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## The Modern 'Waste Land': Multiple Voices in Harish Narang's *Pakistani Bachcha*

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### Abstract

In T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" the modern world is spiritually and morally dead; the modern man is a commoner, not a hero, conscious of his limitations. His mechanical and non-spiritual existence and absence of love and communication suggest living death. He is not only indecisive but also evades responsibilities. If there is mobility for the modern man, it is only for material gains, a moral descent towards alienation, deprivation, and lack of spirituality.

The present paper is a critical insight into Prof Harish Narang's collection of his self-composed short stories in Hindi, *Pakistani Bachcha*. The quintessential modern avant-garde stories present multiple perspectives, multiple truths, and multiple points of view. The fragmented self of the modern man, who is absorbed in disillusionment and has lost faith in humanity, finds suitable expression in the said volume. The study thus reflects on this chaos, the 'waste land' to borrow from T.S. Eliot's terminology. With the analysis of the non-linear narrative, intersecting voices of class and gender, the said and the unsaid, the othered spaces, and the nuanced analysis of the characters' conscious and unconscious thought, the paper probes into the crisis of identity, the existential angst and the gap between human will and action. With a tongue-in-cheek satirical voice, Prof Narang blends historical facts with fiction offering psychological and socio-political narratives.

**Keywords:** Modernism; Satire; Existential angst; Class; Gender; 'Waste Land'  
*Pakistani Bachcha*, self-acclaimed as Prof Narang's first attempt at creative writing is a reflection of the angst of the modern man of the so-called 'modern' era, canonically speaking.

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The translation of facts into fiction while stating the unstated is what makes the collection unique, fresh, and modernistic – in form and content. Prof Narang breaks from the ritualistic art of storytelling to courageously bring out the turbulence of the individual vs society. His socio-political and cultural contemporary reality becomes palpable in a succinct and piercing satirical voice. It is this, which disturbs the creative genius, who churns out narratives of alienation, disillusionment, and dysfunctionality of the modern man spiralled into the social quagmire.

The present paper is a critical insight into Prof Harish Narang's short story collection in Hindi, *PakistaniBachcha*. The quintessential modern avant-garde stories present multiple perspectives, multiple truths, and multiple points of view. The fragmented self of the modern man, who is absorbed in scepticism and has lost faith in humanity, finds suitable expression in the said volume. With the non-linear narrative, intersecting voices of class and gender, the said and the unsaid, the othered spaces, and the nuanced analysis of the characters' conscious and unconscious thoughts, the paper probes into the crisis of identity, the existential angst and the gap between human will and action.

Modernism, though not a movement per se, but a mixture of many artistic movements such as Symbolism, Imagism, Impressionism, and so on can be best understood as the ushering of a new tendency in literature and art post-First World War. It was a reaction against Victorian tradition, realism, and naturalism. The year 1922 signalled the arrival of innovative forms used in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* become popular in this period.

The chaos could not be represented in traditional literary modes leading to innovation and experimentation. In Eliot's fragmented poetic structures, Joyce's and Woolf's stream of consciousness, in Conrad's multiple narrative points of view, the "immense panorama of futility and anarchy"<sup>1</sup> of the age got reflected. A prominent feature of modernism was the 'avant-garde' or 'advance guard' – a military metaphor for writers and artists who decided to do something new<sup>2</sup>. They challenged the norms, shocked the sensibilities of the reader, and created new artistic forms and styles. Ezra Pound beckoned to 'make it new' (Beebe 1067).

Modernism found its roots in romanticism, which revolted against the industrial revolution and the bourgeois social order. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood led by D G Rossetti

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<sup>1</sup> The quote is from the title of Tim Havens' "The Immense Panorama of Futility and Anarchy: Conrad and Eliot as Critics of Modernity", <https://chrestomathy.cofc.edu/documents/vol9/Havens.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Heinle&Heinle, Thomson Learning, 1999, p. 168.

and others and taken up by Oscar Wilde propounded art for art's sake, not to be assessed by any external problems or standards. This led to the emergence of the aestheticism of Baudelaire and Flaubert in France. Walter Pater brought the ideology to England and Eliot to America. The autonomy of art went a step further with the Decadents. The Decadent writer presented the ugly and the morbid without qualms or criticism. Schopenhauer's pessimism influenced Nietzsche's nihilism and Sartre's existentialism. Nihilism negated life, knowledge, and existence and existentialism proposed that man was lost, and confused in an absurd world experiencing the 'existential angst' of dread and confusion. Existentialism further led to the Theatre of the Absurd of Samuel Beckett and others. *Pakistani Bachchapa* paints the pessimism and the absurdity of human existence.

