

Kaiser Haq’s “Ode on the Lungi”: A Resistance to the Politics of Socio-Semiotic

Violence

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to project Kaiser Haq’s one of the most celebrated poems “Ode on the Lungi” as a resistance to the politics of socio-semiotic violence. Literature and politics are two interconnected phenomena. The contemporary version of Colonialism employs the politics of engineering its target nation’s socio-semiotics to maintain an invisible dominance. Socio-semiotics refers to anything non-material like religion, culture, and tradition. Socio-semiotic violence means invading the socio-semiotic systems of a nation and replacing and distorting its symbols or at least the understanding of the symbols. This paper argues that the renowned Bangladeshi poet Kaiser Haq in his poem “Ode on the Lungi” has created a resistance to the politics of socio-semiotic violence by tracing the conspiracy, celebrating the native way of being and doing, and calling for a united stand.

Keywords: Resistance, politics, socio-semiotics, violence, symbols, colonialism

Kaiser Hamidul Haq, a Bangladeshi poet, translator, critic, and academic, is celebrated globally for his poem “Ode on the Lungi” which was published in the volume of poems known as *Published in the Streets of Dhaka*. Any researcher who has worked on Kaiser Haq will indiscriminately admit the fact that although the other poems of the volume were not any less in terms of aesthetic quality or richness of subject matter, “Ode on the Lungi” managed to triumph over anyway. What gives prominence to this poem is a simple question that produces complex answers. Literary analysis, be it text or context-based, needs a careful reading in the very first place and the reading always starts with the title. A very ordinary title with an uncomfortable word (‘Lungi’) in it that stands for a very comfortable clothing is capable of creating the dual effect of immediate-innocent- laughter and the critical crinkling of eyebrows of the readers. The poem addresses certain issues like sartorial inequality, subalternity, and hegemony which eventually lead to the Post-Colonial discourse.

However, this paper viewed Kaiser Haq's "Ode on the Lungi" from a different and more specific perspective. Modern-day politics has disguised itself and therefore it is not easy to pinpoint the imperial agenda like before unless and until we understand the Western way of invading the socio-semiotic systems of the countries that were colonized once. Kaiser Haq being an intellectual of a country that has a long and traumatizing history of being colonized and which is still an easy prey of Neo-Colonialism seems to have realized the urgency of resisting such western strategies of domination and otherization. In his poem, "Ode on the Lungi" he did what a native intellectual is expected to do while dealing with visible or invisible colonial aggression. This paper is an attempt to project the poet's consciousness about the socio-semiotic violence carried out by the West and his way of building a resistance to this politics.

Before reflecting on the socio-semiotic violence that the poet has attempted to resist through his poem, a look should be taken at the urgent issues of the poem under discussion. Lungi, a rectangular local garment vertically stitched to make a textile tube, has always been granted the status of the subaltern even though there are more people in lungi than the population of the USA. Lungi has different names in different countries like Sarong, Munda, Htamain, Saaram, Ma'awaiis, Kitenge, Kanga, and kaiki. But the poem has the essence of Bangladeshi national culture in it and the poet explicitly refers to that in lines like:

It's time you finally made your passage
to more than India – to Bangladesh –
and lounging in a lungi
in a cottage on Cox's Bazar beach. (Haq)

The poet finds it to be a sheer irony of democracy that it undermines the sartorial identity of a large population of the globe only because the lungi is with "them" and not with "us". This otherization which the poet considers to be a "clash of civilization", has been the topic of discussion of Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* where Said argued that the Orient has always been the most recurring image of the Other for the Occident (1). Here the discourse becomes condensedly theoretical as Lungi is being the victim of Cultural Hegemony for being the attire of the subaltern. The politics go deeper when we recall what Frantz Fanon, the founding figure of Post-Colonialism said in his masterpiece *The Wretched of the Earth* that every culture grows in a national context (208). It can be noticed that the local culture of the orient is never given the recognition of "Supra-National Culture" even if some of these have the ability to transcend national boundaries but the culture that

derives from the West often gets the acceptance as so. It is, in fact, a two-way process that involves subliminal seduction employed by the West and the “consent” manufactured by cultural hegemony.

