanings continue to be deposited within various embodied material forms, so that all phenomena function as open-ended hypertextual environments imbricated together, a factor evinced in Akhtar's 'The Maids of the City of Dust'. Here too, all phenomena are speaking in different codes. As Lahore's 'layers and layers of litter' (Akhtar 2017: 40) are swept away by its 'women of dust', it reflects an interwoven changing materiality that also speaks of class hierarchies, as the people travelling on those roads treat these women's labour with a snobbish nonchalance. The cityscape of Lahore thus presents a history in which economic, political, and material alterations remain intricately entangled, articulating its multiple problems and complexities that define how people live their lives.

Matterphor: rereading meanings and materiality in Pakistani anglophone literature

In order to further read the eloquent agency of matter as depicted in Pakistani anglophone literature comprehensively, I coalesce two concepts, 'matterphor' and 'biosemiosis', expounded by Cohen and Wendy Wheeler, respectively. Cohen argues that material structures like stones and mountains function as archives of mobile narratives or material metaphors. While biosemiosis foregrounds 'biological meaning' and the 'embodied nature' of intra-acting agencies and meanings (Wheeler and Westling 2015: 216), a matterphor is a conversation between the biological and the non-biological. Therefore, in the world at large, matter and metaphor enunciatively come together as 'matterphor' (Cohen 2015: 4), that is, a semiosis across ontological and epistemological differences, thus producing material stories. An author does not, strictly speaking, give voice to non-human phenomena; rather, an author adds to the symphonic play of semiotic differences which constitute the world. In this play of differences, semiotics gains an ecological texture as both biological and non-biological material phenomena disseminate their own narratives in a language that exceeds logocentrism through biosemiotics and matterphoric exchanges.

This matterphoric exchange is evident in Akhtar's poem 'Houbara Bustards', named after endangered migratory birds that arrive in Pakistan from Central Asia in winter. Hunted by Arab princes for its supposed aphrodisiac qualities, the Houbara Bustard's narrative ends in Pakistan as its life's story is cruelly interwoven with the story of the country's geopolitical dependence on Arab oil (2017: 36). The poem is a scathing criticism of the special dispensations that the Pakistani government grants to Middle Eastern royals to hunt this endangered bird in exchange for political and economic perks. The Houbara Bustard moves across a vast terrain of material and ideological differences, both materially and symbolically, to be metabolised within the vast maw of the vested political interests of the human race. Folded within this complicated web of materiality, ideologies, and political gimmickries, it is not only non-human phenomena, like the Houbara Bustard, that are impacted upon – the vectors of human subjectivity also undergo a shift. As Pakistan's political elite pander to the whims of Middle Eastern oil magnates, such as Qatari princes and the Saudi royal family, permitting them to hunt down these rare birds, the Houbara Bustard becomes more than a bird; it functions as a comment on the condition of a nation that is exploited by many masters, despite the fact that it has cast off the yolk of colonialism.

As medial metaphors, non-human actants in Pakistani anglophone literature depict a sliding of material-discursive enunciations across the medial world in a manner that constantly modifies the praxis and 'theory of knowledge' (Serres 1982: 65), so that new histories are created which connect diverse bodies in a joint trans-temporal narrative. For instance, both the human and the non-human function as equal participants in Pakistan's determination to consolidate its economic connections with China and the Central Asian countries that lie to the north, linked via the Karakoram mountain range. Yusuf's poem 'Images from the Karakoram' depicts 'wide sweeps of sand and boulder / fanned down years of mountainside' in the Karakoram mountain range. This rocky syntax of mountains then merges into a 'new road that winds and twists' through the 'blasted-out overhangs' (2001: 75–76), which are the result of human engineering. In addition, this road, the Karakoram Highway, re-etches the ancient Silk Road that connected the subcontinent to China in ancient times. The road and the mountains are thus trans-temporal bodies functioning as sites of new historical inscriptions that remain fluid as new socioeconomic necessities compel alterations to the country's topography. With the CPEC, as mentioned above, the ever-developing road links between China and Pakistan make physical alterations to the layout of the land inevitable. In the present time, these material alterations hint at the further consolidation of Pak-China economic links in the future. The Karakoram Mountains, as well as the slum areas in Yusuf's poetry, are connected in a joint, trans-temporal narrative. Each of these material phenomena functions as an 'exchanger of time' (Serres 1982: 72–73) bound in matterphoric intimacies. The enunciations of the material world thus remain open-ended and, by extension, so do their historical interpretations. Human and non-human bodies, like those of Mehwish, the fossil, the Karakoram Highway, and the Cirplet, act, therefore, not only as exchangers of time, but also as exchangers of meanings and narratives.