In T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* the modern world is spiritually and morally dead; the modern man is a commoner and not a hero, conscious of his limitations. His mechanical and non-spiritual existence, absence of love, and communication suggest living death. He is not only indecisive but also evades responsibilities. The present collection of short stories showcases how the national to the mundane day-to-day life of individuals is affected by the modernity of the era and the divisions based on class, caste, and gender. The use of English words and sentences in the Hindi narratives such as "defrost" (Narang 13) or the title of a story "Bisleri Water" or a whole sentence like "with one doctor in the family, your three generations are made" (Narang 34) endorse their modernization. Writing is nuanced, detailing the nitty-gritty, making it realistic – far away from the romantic or the idealistic. The tales give the reader a vivid tour of Delhi locales, university campuses, etc. Autobiographical currents are evident as the protagonist in most of the stories is a university professor or somehow related to a university. The collection is abuzz with the university life and system – professors, meetings, seminars, classes, promotions, refresher courses, and brewing cups of tea and coffee in the staff room. The same capture the ethos of the academia and their prolific discourse on democracy vs autocracy, power politics between the dominant and the dominated, and contemporary burning national issues.

Although the collection begins with a story titled "Chamatkaar", "Chinta" delineates the profile of the materialistic, indecisive, and self-centred modern man. In this biting satire, the protagonist, like 'Prufrock', is engrossed in a dramatic monologue revealing his selfish character. The sham that he puts on of 'chinta' or concern for his old and sick mother is detestable yet not so shocking in an urbane modern set-up. Knowing well that he has a flight to Trichy for a seminar, the blatant lie of wanting to take her to the doctor speaks of the

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callousness that has crept into the modern man's veins. This is despite the mother having taken care of his children while he and his wife worked to earn a living. The visit could have been avoided only if the brother had agreed to keep a landline phone at home. Now, he even had to calculate the time that would go into visiting his mother, the probability of having to stay longer than the calculated time, and the risk of missing the important meeting regarding his promotion to a senior position. Financial gain and career goals take precedence over human relations, a price too heavy to weigh, making the son forego the visit to the ailing mother. What is worse, is the guilt being garbed with the disbelief that the mother must not be too unwell or even that she 'chose' the wrong time to fall sick. Yet again, ironically, it was always her fault for having cared too much about her children, and not herself, leading to these ailments in old age.

It is not just the protagonist Satish but the entire academic scene that is at the butt of the author's wit and satire. Lehman writes: "for modernist authors, satire was above all a tool by means of which they could distinguish their works and themselves from the fallen products of mass culture, as well as from the (no less fallen) mass of producers. The satirist mocks so as to demonstrate that he or she has not "been taken in" by society at large" (69). Petty politics at the workplace and the significance of networking to get the right people on the Selection Committee for the interview for professorship weighs more than the mother's condition. The height of nonchalance is reached with his comment that the mother is not going to die in the next three to four days! Worldly priorities outdo compassion and humanity – Satish's promotion, his children's forthcoming exams, or his brother-in-law's wedding are the real causes of 'chinta' or worry than his own mother's health. Like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, there is a contradiction between action and inaction, neither time nor space has moved and the entire monologue is delivered. The last phone call from his brother leads to further worry – not of the mother but of the chances of the ruin of his plans. One is reminded, "We are the hollow men, the unreal men, stuffed from inside."<sup>3</sup>

"Chamatkaar" is a simple tale of a college professor and his domestic help in a city where technology has made its advancement, where opposite sexes mingle freely, where sexualities are non-conformist, and yet man is lonely. The servant mulls over how his employer is visited both by men and women, and how women – single and divorced spend their evenings in the professor's drawing room. The Kashmiri woman smoked and drank, and wore clothes a size smaller to attract the professor to her. The rustic, unaware of non-heteronormative

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<sup>3</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men." 1925. <https://www.poetry.com/poem/114806/the-hollow-men>

relations, is equally abashed at the proximity of the professor with his male friend. For him, the reason why the good-looking and decent-earning professor had not married was beyond comprehension.

Just as the servant's thoughts draw his version of the matter-of-fact city life, the professor's account of his college dynamics uncovers the ethical degradation in academics. The culture of sycophancy, snacks with tea, skipping classes for days – the 'Rama Rajya' as the writer says – had ended with the new principal's authority and vigilance. The misappropriation of liberty of the teaching and non-teaching staff members is curtailed, labelling the Principal, ironically speaking, a troublemaker.

The tragedy creeps in as the servant gets accidentally trapped in the magnetically locked refrigerator and dies. His interior monologue while observing the neighbours, concern for his employer's meals, and the final reminiscences of his village and family left behind add to his diasporic dilemma. Past, present, and future coalesce in recollections of his village and parents, his fantasy of having his photograph clicked in a wedding procession, the yearning to watch an Aamir Khan movie while his feet go numb, the pulse grows weak, and he chokes to death in the fridge.