“Ode on the Lungi” shares some major features that can encourage a critic to view the poem Post-Colonially but this paper is an attempt to divert the readers' attention to a more specific and practical issue which is resisting the politics of socio-semiotic violence. The rationale behind parting away from Post-Colonial analysis is the vagueness of the term Post-Colonialism. Post-Colonialism is vague because it does not even exist or have never existed. The standard view of Post-Colonialism is often traced in the book *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). In the later edition of this book, the term Post-Colonialism was used to refer to “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft et al. 2). But in the same book the authors acknowledged the limitations of this view like this:

Such a broad-reaching definition has been opposed by those who believe it necessary to limit the term either by selecting only certain periods as genuinely Post-Colonial (most notably the period after independence), or by suggesting that some groups of peoples affected by the colonizing process are not Post-Colonial (notably settlers), or, finally, by suggesting that some societies are not yet Post-Colonial (meaning free of the attitudes of colonization. The case of indigenous people in settler societies is an example of this latter argument). Some have argued that the purpose of Post-Colonial studies is to assist the total and absolute decolonization of societies in psychological as well as political terms, involving massive and powerful recuperations of the pre-colonial cultures. (2)

Apart from this debate which the authors somehow tried to address in the later version of the book, there is a subtler problem left out. Post-Colonialism is the name of the myth that has deteriorated our way of dealing with colonialism 2.0 or Neo-colonialism.

Of all the myths that were established in colonial times, the myth of post-colonization is perhaps the most oppressive. This is because the discourses of Post-Colonialism, and its ensuing practices, which are at the foundation of how we are governed today, are fake news. People cannot be Post-Colonial until colonization actually ends. (Mahboob, “The Myth of the Post-Colonial”)

The cited view has its relevance because colonization today operates through our socio-semiotic systems (ways of being, knowing, and doing) and our colonizers can be global or local. Despite having local

governments for decades, some countries are still blaming colonization for their predicament. As we could not engineer our own socio-semiotics in a way that will lead us to prosperity, we are trapped in the “Development-maze” crafted by the colonizers and the result is our almost voluntary subjugation to their socio-semiotic violence. Development discourses are so naturalized in today’s world that most people just assume that our own architectures (material, social, political, semiotic) should be similar to the “developed” world. This is what questions the validity of fancy terms like “Post-Colonialism” while it is “Colonialism: Season 2 that is operating and we are quite enjoying the show.

Now we come to our basic understanding of socio-semiotics and why violence through socio-semiotics is more impactful than physical aggression. Simply speaking, anything that is not material can be called socio-semiotics. “All beliefs, attitudes, religions, languages, histories, cultures, economics are examples of socio-semiotic systems. Socio-semiotic systems, or the non-material world, operate through symbols. And, symbols are inherently dynamic, variable, and unstable” (Mahboob, “Colonisation 3.0”). Now our next question is what is socio-semiotic violence? Socio-semiotic violence involves the formation of new concepts and categories in the language of the colonizer. It also includes invading the socio-semiotic system of a nation and replacing and distorting their symbols or at least their understanding of those symbols. Symbols are the medium through which we enter the world of non-materiality. In that sense, religion, culture, nationalism everything is non-material. If we take the instance of language, English is the language that has managed to carry out the socio-semiotic process of colonization.

This socio-semiotic violence includes the formation of new concepts and categories in English, e.g., ‘country’, ‘language’, and ‘religion’; an introduction of new forms of education and literacy; and, using these categories and processes to divide up and influence peoples’ beliefs and practices. While the Europeans physically retreated from their colonies starting the middle of the 20th century, the socio-semiotic processes that they put in place continue today. (Mahboob, “Colonisation 3.0”)

The European colonizers aptly used symbols to divide the natives. Divisions were made through literacy, land ownership, economic policies, and beliefs, and so on.

