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Identity, Religion and Violence in Contemporary South Asian Fiction: A Comparative Study of Indian and Pakistani Novels

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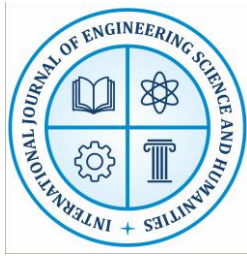
Abstract

This paper examines how four twenty-first-century South Asian novels in English represent the entanglement of religious identity, national belonging, and violence. It reads Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Love Story* (2001) and Megha Majumdar's *A Burning* (2020) as interventions in the politics of identity in contemporary India, and Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God* (2008) and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) as critiques of Islamic fundamentalism and post-9/11 identity conflict in Pakistan and its diaspora. Drawing on postcolonial theory, the concept of reactive identity formation, and re-orientalism, the study uses qualitative close reading and comparative analysis. It argues that all four novels treat identity not as a fixed inheritance but as a contested construction that states, parties, media, and global economic forces shape and weaponise. In the Indian novels, the secular constitutional ideal is shown to be eroded by majoritarian mobilisation and post-truth media. In the Pakistani novels, violence arises from the state's monopoly over a single interpretation of Islam and from Western Islamophobia that reduces Muslims to a threat. Formally, each text resists single, authoritative truth through polyphony, fragmented documents, or dramatic monologue. The paper concludes that these novels offer an ethics of plural, dialogic identity as a counter to ideological rigidity.

Keywords: South Asian fiction, identity politics, communal violence, Islamic fundamentalism, post-9/11 literature, postcolonialism

1. Introduction

South Asia entered the twenty-first century carrying the unresolved legacies of colonial rule, the 1947 Partition, and the 1971 break-up of Pakistan. These legacies now intersect with new pressures: majoritarian nationalism, the global "war on terror," neoliberal capitalism, and the speed of digital media. Religion, in particular, has become a primary idiom through which citizenship and loyalty are defined and contested (Gould, 2012; Riaz, 2010). Communal riots in India and state-sponsored Islamisation in Pakistan are two faces of the same regional process, in which a single religious identity is elevated into the measure of national authenticity.



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Literature has responded to these developments with new forms. Tickell (2016) observes that recent South Asian fiction in English has moved away from the contained domestic worlds of earlier writers towards faster, more dispersed narratives that register globalisation and violence. The novels examined here belong to this transformation. Tharoor's *Riot* (2001) reconstructs a 1989 Hindu–Muslim riot through diaries, interviews, and news reports. Majumdar's *A Burning* (2020) follows a young Muslim woman who is jailed for a Facebook post after a train is set on fire. Khan's *The Geometry of God* (2008) is set during General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation of Pakistan, while Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) traces a Pakistani financial analyst's disenchantment with America after 9/11.

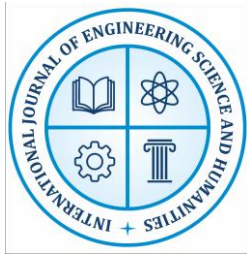
This paper brings these four novels into dialogue to answer three questions. First, how do the texts represent the construction and assertion of religious and national identity? Second, what relationship do they establish between identity politics and violence, whether physical, institutional, or epistemic? Third, how do their narrative forms challenge authoritative versions of history and truth? The central argument is that each novel exposes identity as a political construction that becomes violent when it is made absolute, and that each uses formal plurality to model a more open, dialogic alternative.

The paper is organised in eight sections. After this introduction, Section 2 reviews relevant scholarship and Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework and method. Sections 4 and 5 analyse the Indian and Pakistani novels respectively. Section 6 offers a comparative discussion, and Section 7 concludes.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on religion and conflict in South Asia has largely abandoned the view that communal violence springs from ancient, natural hatreds. Gould (2012) shows that religious conflict in the region is historically produced through colonial categories, electoral competition, and the institutions of the modern state. Corbridge et al. (2012) similarly argue that Hindu–Muslim violence in post-Partition India is organised and politically mediated rather than spontaneous, often clustering around processions, elections, and contested sites. Datta (2010) adds that identity formations in modern India are heterogeneous and layered, cutting across caste, class, region, and language, so that any single religious label simplifies lived experience. Together these works provide the historical ground against which *Riot* and *A Burning* can be read.