The non-linear, stream-of-consciousness technique used in the stories lends multiple voices to the said and the unsaid making the world a modern 'wasteland'. Virginia Woolf wrote: "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end." (160) She argued that humans experience 'thousands of ideas' and 'thousands of emotions' in a single day. As the conscious mind is never detached from the other levels of consciousness, as the mental images, sense perceptions, want the association with the absences, memories, and so on, it leads to a 'stream of consciousness' that the writer aims to portray objectively. James Joyce's *Ulysses* presents the mental associations of Molly Bloom; Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* employs the narrative technique to portray the thoughts of more than one character; William Faulkner uses the stream-of-consciousness narration to convey the inner thoughts of a mentally handicapped character in *The Sound and the Fury*.

With all rushing through one's consciousness, it becomes difficult to communicate with one another, let alone with oneself. The traditional novel form with an omniscient narrator tended to define human experiences and emotions in a rational pattern in a detailed socio-political environment. With the free indirect discourse, the narrator's observations are well-integrated with the characters' inner thoughts. With the use of the free indirect discourse, the

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psychology of the characters – their memories, thoughts, and feelings are described, all symbolic of the existential angst of the modern man.

Human consciousness is governed by 'ideology' which, according to Marx, is also propagated by the dominant class. Prof Narang's fiction records the social context, dominant ideology, and class structures objectively through the plots as well as characters. They not only critically comment on the Repressive State Apparatuses - law, police, army, and 'state control' that use force or the Ideological State Apparatus—that foster the ideology of individuals.<sup>4</sup> Literature is then a 'product' of its times. The hegemonic power structures that divide humans into caste, class, gender, and other categories form the backdrop of the collection. "Aponke Beech" again revolves around Mahesh, the modern, seminar-attending, books-publishing professor, and Harjeet, his Sikh optician friend. Thematically, the story deals with communal riots after the assassination of the then Prime Minister of India by her Sikh bodyguard, Operation Blue Star, and the consequent appalling bloodshed and violence. While Harjeet would banter about university strikes and political scandals, Mahesh's grim reflections included the role of the Repressive State Apparatuses as well as the mute spectatorship of the inhabitants of Delhi in the massacre of innocents. The protagonist, the spokesperson of the writer, comments on the national political mayhem and the religious divide. Not only this, the diasporic marginalization of Sikhs in Delhi, the sense of loss, and the inability to fit in compel Harjeet the optician to return to his people, 'apnonke beech' in Amritsar. The 1984 riots and the Sikh diaspora are again the subject matter of "Ek Aur Khaadhku". The story focuses on a security guard, Mahendra Singh, working at JNU, whose son has settled abroad, and borrows one of the university official's ration cards to get kerosene oil for cooking at his home. A simple bus ride becomes a journey down memory lane when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination typecasted all Sikhs as terrorists, for her assassin was her Sikh bodyguard. The writer's sarcasm is seen in the protagonist's remark that no Hindu should have been spared with this logic, for it was a fanatic Hindu who had assassinated Mahatma Gandhi. What followed was police brutality, arrests of innocent Sikhs, and migration to Punjab including Mahendra Singh's relative Harjeet the optician from 'Aponke Beech'. Sikhs' names had been picked up from the ration card offices and wiped out literally and metaphorically. The riots not only killed people but changed mindsets. Incidents of violence and curfew alternated; the Hindu-Sikh divide had become more of the India-Pakistan partition. When Mahendra Singh

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<sup>4</sup> For further reading see Saugata Bhaduri, and Simi Malhotra, editors. *Literary Theory: An Introductory Reader*. Anthem Press, 2010, pp. 3-67.

takes the bus back home, some kerosene oil spills when the bus merely escapes a collision with another vehicle. This harmless activity becomes grounds for his arrest, for he is a Sikh carrying kerosene oil in a bus near the Rashtrapati Bhawan, allegedly planning to burn down the same. Mahendra is falsely accused of carrying some documents and arson.

“Sukh ka Adhaar” is set at the time of the emergency declared in the nation by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the ensuing Sterilization Scheme to control the population. The blend of facts and fusion brings out the phallogocentric patriarchal Indian society, defined gender roles, the commodification of women, and so on. Lalit gets himself sterilized, and his wife secretly finds respite from having been reduced to a reproductive machine. But the sterilization is not successful and the wife gets pregnant again. Since Lalit assumes he cannot be the father, he is ridiculed and the woman’s infidelity is questioned, who becomes a victim of abuse and violence. The end is dismal, the wife kills herself and the children before the husband finds out the truth about his failed operation. Lalit also ends his life by jumping out of a running vehicle. Systemic failure becomes a source, not of joy, as in the title of the story, but of lamentation. Women’s plight is also underscored in “Mummy Gulmohar KabKhilenge”, the only story in the collection where the narrator is a woman, University professor Kesar Kalsi. Kesar’s husband chooses a Green Card and a better job over his wife and daughter. Despite her education, Kesar faces the pressure to give birth to a male child. With her protests against the superstitious mother-in-law and the sex determination of the child in the ultrasound test, Kesar and her husband become distant emotionally. Hemant is neither present at the time of his daughter’s birth nor shows any signs of return, having availed the perks of the foreign land. The idea of his family migrating to America is also not so welcome to him. Like Kesar’s daughter’s eagerness for the blossoming of the planted Gulmohar flowers, Hemant’s return is anxiously anticipated. The story is not just Kesar’s but also of Deepa and Dilip’s. Deepa faces tragedy as her husband, an Indian Air Force officer is reported missing. Investigations only resulted in a recounted accident of his plane had crashed on Pakistani grounds and failed attempts to find his body.

