

**PUNJABI IDENTITY,
CULTURE AND LANGUAGE:
A STUDY IN STEPHEN
GREENBLATT'S NEW
HISTORICISM**

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INTRODUCTION

The study of Punjabi Identity, Culture, and Language in relation to Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist theoretical framework examines the empiricist understanding of Punjabi among youth. This research paper inquires about the modern understanding of the Punjabi identity, culture and language through a literary perspective.

The focus of this research is to establish the contemporary position of Punjabi and how it is perceived among the natives and ethnically diverse groups. To accomplish this, multiple aspects like identity, culture, and language are incorporated in order to have an intersectional study in light of New Historicism.

This research aims to explore the immediate take on Punjabi culture, identity, and language by comparing it with its traditional or historical understanding. It inquires whether the present comprehension of Punjab finds resonance with the past and how it is reflected in the changing times. This research encompasses an ethnographic standpoint to gather the viewpoints of individuals like Faiza Liaqat, Adnan Bajwa, Bisma Ijaz, Mubaris Kakar, Nayyab Zahid, and Tanveer Malik who have an insightful approach towards this research.

This paper incorporates their emotional and cognitive responses that ultimately provide a critical lens to this pithy discussion. The investigation is kept academic to gauge the logical understanding and empirical experiences are recorded to formulate a constructive thesis.

Research Background

Punjab is the provincial prince of Pakistan having a rich history dating back to the Indus Civilization of 3000 BCE. Up until the 20th century, Punjab was a collective territory but the incident of partition created two Punjabs; one in India and the other in Pakistan. This discussion is about Pakistani Punjab and how Punjab's culture, identity, and language are perceived today by native Punjabis and people belonging to different ethnicities. Since partition, Punjab has gone through a lot of geographical and social upheavals along with dramatic changes under political policies and dictatorial rules. Hence, disregarding politics from discussing Punjab would be serving a half-truth and there must be an intersectional approach to place Punjab with its culture, identity, and language in the modern landscape.

Ethnographic Methodology

In this ethnographic study, the researcher explores the cognizance of Punjabi identity, culture, and language through conversation with individuals of varied ethnic backgrounds. The study aims to learn how Pakistani people share a relationship with one of their most beloved and vibrant ethnicities; with its own culture and subsequent elements making it unique. The central point of consideration is the attitudes of young people towards the most dominant ethnicity of their country and how they feel about it.

The goal is to take their responses on Punjab and whether they feel receptive towards it and how they would base their feelings. The study will unveil a cogent vantage point from a youthful perspective apart from the scholastic studies undertaken on this subject.

The researcher has conducted a total of 6 interviews with ethnic Punjabis, Pashtuns, and Baloch individuals to develop a thesis on their viewpoints regarding Punjab and its cultural elements. All of the interviewees fall in the age bracket of 25-35 so a fresh and youthful perspective is discovered. Three women and three men have been included in this research to provide their stances.

The first participant, Miss Bisma Ijaz, is a passionate journalist and is ethnically Punjabi. The second, is Mr Tanveer Malik who is ethnically Punjabi but lives in Balochistan which adds nuanced perspective to this discussion. The third participant is Miss Faiza Liaqat who is currently pursuing her medical degree and takes pride in her Punjabi ethnicity. The fourth participant is Mr Adnan Bajwa who owns his Punjabi identity and is the founder of an academic circle, Bazm-e-Alam. The fifth contributor is Mr Mubaris Kakar who is an ethnic Pashtun and the last contributor is Miss Nayab Zahid who is ethnically Baloch.

The research questions were kept open-ended and the interviewees were free to add their opinions and answer as they wished. All respondents belong to middle-class backgrounds and received formal education that made them understand the tricky discourse around this subject. In addition, their personal experiences carved their intellectual take on this topic. Their observations are shaped through travelling, inter-ethnic relations, connection with their local roots as well as their intrinsic quest for exploring answers.