Coming back to the poem under discussion, we notice that the poet is very much aware of the socio-semiotic violence in the guise of sartorial discrimination. He does not hesitate to allude to George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and says:

All clothes have equal rights"
This nobody will deny
And yet, some obviously
Are more equal than others. (Haq)

Here the politics of socio-semiotic violence is quite obvious. Clothes are, without any confusion, material things but the symbols they carry refer to cultural, ethnic, and often religious implications which is non-material. For instance, a temple being an architecture of concrete is material but the beliefs and practices it symbolizes are non-material. Similarly, by violating the equal right of Lungi, the West is not only insulting a local garment but also questioning the taste and to some extent the lifestyle of the people who wear it. This violence, as mentioned earlier in the paper is a two-way process. One is the engineering of the socio-semiotics by the West and the other is the manufactured consent from us. Kaiser Haq also projects the impact of such socio-semiotic violence on the natives by saying:

Hegemony invades private space
as well: my cousin in America
would get home from work
and lounge in a lungi-
till his son grew ashamed
of dad and started hiding
"the ridiculous ethnic attire" (Haq)

We can notice that some of us cannot think of wearing this ethnic attire considering it to be ridiculous and can even grow ashamed if any of our family members wear one. Moreover, lungi is often viewed as an object of fun.

The poet's concern about such socio-semiotic violence can be traced in some other places of the poem "Ode on the Lungi". The "kilt" (which we are not sure is the mini version of lungi or a short skirt) is welcomed in a "White house appointment" but a lungi is not. So, it is not the material that is the target of violence rather the non-material, in other words, the socio-semiotics that it stands for. Lungi has always been a "thing" for the

“tie and jacket” people which indicates linguistic violence. Kaiser Haq, therefore, resisted such violence by giving the clear identity of the clothe “lungi” which the Westerners call a “thing”:

A rectangular cloth,
White, coloured, check or plaid,
roughly 45X80 inches,
halved lengthwise
and stitched
to make a tube
you can get into
and fasten in a slipknot
around the waist- (Haq)

Kaiser Haq’s “Ode on the Lungi” also projects how globalization, another instrument of neo-colonial socio-semiotic violence, can invade and wipe out the culture of the natives. He refers to Myanmar at one point in his poem and suggests that there will be a time when the multi-national capital will catch their textile market and replace lungi with the arrival of Savile Row (A British Company for men's formal shirts, casual shirts, tailored suits, silk ties, shoes and much more). Models of globalization have moved, over the last 50 years, from expressions of the process as ‘cultural imperialism’ or neo-colonialism to analyses of the hybridization, dissemination, relativization, and interrelationship of global communities, the ‘compression of the world and the escalation of the consciousness of the world as a whole. There have even been some suggestions that imperialism has been surrogated as a model for global processes and replaced by a more complex view of the engineering of socio-semiotic systems that operate in world culture.

Lungi as a designated symbol of the subaltern, is able to speak against torrential attack and encroachment of aggressive modernity under the guise of globalization which is incessantly engaged in promoting/imposing Western and elitist culture. Be it fashion in regard to costumes or cosmetics and the culture of Coca Cola, Mac-Donald or Pizza, fashion parties and night clubs — these are so meticulously injected in the minds of the indigenous people wherefrom a particular ‘elite’ group who are economically sound and even educated, tend to become dominant like any other dominant foreign groups, and thereby make

their own people subordinate or subaltern. The Western cultural propaganda through numerous media resources has not only punctured the local culture, lifestyles, ways of thinking etc. (Choudhuri 62)