The exploitation of the masses and police brutality are again exposed in the last story “Bisleri Water”. How an innocent boy gets entangled in the web of politics on charges of theft of a Macaw bird gifted to a minister’s son by the President of a different country leading to the involvement of the Prime Minister, the National Human Rights Commission and even student activists on the university campus is a fine case of misuse and manipulation of power. Bribery, weekly reports of ‘death-in-custody’, and rivalry between ministers especially women are

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exposé of the fact that “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”<sup>5</sup> The victim's father's innocent friend also becomes the target of the corruption in the police force and is arrested unlawfully.

The partition of India and Pakistan is again at the heart of the “*Pakistani Bachcha*”. The focus is the Wagah Border visited by the university professor of the story “*Apnonke Beech*” on his visit to Punjab as a Resource Person for a Refresher Course for teachers seeking eligibility for their promotions. The uniformity of the fence and the flags, the uniform-clad men with their rifles, and their disciplined schedule at the border are emphasized alongside the contrasting ‘illegal immigration, ‘spying’, and ‘smuggling’ across the border. At the end of the story, when an Indian child notices a ‘*Pakistani bachcha*’ across the border wearing the same brand of Adidas shoes and leaves an unfinished statement regarding prejudices about the people on the other side, the fissure surfaces. The ‘border’ does not just separate the countries but ideologies. The titular story moans the politics of inclusion and seclusion that create a diversity of ideological borders separating humans.

Just as the protagonist of “*Apnonke Beech*”, Prof Narang yearns for a new vision, free from inequities and so the stories do not end on a happy note. There are multiple voices and their interior monologues. The collection is avant-garde for presenting diverse points of view. The stories replace the linear plot structure with the use of flashbacks and flashforwards in the stream of the characters' thoughts. In a Conrad-like style, the narratives probe into human will and action, inner thoughts, emotions, and virtues. The protagonist is not always the protagonist; the plot – the modern ‘wasteland’ is the main focus.

### Conclusion

In his preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Conrad writes: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see.” *Pakistani Bachcha* breaks new ground by presenting the why and how more than what happened. Multiple time frames and voices suggest impressions formed for the same event or character. Such impressions place more responsibility on the readers and evoke emotional responses from them. The world of *Pakistani Bachchais* filled with inertia, anxiety, and hostility. As in T S Eliot's *Burnt Norton*, the ‘wasteland’ depicted here is filled with

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<sup>5</sup>John Edward Acton's words in his letter written to Bishop Mandell in 1887, <https://literarydevices.net/absolute-power-corrupts-absolutely/>



'hollow men' who are never engaged in the very moment but in fancies or memories. Their 'time-ridden faces' are dead, caught in the 'time before' or 'time after' distracted from distraction by distraction, and thus, never in the living moment.

Descend lower, descend only  
Into the world of perpetual solitude,<sup>6</sup>

If there is mobility for modern man, it is only for material purposes. The world simply moves on its metalled way to practically nowhere. It is a descent towards deprivation, destitution, and lack of spirituality. The titles of the stories exude scathing sarcasm; death figures in almost all of the stories, and tragedy befalls all. In this pandemonium, the serpents of evil, immorality, and apathy are let loose, misleading people into moral, social, and cultural degradation. They are 'modern' – in their literary form and depiction of modern life, "aspects of the same condition" according to T.S. Eliot (Menand 556). To conclude, *Pakistani Bachcha* offers psychological and socio-political narratives in a satirical tone. Like the different parts of Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*, the assorted tales give an impression of disassociation. The picture of the chaotic and fragmented society gradually emerges as one reads the stories cohesively. The writer articulates his discontent and reiterates motifs and facets of human psychology through the disparate yet connected tales.

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<sup>6</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton." 1936. [https://www.best-poems.net/t\\_s\\_eliot/four\\_quartets\\_1\\_burnt\\_norton.html](https://www.best-poems.net/t_s_eliot/four_quartets_1_burnt_norton.html).

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