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COLONIAL MIMICRY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY AS TOOLS OF  
SUBVERTING COLONIAL LEGACY: A DECOLONIAL READING OF  
KAMAL'S NOVEL UNMARRIAGEABLE

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**ABSTRACT**

This research is an interrogation of the colonial mimicry and cultural identity as tools in subverting the colonial legacy of English language and culture in Kamal's novel *Unmarriageable* (2019). It aims at exploring the performative role of colonial mimicry and its critique through cultural identity in a postcolonial society in decolonizing the minds of the natives and dismantling the dominant cultural values. The theoretical framework that informs this research is based on Ngugi wa Thiong'O's *Decolonizing the Mind: The Language of African Literature* (1992) and *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean literature, culture and politics* (1972) along with Hall's (2015), Singh (2009), and Bhabha's (1985) theorization of the key concepts in this research. Ngugi's (1992) provides the central theoretical model through which this research intends to elucidate its argument. The current research uses the method of 'Close Reading' for approaching and analyzing the text proposed by Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher (2013). It allows a close interrogation of the layers of meaning embedded within a text. The findings of this research reflect the manifestation of a spirit of decoloniality in the text to subvert the colonial legacy of English language and culture through evocation of cultural identity and critique of colonial mimicry.

**INTRODUCTION:**

This paper examines the decolonial spirit of Kamal's novel *Unmarriageable* through its critique of the colonial legacy of the English language and culture in Pakistani society. This paper establishes the representation of colonial mimicry of English language and culture in the text as an instrument to subvert the legacy of colonial imperialist domination. This representation is manifested through the narrative of elite society members imitating an English lifestyle and the

values of the colonial master and disavowing their cultural identity and customs. This practice of imitating the dominant culture, termed as colonial mimicry in postcolonial studies, is defined by Singh (2009) as, "Mimicry in colonial and postcolonial literature is most commonly seen when members of a colonized society imitate the language, dress, politics, or cultural attitude of their colonizers (say, the British or the French)." (8) This paper, therefore, intends to highlight the depictions of colonial mimicry of English language, politics, and cultural practices in the text to foreground its subversive role in the text. Colonial mimicry is considered "an opportunistic pattern of behavior" (Singh, 2009 p. 8) in which the natives imitate the dominant and powerful cultural values in hopes of gaining access to that power.

Kamal's (2019) novel *Unmarriageable*, a parallel retelling of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) set in a small fictional town Dilipabad of Pakistan in 2001, chronicles the life of the Binat family as the five daughters Alysba, Jeena, Mari, Lady and Qitty along with their parents traverse through financial instabilities, finding marriage prospects, sexuality, and stereotypical societal norms in a society heavily ridden with imperialistic and hegemonic structures. The events, storyline, and character descriptions are taken entirely from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (therefore a parallel retelling) but with a Pakistani cultural twist. The text weaves in conversations about women empowerment, books, postcolonial state of mind, class struggles and hypocrisy, and most importantly formulates a social satire which not only contests the colonial legacy of English culture in Pakistani elite but also subverts it with a native cultural identity. The eldest daughter Alysba Binat is an emblem of opinionated and strong headed woman who resists not only suppressive norms of the society such as marriage for the sake of acquiring wealth and recognition in society, but also critiques and subverts the imperialistic dominance of English identity through her endeavors to bring forth the supremacy of the native culture.

The characters belonging to the elite social class such as Mrs. Naheed (the head of British School of Dilipabad), Begum Beena dey Bagh (a wealthy elite and the founder of British School Group in Pakistan) and several others' lifestyle, ambitions, and cultural identity can be observed as a mimicry of the English culture in attempts to be acknowledged in the society as superior to the natives who resist the colonized cultural identity. However, as Bhabha in his essay "Off Mimicry and Man" (2012) defines mimicry as "sometimes unintentionally subversive" (p. 94), his conception which is largely derived from Jacques Derrida's deconstructive reading of J. L. Austin's formulation of "performative" mimicry is grounded in the understanding that mimicry can function to expose the hollowness and inadequacy of the colonial expressions of power in itself. On these grounds, mimicry in this text's context is functioning as "performative" instrument that works to foreground the artificiality of the colonial ideals held superior or dominant in the text through the characters such as Alysba Binat (Alys), Jeena Binat, and Darcee who are represented as disavowing a colonized identity. These subversive characters are constantly striving to maintain a native cultural identity by challenging and critiquing the colonial legacy and imperialistic domination of English language and culture in postcolonial Pakistani society. This cultural identity in terms of Hall's (2015) definition, "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable

