

## **‘Ode on the Lungi’: Kaiser Haq’s Portrayal of “the Subaltern Speaking”**

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### **Abstract**

*Ode on the Lungi* is the highly studied and mostly appreciated poem of Kaiser Haq, the most eminent Bangladeshi poet writing in English. He considers Lungi, “ethnic attire,” as the symbol of subaltern and gives them voice to speak aloud their sufferings and the democratic hypocrisy they undergo. Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak suspects about whether the subaltern can speak or not and Arudhati Roy comments that the subaltern either cannot speak or we carefully and consciously neglect their speaking. What we get reading the poem is that Kaiser Haq challenges these comments of Spivak and Roy and cultural consciousness, as Franz Fanon defines the concept of national consciousness. *Ode on the Lungi* will be interpreted here in the light of the concept of subaltern and their urge for democratic equal rights. This paper is concerned with how Kaiser Haq blends the subaltern and their carefully unheard voices to the world and world people and questions the Father of American democracy about the validity and utility of democratic ideal regarding cloths referring to sartorial equality. This paper will also unearth the cultural and political differences between the East and the West as Haq shows using the kilt and lungi. In short, the prime concern of the paper is to analyze the voicing of the subaltern, especially Asian and more specifically Bangladeshi subaltern including women as employed in *Ode on the Lungi*.

**Keywords:** subaltern, orientalism, cultural consciousness, post-colonialism, feminism.

## **Introduction**

*Ode on the Lungi* is a poem appreciating the lungi wearing people referring to the subaltern and marginalized people (Chowdhury). Lungi, though an “ethnic attire” of common people, claims for equal dignity and this is why the speaker of the poem questions Walt Whitman, the most influential American poet who wrote on democracy and American ideals, and about the existing hypocrisy of democratic ideals. This attire also represents the subaltern and their presence in the global era. This poem is regarded as a postcolonial response against the autocratic, hierarchical and superior entity that is the West, more specifically the Occident. This paper will analyze how Kaiser Haq employs his idea of promoting the status of the subaltern. He also uses the upside down idea that is carnivalesque. He equates lungi and the lungi wearing people with other people of the world influenced by the democratic ideals but he finds hypocrisy in this ideal. Even nothing can resist him from proclaiming the equal rights of human being. Another issue is that Haq articulates the voice of the subaltern in the form of a lungi for global acceptance (Chowdhury).

## **Subalternity, song of myself and hypocrisy of democracy**

Subaltern is mainly derived from Marxist cultural critic Antonio Gramsci and it generally identifies those people or social groups who are outside the hegemonic power structures of the West and its colonies and therefore are excluded socially, politically, economically and geographically from a society’s center-stage. In addition, a group of South Asian historians who formed the subaltern studies group in the late 1970s and early 1980s started writing history from below, not from the perspective of the colonizer but from the perspective of the colonized. Here in *Ode on the Lungi*, Kaiser Haq is writing the history of the subaltern from their own perspective. The concept of subalternity occupies a great space throughout the poem titled “Ode on the Lungi”.

Walt Whitman begins ‘Song of Myself’, a poem included in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), “I celebrate myself, and sing myself” (760). This celebration signifies democratic ideals and freedom to do anything legal and express own feelings. If this is true, everyone can wear anything they wish. But unfortunately it does not work if the case is for subaltern Eastern people. Here it is necessary to identify the term subaltern. *Postcolonial Studies* (2013) defines, “Subaltern, meaning ‘of inferior rank’, is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci (1930-2) to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class” (244). The anthology adds, “Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and the groups denied access to ‘hegemonic power’” (244). Now the definition demands a definition of hegemony. Antonio Gramsci writes in ‘Hegemony’ (673) that hegemony is the power of the ruling class to convince other classes that their interests are the interests of all. In other word, hegemony signifies cultural domination. Cultural domination is dominant in subalternity and in cloths. In cultural domination, some cloths are considered better than other. In *Ode on the Lungi*, the speaker of the poem clearly claims that “some obviously/ are more equal than others” (23-24). Lungi is dominated by kilt or some other dresses. When the speaker talks of democracy with Walt Whitman, “laureate of democracy” (50) about a White House appointment, Mr. Walt can enter “affected a kilt— / but a lungi? No way.” (52-54). Though kilt is a dress resembling lungi, kilt is allowed in the Whitehouse but not lungi. This inequality questioned: “Is it a clash of civilizations?” (57).

Kaiser Haq is said to be the real “ambassador of Bangladeshi culture” who proudly reveals his origin and rationally tries to brand his country (Hossain 11). In addition, he “defends the misrepresentation of lifestyles and ideas of the East by the West and *Ode on the Lungi* is an attempt of his defense” (Munzerin Mohiuddin 2).

