Review Article

Globalizing Indigenous Literature: A Thematic Analysis of Pakistani Instagram Poetry

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Abstract

Instagram poetry makes for a new and interesting genre, or rather a new sub-genre in literature according to Oliveira & Fazano (2020). In the radically transformed world of social media, poetic expression has also morphed into an emergent form. Instagram poetry democratizes the process of voice and allows poets to publish their poetry, and reach a greater audience with more of an impact. Pakistani poets are not far behind in incorporating this new form of poetry into their traditional modes of expression. Numerous young poets transpire on Instagram, incorporating their words into images to post on their feeds or in their stories. It becomes imperative to notice and hear these varied voices as well as examine and analyze their message. Bringing their poetry to the mainstream with the help of a thematic analysis, this study incorporates the Sociological Criticism theory to explore the prevalent themes. This study attempts to give Pakistani Instagram poets and their subjects the deserved exposure. Applying Belsey's method of close reading Pakistani Instagram Poetry reveals some major themes across poems and a few minor themes that appear less often. One of the major and prominent themes, as revealed from the study, is the theme of 'self-compassion' with several minor themes under this larger ambit. A greater focus on self is possibly the new trend in the subgenre of Pakistani Instagram poetry but further comparative studies with Instagram poets of other nationalities need to be conducted to find out the most common themes in Instagram poetry worldwide.

Keywords: Pakistani Instagram Poetry, Sociological Criticism Theory, Indigenous Literature, Themes in Poetry, Thematic Analysis, Self-Compassion.

INTRODUCTION

A notable sub-genre of digital poetry is Insta-poetry or Instagram poetry, a form of literature that has recently emerged, produced through the social media platform Instagram as evident from the name. As Naji says, "Instagram poetry, a type of digital poetry is, as the name implies, poetry that is produced for distribution through the social media platform Instagram and most usually incorporates creative typography with bite size verses." [1-2]. Instagram is a platform that only allows pictures or videos to be posted rather than text-based posts like Facebook or Twitter. Therefore, poems or poetry on Instagram are shared, viewed, and saved as images, instead of text files, hence visual presentation matters a lot. Instagram poets can use unique textual styles such as animated text or unique fonts which are provided by computers, but most Instagram poets choose to write the poems by hand either in elaborate fonts or on richly textured papers. They also incorporate illustrations at times. This way, Instagram poets are reasserting the traditional idea of poetry which insists that true "poetic expression looks inky and papery", and that a poet's work is the realest when it is written on a paper by the poet themselves and not presented on a computer screen which seems impersonal (Perlow). Some poets share their poetry using an image as a background of the text or typing it on a plain white or colored background. The image may be related to the main theme of the poem but that does not always have to be the case. Hence, Instagram poetry cannot be interpreted apart from and in isolation from the images but it is to be interpreted together.

Discovering the themes of Pakistani Instagram poetry in particular and analyzing whether the poetry reflects its society or not is the focus while also shining a light on Pakistan's contribution to this new genre.

Pakistani poets are not lacking by any means, and they deserve the appropriate exposure. Analyzing Instagram poetry produced by Pakistani poets not only puts it in the limelight but globalizes it too, and globalizing indigenously produced literature is a necessity for former colonies like Pakistan.