points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture.” (p. 226) can be established as everything (values, lifestyle, customs, manners etc) that distinguishes the natives from their colonial imperials. However, this working conception of cultural identity in this context cannot be inscribed in terms of nationality, as a distinguishing factor between the natives and the colonizer. Since ‘nationality’ in Bhabha’s (1985) conception is “built upon the exclusion, or even extermination, of those who are described as not belonging to that nation.” (p. 134) which calls for exclusion of the postcolonial experiences of refugees, migrants, or transnationals who have spent a significant part of their lives in the postcolonial country and share similar experiences of colonialism. Alys, the central subversive character, is a Saudi Arabian migrant who despite having grown up in Jeddah (a foreign land) detests the colonial imperialist domination in Pakistani society and confronts colonial customs with the richness of native cultural customs. Therefore, this paper builds on the understanding of Cultural Identity as everything distinguishing a native from the colonizing forces expect for the nationality. Consequently the objectives of this research are to explore the elements of colonial mimicry and cultural identity in Soniah Kamal’s novel *Unmarriageable* and to elaborate the instrumental role of both colonial mimicry and cultural identity in subversion of the colonial legacy of English culture in the text.

### ***Thesis Statement:***

Kamal’s novel *Unmarriageable* set in Pakistani context manifests a spirit of decoloniality in its attempt to subvert the colonial legacy of English language and culture through evocation of cultural identity and critique of colonial mimicry.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:**

The theoretical framework that informs this research is centered around Ngugi wa Thiong’O’s *Decolonizing the Mind: The Language of African Literature* (1992) and *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean literature, culture and politics* (1972) which not only acts as a theoretical guide in exploring the formulation of colonial mimicry and cultural identity in the text but also acts as a model in discerning how natives can reclaim their language to strengthen their cultural identity and subvert the colonial legacy. Moreover, Hall’s (2015) and Bhabha’s (1985) theorization of Cultural identity, and Singh’s (2009) theorization of Colonial mimicry aid in further substantiating the understanding of the theoretical terms.

Ngugi formulates how through reclamation of Native Literature can natives regain a sense of cultural traditional identity which can further dismantle the colonial legacy of the master that dictates their native cultural traditions as inferior. Culture, in Ngugi’s theorization, “in its broadest sense, is a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavor to live and come to terms with their total environment” (1972 p.4) This broad and inclusive theorization of culture is in correspondence with the earlier established conception of Cultural Identity integrating Hall (2015) and Bhabha’s definitions. Ngugi establishes the connection between language and culture as intrinsically woven within each other as he affirms, “language of [my] education was no longer the language of

[his] culture” (1992 p.11) in his colonial school this connection is disrupted where “education was not aimed at a knowledge of self and the reality of the black man’s place in the world... [instead] ... was the means by which the colonizer developed the native elite” (1972 p.49). It raises the debate of the disruptive role of colonial education in native’s lives by formulating that since language and culture are intricately connected, teaching the literature of the colonizers can lead to cultural displacement which in turn develops the native elites in the society who are the emblem of colonial mimicry and a lost sense of the self.

In the final step Ngugi theorizes the strategy to decolonize the colonial mind and reclaim natives’ cultural identity. He formulates “If focusing on European literatures and languages led the African away from traditional beliefs and values, then strengthening the validity of African languages and literatures may lead back to those beliefs and values; in short, one way to overcome the forces of cultural oppression is to reclaim traditional language and literature.” (1992 p.46)

The empirical literature available on Kamal’s novel *Unmarriageable* is limited to a few blog posts, and an article by Harner (2013) briefly reflecting on generally all aspects of the text including its critique of the gender inequalities, social injustices, destabilization of patriarchy and postcolonial hierarchies. *Unmarriageable* further establishes on Austen’s critique and contestation of the gender inequalities the Bennets face in her text that has a universal appeal even in the contemporary Pakistani society as well. It also raising complex questions about whose literature deserves to be read and interpreted, the Pakistani or the European English literature? (Harner, 2013)

Harner (2013) exclaims Kamal’s adaptation of Austen’s storyline and character depiction is aimed at examining the history of colonial encounter with the West that lead to the introduction of English authors to the women in postcolonial societies. It examines the literary legacy of colonialism and invites Western readers to reassess their biases against the canonical literature and what is worthy of being read and calls for the expansion of their reading circle to include Pakistani and South Asian authors.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

The current research uses the method of ‘Close Reading’ for approaching and analyzing the text proposed by Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher (2013). According to this model, "When readers read closely, they investigate, interrogate, and explore the deep meanings of a text. They form opinions and arguments based on a range of texts that have been examined and can defend their positions as result" (Fisher & Frey, 2013, p. 56). This research, in this manner, closely interrogates and explores the elements and instances of colonial mimicry and cultural identity in the text.