To conclude, one of the major insights that one draws from Pakistani anglophone literature is that as the material world changes, narratives and history continue to change, too. Shifts in human subjectivities also emanate within the medial space of nojects. For instance, the nojects constituting Mehwish's material environment functions as meaning-making intimate augmenters of her ability to comprehend herself through her physical experience. Similarly, in the works of Shamsie, Yusuf, Akhtar, and Khaliq, the fossil, the cirplet, the buildings of Lahore, etc. all signify an open-ended, transtemporal, and multi-medial exchange of meanings. As a result of this material-semiotic fluidity, history is recast in terms of a malleable symbiotic intra-action with the material world. This intra-action prevents placing phenomena within exclusive categories, which liberates the definition of one's identity from the narrow confines of race and gender alone, allowing it to be rethought in terms of an agentic materiality that functions as an audibly resonant archive of narratives. It is through depictions of such agentic materiality that Pakistani anglophone literature provides a viable site for a post-postcolonial reframing of Pakistani subjectivities, thus liberating this selfhood from the spectre of its colonial past.

Notes

- 1 While colonial and postcolonial discourses focus primarily on dealing with the coloniser-colonised binary, my idea of a post-postcolonial discourse initiates a mode of thinking that goes beyond this binary in terms of a mutual osmosis of ideas that pre-empt the reinstallation of rigid, hierarchised categorisations. From my perspective, the idea of post-postcoloniality is different from decoloniality, which focuses on an epistemological disconnect from colonial mental models. Conversely, post-postcoloniality is a means of amalgamating Western and non-Western epistemological models without alienating either of these thinking patterns, in order to conceptualise ourselves as glocal citizens with a diversely mobile selfhood.

- 2 In the seven decades since its independence, Pakistan's democracy has been overturned by three military coups. Martial law was first imposed in 1958 by Major General Iskander Mirza, who was exiled by General Ayub Khan. Ayub Khan's rule ended in 1971. The second military coup was led by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1977 against Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was subsequently hanged. General Zia's reign ended in a plane crash in 1988, allowing the country's shaky democracy to establish itself again under Benazir Bhutto's premiership. However, the next eleven years saw Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif taking the helm twice, since both their governments saw repeated dissolutions due to conflicts between the army and the presidency. In 1999, Nawaz Sharif forcibly removed the then Army Chief, General Pervez Musharraf, which led to a military coup and the expulsion of Nawaz Sharif from the country. Musharraf's rule lasted until 2008, when he resigned under public pressure.
- 3 With the collapse of the World Trade Center in New York, Pakistan's ties with the Taliban came under global scrutiny. As Pakistan's links to various *jihadi* groups in the region attracted US ire, it joined the Global War on Terror, and since then has been a key ally of the United States.
- 4 We find a similar traverse across millennia effected by material objects in the poetry of Akhtar, Yusuf, and Khalique. Their works reflect how life is all about intra-active textual becomings; however, due to space constraints, they cannot be encapsulated in detail here. The reader can nevertheless refer to their collections (i.e. Akhtar's *Lahore, I Am Coming*, Yusuf's *Picture This ... Poems*, and Khalique's *Between You and Your Love*) for further analysis.

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