The most recent genre that emerged after the internet became readily available is digital poetry, electronic poetry, or post-internet poetry. In the last few years, research studies in the area of humanities have focused on digital media. Although this does not seem to be very popular with academia, books focusing on digital literature have been rapidly published, with authors like Landow, Lunenfeld, and Hayles writing about the "new genres of art and their relationship with the reader/spectator." Others have dedicated their work to the discussion of new forms of literature like Aarseth, Bolter, Funkhouser, Hayles, Ryan, Saemmer, and Simonowski. All these authors have written about the terminology of electronic literature, its aesthetic, and the author-reader relationship, and some have specifically written about electronic poetry such as Glazier, Funkhouser, Hayles, and Simonowski (Di Rosario 11). Digital poetry is certainly different from printed poetry as it employs sounds, images, and other computer programs besides graphic texts whereas printed poetry comes with fixed texts using fixed words and constructions and fixed implications too. Hence, digital poetry can only be read or accessed through computers (Abdel Fattah 486). When it comes to the creation of digital poetry, study suggests that creating poetry through new media is not only about adding pictures to poetry or poetically expressing ourselves in more ways (Hughes 154). It is not to say that printed poetry is not of use anymore but there are "new forms of expression that extend our ability to express ourselves" (Hughes 161). Even with the increasing trend of digital poetry, studies show people still prefer print over digital form. In one study, participants expressed the unavailability of literary bookstores as a reason to shift to online resources of poetry. The experience is nothing like reading a book although it is more readily available, convenient, and faster. Some people who appreciated the ready availability of online poetry and its speed, reflect on the way the reading experience is different as compared to reading poetry from a book, as a "close, deep engagement with the work" is missing (Fleming-May & Green 865). Along with readers' preferences, studies have also been conducted to analyze the benefits and challenges of online publication of poetry. In favor of online poetry, poets have mentioned the "convenient and timely submissions process", which elaborates on the fact that the online publication process is faster and easier as compared to traditional print publication. This works better than print publication considering poets' concerns and hence emerges as an advantage over print publication. "Increased visibility" is another advantage, over print publication. Respondents in this study have mentioned how publishing online evidently makes their work visible to a lot more people, all over the globe, as compared to when they publish their poetry in printed form. The algorithm of online poetry sites, journals, and books is so in nature that poets gain more readership, and they are consequently connected to more readers and fellow poets. Moreover, poets are adopting online publications for their readily available feedback from audiences. Poets described print publication as something that is "a thing for your resume" as there is not significantly any feedback available to them while that is certainly different in the case of online publication. The moment you publish your poem on an online platform, you can immediately see the amount of people viewing it, and you will get notified about feedback coming in, in the form of 'likes' and 'comments.' The instant feedback system is one of the reasons poets are moving towards online poetry genres, as technology brings in new ways to publish poetry (Fleming-May & Green 866-67). Contrarily some people are in favor of print publication. They counter that print publications' editing process is more efficient, as the editors "separate the wheat from the chaff", and good quality poetry reaches the readers. Online publications comparatively publish anything and everything, which reduces the quality levels, and readers cannot sift through to find good poetry from the extensive amount available on the internet. This serves as a reason for choosing print publication over online publication. An additional disadvantage of online publication is the issue of copyrights and plagiarism and poets' payment for the literary work. Re-sharing of a poem can lead to increased readership but it is also how a poet's work may be changed, manipulated, or remixed. This re-sharing then leads to plagiarism and copyright issues which are inevitable in online publication. When it comes to earning, poets remain unpaid in online publications but a respondent expressed that poets "have never made any money", so it is not any different. Overall the positive aspects outweigh the negatives, making online publication a popular new way of publishing poetry (Fleming-way & Green 867-69).

Instagram poetry has given way to the genre of poetry which was declining in the past years. A study shows that the mere use of the word "poetry" saw a steep decline from 1960 to 2008 (Krgonzal). The new wave of continuously rising Instagram poets has helped the genre of poetry by a huge fraction. In 2013, a Cambodian-Australian Instagram poet, Lang Leav, was gaining popularity online, and Andrews McMeel, a publishing company, signed her to a book deal. They published her poetry book titled 'Love and Misadventure' which sold more than 150,000 copies. According to the publishing house, it was incredible for a love poetry book to sell out 150,000 copies. Similarly, Rupi Kaur's 'milk & honey' helped the sales majorly and since then, the genre of poetry has been rapidly growing in book publishing. As Kaur's publisher said she saw the change happen firsthand as poetry used to be in the back of the stores next to the bathrooms but now it is up at the front, and

that helps sales of all poets. A market research group also found out that 12 out of the top 20 best-selling poets in the year 2017 were Instagram poets. Also, in a survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Census Bureau in the year 2018, 28 million of the American population is reading poetry which is the highest percentage of poetry readership in almost two decades (Hill & Yuan).

Society and literature are inherently linked hence several critics from Plato to contemporary critics have developed different theories of sociological criticism. The belief was that literature is a product of society, and ideas and feelings found in literature are shaped by the cultural life that a society creates (Jadhav, 2014). The theory of sociological criticism views literature concerning the cultural, economic, or political context in which it is read or received. It explores the relationship between an artist and their society by examining the literature itself for elements that show the effect of society on their work. Scrutinizing Pakistani Instagram poetry through the lens of this theory allows for an insight into how the poetry reflects Pakistani society which effectively indigenizes the literature. Since it reflects indigenous society, bringing exposure to this poetry puts Pakistan's indigenous literature on the map of the literary world.