In addition, this model allows for the proposing questions such as why or how certain elements are articulated in the text and "These questions invite opinion with evidence or argument and result in some task" (Fisher & Frey, 2015, p. 15). This model aligns with the objectives and questions of this research in not

only interrogating and exploring the in-depth meanings within a text but also in mediating connections within the text to formulate the argument of this research. Therefore, this research considers Fisher and Frey's (2013) model an effective method to approach the text.

## ANALYSIS

### *Colonial Education Establishing Native Elites Exhibiting Colonial Mimicry:*

Ngugi (1992) in his work *Decolonizing the Mind* establishes the critically disruptive role of Colonial education as "representative of the larger colonial project" (p. 35) with an agenda to "instill European ideas and values" (p. 35) among natives. In the novel, the school system is named as 'The British School Group' established in Pakistani postcolonial society by a character Beena dey Baagh, exhibits this colonial agenda of instilling Western ideals and values among the mentally colonized elite natives through English education. The British School of Dilipabad is founded to be "an English-medium establishment" (Kamal, 2019 p. 17) which clearly exemplifies the Colonial Legacy of English language and by extension its culture. Ngugi while referring to the colonial education of European ideas and values states, "These ideas and values were not weighed in relation to the native cultures; rather they were seen as superior from the start, thus the teaching of such ideas and values was assumed to be beneficial to the African." (p. 35) The superiority of European education is manifested "in the British colonial school, where English was both the language and culture to be learned and imitated." (p. 36) The British School in the text also affirms the superiority of European education through its exclusive accessibility "for girls from Dilipabad's privileged" (p. 17) and the principal Naheed's willingness "to pay well for teachers fluent in English with decent accents" (p.17) When Alys and Jeena visit the school looking for a teaching job, "Mrs Naheed pounced on them, particularly thrilled with their accents: the soft-spoken Jena would teach English to the middle years, and the bright-eyed Alys would teach the upper years." (p. 27) This agenda based colonial education sets the narrative of Colonial superiority of English language and culture through its focus on producing Native Elite who maintains the colonizers' superiority and thus looks down on his own cultural traditions and languages. This inferiority complex is reflected in Begum Beena dey Baagh's conversation with Alys in which she is bothered with Alys' audacity to equate herself being a fellow educator with her as she says "Do you know who I am? I am Beena dey Bagh! I have founded an entire school system in Pakistan, English-medium no less." (p. 244) In the process of mimicking the dominant language or culture, these colonial subjects suppress their own cultural identity or low down upon it as inferior to the dominant culture. The colonial education, thus, performs a primary role in producing mentally colonized elite natives who accept the superiority of European culture as well as exhibit colonial mimicry in hopes of gaining access to that superiority.

This production of mentally colonized elite natives is manifested once again in the character of Mrs. Naheed she opts to educate her daughter Ginwa and Rumsha in the much advanced British School of Lahore "rather than her own British School of Dilipabad because she wanted them to receive superior

educations.” (p. 17) Their colonial mentality is manifested in the form of their colonial mimicry through her daughters’ picture in her office which flaunts both her daughters “posed in front of the Eiffel Tower with pouts, blonde-streaked brown hair, and skintight jeans” (p.17) Their ‘blonde-streaked brown hair’ and ‘skintight jeans’ reflects their mimicry of the Western beauty and dress-code ideals as held superior by them being the colonized native elite who have received ‘superior’ English education. Whereas, the Eiffel Tower is reflective of their Elite privileged social class which not only allows them superior lifestyle as compared to the Dilipabad natives in to form of foreign holidays but also a hegemonic dominant status in the society.

### ***Reclamation of Cultural Identity through Critique of the Colonial Mimicry:***

Ngugi (1992) theorizes the strategic decolonization of the natives’ mind by reclamation of their collective cultural identity. He formulates in his book *Decolonizing the Mind* that if Colonial education consolidating the supremacy of English Literatures and culture led the natives “away from traditional beliefs and values, then strengthening the validity of African [native] languages and literatures may lead back to those beliefs and values; in short, one way to overcome the forces of cultural oppression is to reclaim traditional language and literature.” (p. 46) The reclamation of cultural values can be traced at several instances in the text.