## **Sartorial Equality, Subalternity and Kaiser Haq's 'Ode on the Lungi'**

The subalterns are supposed not to speak. Even if they speak, they are preferably unheard or carefully neglected. "Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to hegemonic power" (Ashcroft's *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts* 244). In postcolonial studies, subaltern are the Orient. To simplify, they are the colonized people and especially they belong to the East. Common people of the Eastern world are addressed here as the subaltern. Kaiser Haq writes in *Ode on the Lungi* that "It's the subaltern speaking" (185). Lungi is the dress of the working class of Bangladesh. So this dress signifies the lungi wearing people. How lungi is viewed is another crucial question that is not denied by the poet. The reaction of Beau Brummel against coat was "What is this thing?" (*Ode* 115) The approach was very neglecting. Kaiser Haq could understand that lungi will be regarded in this way to the father of democracy, Walt Whitman. So he himself raises the questions and gives a scientific description of this attire. Finally, the speaker of the poem would like to promote the lungi wearing people. That is why he urges to the US chief to attend the office with lungi and proclaims that "Grandpa Walt, I celebrate my lungi/ and sing my lungi/ and what I wear/ you shall wear..." (*Ode* 105-108) The Western, the colonizer, insisted to follow them. Now, this postcolonial response of a colonized man, who is talking with the same tone and asks them to follow his footprint, ensures the possibility of sartorial equality, which indicates the equal rights of the colonized world and its people. This footprint is to be followed by the colonized. This poem expresses a growing consciousness and fight against the gap between 'us' and 'them' (Hossain, 2013). Now lungi wearing people are none whom the Occident can demean. Thus subaltern people are dignified with their due respect and humane quality in *Ode on the Lungi*.

Kaiser Haq is a Bangladeshi poet who also loves to wear lungi. He represents this community. He expresses his sorrows while Lungi was banned in Gulshan, an aristocratic area of Dhaka, Bangladesh. He said, "I discovered that the Baridhara society is not alone among

public bodies in its antipathy to the public use of the lungi” (Dhaka Tribune, April 18, 2013). Haq commented earlier that this was “the invasion of sartorial inequality” (Hossain 2). All these employ Kaiser Haq’s concern for the subaltern and the unvoiced people.

*Ode on the Lungi* is the symbolic representation of the subaltern. Kaiser Haq utters that lungi is the subaltern speaking. To elaborate the idea, the lungi wearing people are promoted here in the guise of lungi. How Bew Brummel sneers at this ethnic attire and how the son of Kaiser Haq’s cousin becomes ashamed of lungi are in no way different from how the Orient are looked down upon and how common people of the East are treated throughout the world. The speaker of the poem raises his voice for the equality of all as to employ democratic ideals but he found the clash of civilization that also refers to the target of protest. It “is unquestionably a postcolonial resistance poem to the imperialist cultural hegemony” (Hossain 2). Thus this poem takes the voice of the subaltern.

### **Kilt vs lungi and Orientalism**

The speaker of *Ode on the Lungi* comments that “the kilt is with ‘us’/ but the lungi is with ‘them’” (59-60). Here the words ‘us’ and ‘them’ are in inverted commas as they refer to the idea of Edward W. Said (1978). He has defined the occident and the orient with these two terms. The occident stands for the colonizers and the Western while the Orient stands for the Asian and the African. In a colony, the colonized are the marginalized. It implies them even culturally and politically. Said writes in *Orientalism* that “the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (25). Here the lungi wearing ‘them’ is the native people signifying the marginalized and the subaltern people. As the Westerner wear kilt, it is a cultured dress but lungi is an ethnic attire as it is worn by the subaltern.

Kilt vs Lungi signify the West vs the East as kilt is the attire of the Western while lungi is the attire of the Eastern. Kilt is an attire resembling lungi. People of the West are accustomed

to wearing kilt. This is a part of Eurocentric tradition. On the other hand, lungi is worn by common people, especially by the working class. According to Eurocentric idea, dresses that do not belong to the West are inferior and therefore lungi is inferior dress. But Kaiser Haq distinguishes this discriminatory attitude of the world. He has given an example of one of his cousins who lives in America. His cousin wears lungi after he returns from office but “his son grew ashamed/ of dad and started hiding/ the ‘ridiculous ethnic attire’. (*Ode* 86-88)” Here the phrase ‘ridiculous ethnic attire’ has been under quotation mark since it implies something else. Thus, *Ode on the Lungi* “projects the ... picture of Eurocentric hegemony in private spaces” (Afroz and Yeasmin 52).