Analysis of the data yields in both major and minor themes. One major theme that emerges from the analysis is "self-compassion" which makes up 28.8% of the collected data. Pakistani poets greatly emphasize notions related to self, which are mainly self-acceptance, self- love, self-reliance, self-acknowledgment, and self-righteousness with hints of selfishness in some poems. For instance, a verse from *Abeera Latif*'s poem reflects the theme of self- acknowledgment.

> *"I own a brain,*
> *That works," (1b AL)*

Latif pens that she has a mind of her own that works. She acknowledges the presence of a sound brain to put across a silent message to people who interfere in other people's decisions and lives. Another poetess, who pens a mix of self-acknowledgment coupled with an indication of self-love is, *Unzila Iftikhar*. She pens the same theme in her distinct way.

> *"she is like a chrysanthemum soft, but she's courageous for she is brave enough to truly be herself in this plastic world." (12a UI)*

She compares a girl to a delicate flower but goes on to assert that she is not to be mistaken as solely being soft. The girl is courageous as she is being real or herself in this fake world. *Iftikhar* has employed the theme of self-acknowledgment here while the notion of self- love is also at play in the background. An instance of self-righteousness is found in *Khadija Chugtai*'s poem as she

advises one to cleverly adjust oneself to the waves and to do it in the way you feel better about it.

> *"adroitly adjust to the sails however you feel better" (2b KC)*

This deeply reflects the theme of self-righteousness as it depicts only relying on yourself for decisions, and trusting yourself to choose the best.

Waleed Alam has penned down the theme of selfishness in two of his poems, *Fail To Love* and *Heart To Dare*. In the first poem, he writes,

> *"Sometimes I feel like a monster but I feel content…I could carry your burden but I have my own self to fend," (4b WA)*

Alam showcases a selfish person as the narrator, one who is entirely focused on himself. The narrator admits that sometimes they may be cruel like a monster but they feel at ease in it, so they continue to behave so. This is then followed by words that truly capture the true essence of selfishness, as the narrator expresses that he has the ability to carry the listener's baggage but would not do so. The reason is that they have themself to take care of, which is quite selfish but it can also be seen as prioritizing oneself before others. In another poem, *Heart To Dare*, *Alam* again pens the theme of selfishness. It is shown how the narrator only pays attention to their misery, and how they saw this person grieve but they do not have a heart capable of caring enough to help or comfort. This relates to the aforementioned theme, as it is a clear depiction of selfishness.

> *"you can come back to yourself when they leave you." (6b MM)*

Mahmood expresses the theme of relying on yourself as she assures the readers by saying that they can "come back" to themself when they have nobody to lean on. This also comes under the theme of self-love as it depicts keeping one's dignity intact when people leave and relying on oneself instead of running after others. *Amna Dhanani* employs the theme of self-love in her poem as she pens the notions of criticism, and being true to oneself.

> *"People will see*
> *What they want to see in your words. Just be true and be you" (8a AD)*

Aptly she writes how people are always judgmental towards others, and that they will perceive your words according to their own will. So, *Dhanani* advises one to be truthful and be yourself. This deeply reflects self-love along with a hint of self-acceptance.

Noor Unnahar is all about self-love and self-acceptance as she employs these themes in her untitled poems on Instagram. She uses empowering vocabulary to bring inspiration to readers from her words, as seen below.

> *"I AM BUILDING*
> *A HOUSE…I AM BUILDING MYSELF" (9b NU)*

Unnahar starts this poem by implying she is constructing a house. She lists down the materials she is using in this house which include strength, ambition, and forgiveness, all of which are good virtues. These are not typically the items that go into the making of a house but then her last verse states that she is building herself, an act of self-love. The theme of self- acceptance is also at play here as the underlying meaning leads one to believe that the narrator must have accepted herself as lacking something, and so she built herself up again with good virtues. In another poem, *Unnahar* makes use of similar vocabulary to put forward the same notion. She advises one to, once again, build oneself but this time the elements are not good virtues. Instead, she sets the foundation on her ruins this time, giving a great lesson on self- acceptance and self-love. She accepts herself in the ruined form and then loves herself enough to build a new self from the same ruins. This takes a lot of strength on her part but the message that is delivered is powerful and inspiring. Another poetess namely *Mariam Hassan Jafri*, has taken up themes of self-acceptance and self-love too. As seen from the first extract of her poem, *Jafri* expresses the essence of loving oneself.