Thematic Study

The New Historicist understanding of Stephan Greenblatt is derived from a post-structuralist, Marxist, and anthropological influence. Apart from a homogenous and rigid understanding of history, culture, and identity, new historicism offers a discourse and a place of interpretive discussion. Greenblatt sees New Historicism not as a “doctrine” but wants to “situate it as a practice.” In this way, it becomes “methodologically self-conscious” as historical and literary interpretations are not totalizing and must have the flexibility to allow contradictory viewpoints. There is always a contradiction in beliefs and no existing problem can be explained monologically. When Greenblatt looks at culture, he sees a “complex network of institutions, practices, and beliefs.” He explains cultures have a “constraint” as well as “mobility”.

If a particular culture wants to survive then it must have a balanced oscillation between the two. This non-alignment with a definite ideology such as Marxism, post-structuralism, and Foucault’s power dynamics, offers nuance and an interdisciplinary approach leading to a constructive discourse.

Data and Findings

The response of multi-ethnic groups towards the reception of Punjabi identity offers an intuitive outlook with its entire focus on the individual’s personal experience. Each answer opens up a new plain of understanding and creates a liminal relationship that surpasses ideological boundaries.

The first question is how Punjabi identity is perceived in today’s Pakistan given the historical and socio-political circumstances and what it means to them.

Bisma says that Punjabi identity gives her a sense of belonging but at the same time creates an unwanted superiority complex given the plight of other ethnicities. For Adnan, Punjabi identity has become more like a political identity which is disassociated from its actual roots; a distorted form of Punjabi identity and Punjabi identity has evolved. For Faiza, being a Punjabi is definitely a privilege especially if you belong to the central part of Punjab. For Tanveer, being a Punjabi living in Balochistan, he witnessed a difference between Baloch Punjabi and central Punjabi.

The Baloch Punjabi is ethnically a Punjabi but his psychology and social attitudes are similar to the Pashtuns and Baloch. A Baloch Punjabi has no identity crisis but a central Punjabi is more ideologically confused in adopting his heritage. Whereas, Mubasir thinks that Punjab is perceived as a place having its own culture and tradition with a dominant Islamic and liberal lens. Nayab acknowledges the distinguishing features of Punjab in comparison to other cultures and appreciates the uniqueness of each.

The next questions are about whether Punjabi-ness is discriminatory towards other ethnicities and whether social status or privileges are attached to this particular identity.

There is a divided yet welcomed constructive criticism in the answers. Bisma and Faiza acknowledge the supremacy attached to Punjabi identity and the obvious discrimination against other ethnicities. They observed this prejudice in their educational institutes and how various scholarships are reserved for Punjabi students only.

At the same time, situations get intense when state policies are criticized by non-Punjabi ethnicities and teachers, along with students, have their reservations. Tanveer is of the view that his talent got him ahead and he refused to get a quota seat as skills can get you anywhere.

However, there is an issue of fake domiciles exploited by Punjabis and this is a cause of apprehension among Baloch people. Adnan thinks that Punjabi is not discriminatory; rather, Urdu and English have played this role. According to him, there is 'systematic oppression' and this is the 'untold truth' that no one wants to hear. Mubasir says that Punjabis are given more rights as they are dominant in the policy-making sector and if one wants his rights then he must be a Punjabi.

Regarding questions about the appealing elements of Punjabi culture like music, dress, film, literature, etc., the respondents have diverse answers. These answers are knitted with the language as it shapes culture and thought which is also linguistically opined by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Also, part of the enquiry is whether the Punjabi spirit or Punjabi-ness is present today as told in books and history or is lost somewhere.

Nayab points out that ethnicity doesn't matter; it is culture that marks the differences and she admits that the true Punjabi-ness specifically defined by the language is not practiced today. Bisma and Faiza think that the Punjabi culture is lost and there is confusion regarding what it means to be Punjabi. Is it the language, culture, history or the state propagated nationalism? Faiza feels that speaking Punjabi makes her emotionally attached to the culture and she owns

her identity but the truth is that it is mixed and drawn back by Urdu and English. Bisma shares the same view that a limited view of Punjabi is described and Punjabi speakers are regarded as "Paindu" or looked down upon. She says that the literary contributions are restricted to Bulleh Shah and, except for a few concepts of harmony, there is nothing left to say. Also, the cinematic portrayal of Punjabi cinema is violent and sexist portraying men as aggressive beasts and women are objectified to only please men.