An effective way of resisting socio-semiotic violence is safeguarding a country's national culture which demands the active roles of the native intellectuals. Frantz Fanon in the chapter entitled "On National Culture" of his book "*The Wretched of the Earth*" suggests that the formation of national culture after gaining independence is a crucial stage and it requires the native intellectuals' active participation (Fanon 211). The native intellectuals need to double-cross the colonizers by using their language, policy, and techniques against themselves and at one point they need to turn into racists. The type of racism that Fanon referred to can be identified as Négritude. Négritude is a cultural movement that started in the 1930s in Paris by French-speaking black graduates from France's colonies in Africa and the Caribbean islands. These black intellectuals converged around issues of race identity and black internationalist initiatives to resist French colonial power. They took pride in and found solidarity in their shared black identity and African heritage. The Négritude movement beamed an awakening of race consciousness for blacks in Africa and the African Diaspora. A similar discourse is at our hand that can originate from Kaiser Haq's poem as "Lungitude." This time, the consciousness is not about the complexion of the race but the sartorial habit of certain races who have the shared experience of being the "global left-outs." "Ode on the Lungi," illustrates how a poet can cross boundaries and appeal to a variety of people who share common concerns and viewpoints. In this poem, Haq effortlessly moves from a Bangladeshi man "swimming in a lungi/ abbreviated into a G-string" to a list of similar garments used by men of other nations and given other names" (Ahmed 126). This view is reflected in the poem: "Hundreds of millions/From East Africa to Indonesia/ Wear the lungi" (Haq).

Kaiser Haq's "Ode on the Lungi" is a call for rediscovering our authentic self. Being a Bangladeshi poet, Kaiser Haq is safeguarding Bangladeshi culture by resisting the socio-semiotic attack on a popular national clothe of our country. Meanwhile, this poem conveys the shared interest of people from many countries in the world who wear lungi and this consciousness like Négritude can bring them on the same platform. The west does not reject lungi because Bangladeshi people wear it, they reject it because it is the clothing of the subaltern and the subalterns have a shared identity. "For the colonist, the Negro was neither an Angolan nor a Nigerian, for he simply spoke of "the Negro." For colonialism, this vast continent was the haunt

of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighed down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals—in short, the Negro's country” (Fanon 209).

“Ode on the Lungi” resists the politics of Socio-semiotic violence by demolishing the notion of standard clothing, pin-pointing the strength and utility in the local culture, and beaconing the hope of being and doing things in our way. This three-fold resistance can be considered to be vital in the process of Decolonization. “Decolonisation, in Colonisation 2.0, does not imply getting rid of visible ‘foreign’ rulers – this was done decades ago in most cases. Decolonisation, during the period of Colonisation 2.0 will require getting rid of the ‘invisible’ and ‘viral’ socio-semiotics that are designed to destroy us”(Mahboob, “Colonisation 3.0). We need to realize that in our contemporary, Decolonization has become a complex process. Although Decolonization can be set as a goal of the educational outcome, it is primarily an individual and personal process. For instance, if wearing a Lungi on formal occasions is not made normalized, it is not necessarily the failure of the government. As an independent citizen, one needs to normalize this ethnic attire for himself and for people who wear it in front of him. It is a collective process that starts with the individual. Normalizing Lungi is just a symbolic step in the process of Decolonization. Kaiser Haq’s “Ode on the Lungi” encourages us to Decolonize our minds by celebrating what we have, critiquing the double-standard of the West, and explicitly stressing the fact that “Something needs to be done” (76). Kaiser Haq’s resistance to the politics of Socio-semiotic violence involves the criticism of the sartorial double-standard of the West. He did not complain about the “Jacket and tie” as they are useful in certain places. But he is not okay with the idea that a vast population’s modest clothing is being treated as a “thing”. He mentions in this poem:

Think too of neo-imperialism
and sartorial hegemony,
how brown and yellow sahibs
in natty suits crinkle their noses
at compatriots (even relations)
in modest lungis, (Haq)

This crinkling of noses hides sheer political motives like neo-imperialism and sartorial hegemony. Another point is the acceptance of the Scottish Kilt and the rejection of lungis that indicates “some are more equal than others” and this duality of Democracy foreshadows the clash of civilization. Finally, in the name of “Globalization,” the threatening victory of multinational capital attempts to replace the ethnic attires not

because the ethnic attires do not match the standard of clothing (there cannot be any particular standard of clothing) but because the mimicry of the natives is to be purchased either by corporatization or by sartorial hegemony.