The critique of the artificiality and hollowness of the colonial identity is reflected through colonial mimicry in Mrs Binat’s continuous failure despite her struggle with imitating the English accent, as she says: ‘Okay. Gift is done.’ To which responds correcting her pronunciation ‘Gift’, ‘That’s what I’m saying. Gift. Gift.’ Mrs Binat shakes her head and says ‘Oof, I’m so sick of the tyranny of English and accent in this country.’ (p. 33) This reflects her anxiety being a member of a society obsessed with the colonial legacy of English. At another instance in the text where Alys shares her reading interests with Darcee and other guests at Nadir Fiede’ wedding, her mention of the local digests is mocked by Darcee as pathetic. To this, Mr. Binat’s response, “Let him look down on Reader’s Digest and Good Housekeeping. You should be proud that you are an equal-opportunity reader and will read whatever you can get your hands on.” (p. 63) is an attempt to throw the colonial mentality of the elite natives, making them look down upon native cultural items as inferior, back on themselves. In addition, Darcee’s purchase of local artists Iqbal Hussain’s artwork, which in his sisters’ remarks “doesn’t shy away from who he is and where he comes from. He celebrates his origins. Actually, he thrusts them in the faces of society and says, ‘Deal with my inconvenient truths.’ ” (p. 219) is an act of resisting the colonial imperialist legacy and a reclamation of the cultural identity. Darcee is also seen calling out Hammy for belittling her English accent (p. 246) which again consolidates colonial resistance on behalf of natives and an act of subverting the dominant cultural identity through its confrontation with one’s own cultural identity.

Native’s critique of the colonial mimicry can be taken as a step further ahead in reclaiming one’s cultural identity by shunning off every ‘artificial’ identity gained through the imitation of the colonial lifestyle. This is reflected in the text

at certain instances specifically where Alys friend Sherry ridicules her heavily English centric Urdu accent. Sherry's critique of an imperfect Urdu accent can be understood as an attempt to place local language as central instead of a secondary position as she says, "Aren't you Pakistani?" the girl said. "Your Urdu is very poor, even for a Burger." (p. 41) In Ngugi's strategic decolonization of the mind, "rejection [of] the primacy of English literature and cultures" is a major demarche towards dismantling their dominance and placing native language or cultural at a central position. As decolonization of the mind, in Ngugi's theorization, reorients the colonizer's language from a central position to a secondary position. Through the central placement of native language and culture, all the secondary languages, values or norms are to be understood in their relevance and contribution towards the native's own cultural understanding of the world.

***Subversion of Colonial Legacy (Decoloniality) and the Formation of an In-Between 'Powerful Space':***

The previous discussion has connected the critique of colonial mimicry with the reclamation of the cultural identity as a strategic step towards decolonization. This final section of the discussion, reflects back on the strategic decolonization theorized by Ngugi (1992) as instrumental in forging an in-between space that not only allows the natives to subvert the colonial dominance and centralizing native cultural values but also in providing the natives with a lens to use for assessing the relevancy and contribution of secondary cultures or languages towards native's understanding of its own world.

Ngugi's (1992) stratagem in decolonizing the natives' mind integrates a desire to see natives' mother-tongues (national languages) carrying an identity and literature reflecting not only the uniqueness and richness of natives' expression but also his struggles with nature, environment, and society. As Ngugi states, "With that harmony between himself, his language and his environment as his starting point, he can learn other languages and even enjoy the positive humanistic, democratic and revolutionary elements in other people's literatures and cultures without any complexes about his own language, his own self his environment." (p. 29) This harmonious apprehension of other languages and cultures can enable the natives understand the world not in relation with so foreign dominant culture but in terms of natives' own identity that informs their understanding of the world. This concept can be traced in the text at two significant instances. First, in Darcee's proclamation of his favourite partition book *Sunlight in the Broken Columns* he asserts, "That book made me believe I could have a Pakistani identity inclusive of an English-speaking tongue. We've been forced to seek ourselves in the literature of others for too long.' To which Alys added in agreement, "But reading widely can lead to an appreciation of the universalities across cultures." This assertion is in correspondence with Ngugi's (1992) formulation of a harmonious 'powerful space' through which natives can reorient their understanding of the world centered on their cultural foundations.

The second and most significant instance in text that supplements this argument is reflected through the conversation between the school Principal Mrs. Naheed

and Alys, in which Mrs Naheed is expressing her dissatisfaction with Alys's class discussions: "Another year you told them [students] that they should be reading Urdu and regional literature instead of English. An absurd statement from an English literature teacher.' To which Alys responds, 'Not "instead". I said "side by side".'" (p. 19) This statement asserts the attempt made on behalf of the subversive character Alys, to not only subvert the colonial domination by introducing her students with their native literature, it also reflects her endeavors to equip her students with abilities of critical thinking through which they can trace their roots and the richness of their culture. Alys' response is an evocation of Ngugi's Formulation of a 'powerful space' for the natives, in which they rethink and refigure their cultural understanding in respect to their own language, culture, and values. The last step towards decolonizing the mind proposed by Ngugi (1992) is his desire, "I do not want to see [native children] growing up in that imperialist-imposed tradition of contempt for the communication developed by their communities and their history. I want them to transcend colonial alienation." (p. 28) Correlative to Ngugi's desire is Alys' desire, "I want them [students] to think critically." (p. 212) which significantly justifies the argument presented in this paper.

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