> *"for tomorrow and the days that come after I choose to only carry myself" (14c MHJ)*

Jafri here depicts the theme of self-love through her words. This verse may also come under the theme of selfishness but unlike *Alam* before, she has worded it quite differently. Her unique way of saying it has made this poetry reflect self-love more than selfishness, as she says that from now on she only chooses to carry her own self. It has not necessarily been mentioned that she would not help anyone else, rather she has set priorities here with herself being the foremost one. Hence the theme of selfishness here dims down letting self-love overpower it. In another poem of hers, she incorporates the theme of self-acceptance. She writes that all she needed was to be herself, not clarifying what caused this need but she puts forward an inspiring notion of accepting oneself. Being true to one's self is also a form of self-love, so the two themes can be seen at work together in this verse, letting self-love merge with self-acceptance.

Applying a sociological criticism lens to this theme, it can be concluded that it aptly represents the society it is produced in. Pakistani society like many others has progressed under the effect of globalization, and the youth puts great emphasis on self-compassion. Society as a whole shows to be focused on itself, looking inward for validation, love, and acknowledgment of the good. This is also reflected in the literature consequently, especially Instagram poetry by Pakistani poets as they constantly pen verses about self-compassion.

The theme of identity was addressed in the poems quite a few times, mostly asserting an individualistic identity approach. Poetess, *Abeera Latif* pens a verse that encompasses this theme well.

> *"Don't tell me what to do, For i am not you." (1b AL)*

Latif expresses that she does not need anyone to tell her what she should do, the reason being that she is not them. She asserts her identity here which indicates the central theme of this verse.

In another instance, a poetess employs the theme of identity slightly differently. She is not as straightforward as the aforementioned verse but instead a little indirect in her approach. *Chugtai* starts by comparing herself to a "*haze*" which appears but always fades away after a while. It is implied that she is more often than not invisible because fog and haze appear for short intervals. She carries this theme forward with another verse in which she says,

> *"//what I am and what you think are entirely different things//" (2c KC)*

It becomes clear here that like *Latif*, she too employs an individualistic identity approach. However, as said before, she uses an indirect way to say it. *Chugtai* writes that her real identity is what she is and it is completely different from the perception people have of her. This indicates that she wants to stress her own identity in the face of the wrong perceptions kept about her.

Instagram poetess *Aleezah* pens the theme of identity by comparing herself to inanimate objects, ones that are usually considered beautiful. She writes,

> *"I look like the star/the one that barely shines…I look like the glory of a sad poet/trying to write poetry…I look like the dispersed sky/the clouds are barely there…I look like how I see myself in the mirror" (3a A)*

Aleezah has compared her existence to the existence of a star that is dimmed, to the beauty of a gloomy poet who is trying to pen some verses, and to the scattered sky with scarcely distributed clouds. After this comparison, she goes on to say that she looks like she sees herself in the mirror, declaring that she has an identity she is well aware of. Just as *Latif* and *Chugtai* do, she manifests an individual identity too, making this theme quite uniform.

Closely related to the greater focus on self is the individualistic approach people have adopted recently in Pakistani society. Everyone shows a clear understanding of their identity, and a desire to assert it too. This is reflected in the literature as sociological criticism theory suggests; Pakistani Instagram poetry replicates the society it is written in as well.

Cruelty is a minor theme that appears once in the forty-five poems in the data. It is penned by the poetess *Hina Syeda* as she writes about the terrorist attack on APS Peshawar.

> *"134 children dead.*
> *No place safe.*
> *Not even schools." (10a HS)*

Syeda talks about the inhumane behavior of terrorists here as she gives readers the figure of the deceased children, 134. She affirms that no place is safe including schools which were previously considered a harmless place for children. The theme of cruelty seeps through the words as the poet recounts the evil acts of inhumane people.

This minor theme in the data aligns well with the sociological criticism lens as what happens in society is echoed in the poetry. Terrorism had a chokehold on Pakistan for a long while, and one of its cruel incidents was an attack on a school in Peshawar. *Syeda* employs the theme of cruelty to highlight the happenings in society and bring light to the cruelty of terrorism in our country.

This research project began with the quest of themes in Pakistani Instagram poetry and whether it reflects Pakistani society. With the aid of sociological criticism, it was found that most of the themes aptly mirrored the society the poetry was written in. The themes majorly consisted of self-compassion while a few minor themes were identity and cruelty. These prominent themes were chosen to be discussed from the analysis of the whole data. With this research, indigenous Pakistani literature can be globalized as Pakistani poets gain exposure. Further studies can highlight more of Pakistan's contribution to this new genre of digital poetry.

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