“Ode on the Lungi” calls for a movement. This realization is the first step of resisting socio-semiotic violence. Kaiser Haq does not seem to believe in “All talk and no work” and therefore, he focuses on the practice rather than the theory. He claims himself as a “Lungi Activist” and calls for certain collective actions that symbolize the urgency of some real-life campaigns. This is quite interestingly a feature shared in a newly merging genre of academia founded by Professor Ahmar Mahboob called “Subaltern Linguistics.”

Subaltern linguistics is a linguistics carried out by and for a community’s self-empowerment, well-being, and prosperity. Subaltern linguistics can be carried out by anyone. And, it can be done in any language – it does not need to use or rely on English or on technical jargon. The goal of subaltern linguistics is to create economies, practices, projects, and resources that can be made and used by community members and leaders to develop and promote community beneficial socio-semiotic processes in their own language (or a language of their choice). Socio-semiotics can be broadly understood as ways in which various meaning-making resources (including, but not limited to, images, texts, colours, symbols, gestures, movement, sounds, smells, tastes, touch) relate to the lives of people.” (Mahboob, “What is subaltern linguistics”)

Community empowerment, well-being, and prosperity are the three goals of Subaltern Linguistics. It recognizes the relationship between socio-semiotics and the material system. SL demands CREDIBLE projects rather than research articles that fail to reach common people. These projects include campaigns and activities that address real-life issues and attempt to bring visible changes in society. SL believes in blending literature with linguistics and real-life issues.” Ode on the Lungi” can be an ideal piece of work for this field as it demands some real-life activities. We can see in the poem that the poem says:

Friends and fellow lungi lovers,
 let us organise lungi parties and lungi parades,
 let us lobby Hallmark and Archies
 to introduce an international Lungi Day
 when the UN Chief will wear a lungi
 and address the world (Haq)

In some so-called “elite residential areas” of Dhaka, Rickshaw pullers are not allowed to wear a lungi. To protest against such “Native Cultural Bourgeois”, many youths were seen to parade on the streets of Dhaka wearing lungi which eventually became a news story for mass media. The demand for having an “International Lungi Day” can be assumed as the Poet’s demand to transmute wearing Lungi into a Supra-national Culture. It is obviously a boomerang on the face of globalizing the western sartorial habit. The poet addresses Walt Whitman on several occasions in the poem and he at one point proudly demands:

what I wear
 you shall wear
 It’s time you finally made your passage
 to more than India – to Bangladesh –
 and lounging in a lungi
 in a cottage on Cox’s Bazar beach
 (the longest in the world, we proudly claim) (Haq)

The poet’s taking pride in Cox’s Bazar is another reference to his attempt to uphold his motherland which Fanon denominated as a common feature of a native intellectual (210).

Perhaps, the most striking resistance to the politics of socio-semiotic violence can be found in places of this poem where the poet celebrates lungi and highlights the utility of it. This celebration is a manifestation of the pride that a native takes on his identity. The poet proudly proclaims: “I celebrate my lungi/and sing my lungi” (90-91). At the same time acknowledging the versatile utility of lungi symbolizes the self-reliance and efficacy that can be traced in our own way of being and doing. This is a must if we want to safeguard our lifestyle, culture, and independence. The poet suggests that we can find strength and utility in what we have. We need to utilize our resources, make our own policies, and engineer our socio-semiotic system by ourselves. The first utility that the poet mentions is a democratic one: “One size fits all” (112). Lungi is by default equal for everyone. The second utility is the option of turning inside out. This feature reminds us of the notion of *Carnival and Carnavalesque* that talks about a world upside down. In a carnival, the margin takes over the center (Bakhtin 49). Similarly, Lungi allows the inside to take place of the inside. Besides, it is a smart way of hiding the dirt if one gets any on his Lungi. Lungi also has the ability to be recycled, a feature that the Environmentalists love a lot. A worn-out lungi can be a material for a Quilt or Dishrag which is a symbolic message that there are things in our way of living lives that can help us develop our economy with the limited

resources we have. The only thing that we need to do is search for the silver lining. Another striking example can be traced in lines like these: “Most of the year, when barebodied/Is cool, you can lead a decent life/ With only a couple of lungis” (Haq).