Adnan thinks that there are some prejudices and then 'survival prejudices' among people. He is of the point that Punjabis must adopt their culture like Pashtoons, Baloch, and Sindhis, who don't feel the need to learn Punjabi if they move to Punjab. He also mentions language prejudice among the Punjabis themselves by quoting his experience that if he places an order in Punjabi in a high-brow restaurant then he tends to perceive a weird attitude. A 'strategic blunder' on the part of the state has given way to a confused identity of Pakistan in the process of disassociating local languages and has dismantled Punjabi in the process. Regarding literature, he says that writers like Waris Shah, Bulleh Shah, and M, Bakhsh did play a role in telling stories and establishing a moral fabric but was done partly due to 'invader prejudice' and partly to play their role in reforming society. The assimilation of works of literature was and still is missing.

Tanveer says that Punjabi culture is festive and there is a lot of celebration. He appreciates the liberal environment which gives women an equal chance to participate in social and economic life. From rural agrarian to modern feminists, he is all praise for the Punjabi women who can speak for their rights. However when it comes to Punjabi films then there is an aggressive picture played by characters like Sultan Rahi and vulgarity added by 'mujras'. In contrast to that, Punjabi literature features a pacifist approach with its poetic verses although prose is missing. Keeping this in view, Punjabi is now lost due to the imposition of Urdu and then English as official languages.

So, if a Punjabi movie is televised through state television then, except Punjabis, no other ethnicity can understand the film. As for literature, he says that Balochistan is multilingual as the Baloch Punjabi understands Barahvi, Pashto, Balochi, and Persian. He is familiar with Ranjeet Singh, Khair Bakhsh Marri, Khushal Khan Khattak and Akbar Bugti. But the central Punjabi reads soft literature like Nasim Hijazi and Raja Gidh. There is an interplay of Punjabi nationalism and Islamization portraying a diverse but confused Punjabi. He gives his final word that Punjabi identity is 'disoriented' and 'ideologically divided' as they hesitate to own themselves and at the same time behave narcissistically before other ethnicities.

Mubasir shares a similar point that it seems Punjabis don't like their heritage and hence are adopting 'Westernized' versions to appear more civil. He quotes an anecdote where his Punjabi professor was telling his son to speak Urdu and English as it is a better-behaved language. He further adds that when Urdu was utilized to shape Pakistan's identity then it did more harm to Punjabi than other languages. He is all for the promotion of Punjabi and its beautiful dialects like Kathrani and Siraiqi but the situation does not seem favorable. Punjab is dominating other ethnicities and blaming them for drifting from the centre and itself is breaking down in keeping.

Analysis and Synthesis

The responses of the interviewees serve as an eye-opening experience because, despite cultural and ethnic differences, there is an acceptance of diversity. There is a complete disassociation from being victimized as per the responses of Mubaris and Tanveer which reflects a self-aware approach towards their own identity. There is an introspective lens to each response that is a fruitful synthesis of this research. The complex interplay of socio-political changes along with cultural prejudices are recognized by every respondent and there is an acceptance of misgivings. Side by side, their willingness to be inclusive and embrace change in their approach towards the solution of ethnic prejudices as a way forward is highly progressive.

This provides a constructive as well as optimistic synthesis to this research.

Conclusion

The above discussions and responses conclude one thing when it comes to local people: they are inclusive and accept the differences with open arms. Be it a Pashtoon, Punjabi, or Baloch, they appreciate the zeal of Punjab and Punjabi and do not feel inferior. They are appreciable towards Punjabi culture and are welcoming towards cultural, lingual and social assimilation leading to the celebration of uniqueness. The only grievance is regarding the hegemony of the state and the personal prejudices of people that are shaped by political stances. If the state takes out its hands from defining culture, language, and identity then the situation can change diametrically for the best.

The people, and not the state, must decide who they are and together it will serve the state of Pakistan which comprises a unique blend of people. If the state encourages assimilation and equal treatment, it would be in the best interests for everyone.