### **Lungi activist as the unvoiced majority**

When can a dress be ethnic attire? Is it the answer that it is worn by a very few people or only by a tribe? Kaiser Haq answers it in the poem very sarcastically that “there are more people in lungis/ than the population/ of Europe and the USA” (*Ode* 44-46). Who use this dress? He also answers it saying “Hundreds of millions/ of men and women, / from the Pacific to Africa/ wear lungi” (*Ode* 32-35). So it is used in several continents and by thousands and millions of people. Normally women are regarded as the doubly subaltern as they are firstly subaltern to the highest authority and then to his male counterpart. Symbol of lungi does not exclude the women from the mainstream. Rather they also wear lungi; they are also marginalized culturally and sartorially. Here the form of lungi is the same but the name is different on the basis of sex and country. “Sarong, munda, htamain, saaram/ pinon, ma’awaiis, kitenge, kanga, kaiki,/ or the variant dhoti” (*Ode* 37-39), all of the dresses mentioned here are lungi, at least in the form of lungi. These dresses are used not only indoor but also outdoor. So how can this lungi be ethnic attire? No answer can be given as Orientalism deals with the idea of the Occident about the Orient. The occident claim themselves culturally superior to the Orient, so being the attire of the Orient, lungi is a low quality dress though in form it resembles kilt, *their* dress. So, Kaiser

Haq portrays lungi in such a way where hegemony cannot defeat lungi as a low quality dress. Thus Mr. Haq speaks for lungi wearing people.

Haq is very brokenhearted with the existing situation. He writes, “Something needs to be done” (*Ode* 92). He does not mention his inabilities as stated in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and does not say that “Nothing to be done” (41). Rather he is eager to do something to eliminate the discrimination. Kaiser Haq declares:

The next time someone insinuates  
that I live in an Ivory Tower  
I’ll proudly proclaim  
I AM A LUNGI ACTIVIST. (*Ode* 95-98)

He does not stop by only declaring but insists on organizing an international program on lungi. He writes, “Friends and fellow lungi lovers, / let us organize lungi parties and lungi parades./ let us lobby Hallmark and Archies/ to introduce an international Lungi day.” (*Ode* 99-102) The urge and declaration for organizing an international lungi day symbolize the dignity of lungi as well as the dignity of the subaltern. He is well aware of the ridiculous attitude of the Western. Despite this, he does not resist himself from proclaiming the equal dignity for lungi as in this democratic world; every cloth should have equal rights. This upholding of lungi is to uphold the lungi wearing people. He denies, more specifically challenges the sartorial hegemony that pervades our lives by dignifying lungi and the marginalized people.

In this article, Walt Whitman is relevant in almost everywhere as the speaker of the poem is addressing him. The Father of American Democracy writes in ‘Song of Myself, “I celebrate myself and sing myself” (1). Haq connotes to Walt Whitman, “I celebrate my lungi/ and sing my lungi/ and what I wear/ you shall wear” (*Ode* 105-108). Here the concept of ‘myself’ refers to the concept of lungi wearing people. ‘Myself’ is equal to lungi to Kaiser Haq. Here it is the relevant to note that lungi wearing people are akin to ‘myself’. Haq belongs to

this group. He is not declaring the freedom of his own self but the freedom and equal rights and dignity for his own people. Here he gives no chance of looking down upon the downtrodden. If the ideals of democracy prevail in the world, everyone is bound to listen to others. Here in the poem Haq invites Walt Whitman to wear lungi as Haq and his people wear lungi. This invitation also signifies the confrontation and upholding of the downtrodden and thus Kaiser Haq makes the subaltern people speak.

### **Symbol of lungi as “the subaltern speaking”**

Lungi is a “symbol of global left-outs”. After explaining lungi and its utility scientifically, Kaiser Haq says that lungi is “an emblem of egalitarianism,/ symbol of global left-outs.” (*Ode* 182-183) The word “left-outs” signifies the excluded people. It also refers to the downtrodden and subaltern that is systematically excluded from the mainstream by the elite, by the “us” and by the Western. The left-outs are speaking for their own dignity. He clarifies any sort of ambiguity and says that “it’s the subaltern speaking” (*Ode* 185). This comment eliminates all types of ambiguities regarding the interpretation of *Ode on the Lungi*.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, *Ode on the Lungi* is connotatively ode on the subaltern, ode on the downtrodden and ode on the marginalized people. These marginalized people are not silent in this poem. Rather they are declaring their equality with other people. The lungi wearing people are not to be neglected as in this democratic world; they also possess the same dignity. In short, Kaiser Haq successfully portrays the equal dignity and strong voice of the subaltern in *Ode on the Lungi*. He personifies lungi in this poem so that he can glorify the lungi wearing people and can represent them with their own identity.



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