We can notice that the poet is acknowledging the fact that living bare-bodied can be cool. By saying so he is standing beside the village people, the indigenous, or anyone who finds it to be comfortable. What is more humane is the recognition that life can be lived decently only with two lungis. This statement totally shuns the ambitious lifestyle of the West and reminds us of our ability to live peacefully even with limited materialistic belongings. Lungi has its performativity both as “Arab-style headgear or Sikh-style turban” indicating its suitability to multi-culture. The poem reflects lungi’s season friendliness. It has its prominence in winter as Lungi can be improvised as a Poncho, an item of warm clothing for winter. From Bengali’s Kabadi to Sahib’s Cricket, Lungi serves the purpose of sportswear too. The poem celebrates Lungi as a romantic clothe as well and alludes to *The Rubaiyat* by Omar Khayyam:

when romance strikes, the lungi
is a sleeping bag for two:
a book of poems, a bottle of hooch
and your beloved inside your lungi –
there’s paradise for you. (Haq)

Lungi can be lifesaving if someone is drowning as it can be improvised as a life jacket. Finally, the Lungi is like a flag that can be waved during indisposition to the “useless stars.” The phrase “useless stars” can stand for the stars of America’s national flag. This connection can be made due to the explicit reference to Walt Whitman in the poem. The most politically conscious statement can be found in these lines of the poem:

In short
the lungi is a complete wardrobe
for anyone interested:
an emblem of egalitarianism,
symbol of global left-outs
Raised and flapped amidst laughter
It’s the subaltern speaking (Haq)

Addressing Lungi as a complete wardrobe the poet seems to project the completeness of the native's ways of being and doing. Unlike western clothing that often outcasts people (like Mr. Brummell used to do), Lungi is a symbol of Egalitarianism. The poet highlights the fact that the 'Lungi People' have always been treated as the global left-outs, the reject in the face of the dominating Westerns. But against all odds and mockery, lungi has its voice, the voice of the subaltern. Here the poet speaks as a subaltern, for the subaltern, and about the attire of the subaltern.

The utilities of lungi mentioned earlier and the poet's stand for the subaltern lead us to a greater discourse, the discourse about building a resistance to the politics of socio-semiotic violence. One very common way of socio-semiotic violence is to pinpoint the shortcomings of the target community's culture, education, lifestyle, economics, and governance. The second step is to display the policies and trends of the colonizers and claim them to be superior and make the natives take this propaganda as a Gospel truth through cultural hegemony. Cultural Hegemony can only invade and carry out its operation successfully when the native's socio-semiotic system is not designed in a way that will match their community's needs. Our infrastructures, goals, and needs can in no way match those of the Occidentals. Therefore, adopting their policies or lamenting for not being able to be like them will never lead us to decolonization. And before decolonizing our minds, our education, culture, economic policies, lifestyles, governance, and beliefs we cannot claim to live in the era of Post-Colonialism. Kaiser Haq's "Ode on the Lungi" is an example of resisting the invisible violence of understanding and using symbols. Lungi as a symbol of the subaltern, the global left-outs, calls for resistance. Lungi as a "complete wardrobe" as an "emblem of egalitarianism" as a "theory of everything" as a platform for finding mutual interest among many nations serves as a crucial unit of the native's socio-semiotics. This encourages the natives to rebuild their socio-semiotic system with the belief that completeness is within us and we can always work for our completeness in our way.

Kaiser Haq's "Ode on the Lungi" sends us some heavy messages in a very light tone. Its subject matter, use of humors, intertextualities, and the poet's unique stylistic experiment raise it to a height that the poem demands more and more reading, research, and most importantly – campaigns. This paper, as mentioned in the title, analyzed the poem politically, and encouraged the critics to address the relevance of "Ode on the Lungi" to our current socio-semiotic crisis. We cannot undo our colonial experience nor can we get rid of its new strain. But we can and we have to create a way of building a resistance to the politics of such socio-semiotic violence and in this process, Kaiser Haq's "Ode on the Lungi" can serve as a practical example.

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