For Pakistan, Riaz (2010) traces how religion was mobilised as a political resource, particularly under Zia-ul-Haq, whose Islamisation programme introduced Hudood ordinances, expanded blasphemy provisions, and privileged one sectarian reading of Islam as the basis of citizenship. Cilano (2013) reads contemporary Pakistani fiction in English as a sustained argument about the "idea" of Pakistan, showing how novelists contest the state's narrowing of national identity.



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Kanwal (2015) extends this project, urging critics to read Pakistani fiction "beyond 9/11" and to recognise the diversity of Muslim identities that Western discourse flattens.

A second body of work addresses Muslim identity in literature after 9/11. Chambers and Herbert (2015) examine how Muslims are imagined in South Asian and diasporic texts, highlighting tensions between secularism, religion, and representation. Clements (2016) analyses how writers including Hamid and Aslam write Islam from within a South Asian Muslim perspective, resisting both fundamentalist and Orientalist scripts. Nagra (2011), writing on Canadian Muslims, coins the term reactive identity formation to describe how discrimination after 9/11 prompted many Muslims to assert their religious identity more strongly. Hamid (2015) himself insists that Islam is not a monolith and that each believer develops a personal relationship with the faith.

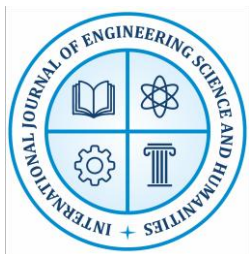
Work on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has been especially rich. Kennedy (2018) reads Changez's shifting beliefs through Hamid's own view that fundamentalism means seeing the world through a single lens, which applies as much to market ideology as to religion. Lau and Mendes (2011) introduce re-orientalism to describe how South Asian cultural producers represent the East through Western expectations, and later apply the concept to Hamid's novel and its film adaptation, showing that the text both confronts and conciliates Western audiences (Lau & Mendes, 2018).

Despite this scholarship, few studies place Indian and Pakistani novels of religious violence side by side, and *A Burning* has received limited critical attention because of its recent publication. This paper addresses that gap by reading two Indian and two Pakistani texts comparatively, with attention to both content and form.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The study adopts a postcolonial framework that treats identity as constructed, relational, and shaped by power. Within this frame, three concepts guide the analysis. The first is the constructed character of communal and national identity: following Gould (2012) and Datta (2010), religious belonging is understood as a political category that institutions, parties, and media actively produce and harden. The second is reactive identity formation (Nagra, 2011), which explains how external hostility can push individuals to embrace an identity more firmly than they otherwise would. The third is re-orientalism (Lau & Mendes, 2011), which helps assess how South Asian characters and authors negotiate Western expectations when they represent themselves.

The paper also attends to the relationship between history and fiction. Several of the novels blend documentary material, such as newspaper reports, speeches, and legal testimony, with invented narrative. Following Tickell's (2016) account of the formal transformations of contemporary South Asian fiction, such hybrid forms are read as deliberate strategies that question who owns historical truth.



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Methodologically, the study is qualitative and interpretive. It uses close reading of the four primary texts, focusing on characterisation, narrative voice, structure, and key scenes of violence or accusation. The texts were selected because each centres a violent event, whether a riot, an arson, a blasphemy trial, or a terrorist attack, and because each uses that event to interrogate the politics of identity.

4. Identity Assertions in Contemporary India: Riot and A Burning

4.1 Contested history in Tharoor's Riot

Riot opens with news reports of the death of Priscilla Hart, a 24-year-old American volunteer stabbed during Hindu–Muslim clashes in the fictional town of Zalilgarh, Uttar Pradesh, in 1989. Rather than use an omniscient narrator, Tharoor (2001) assembles the story from diaries, letters, interviews, poems, and journalism. Priscilla's estranged parents arrive to investigate her death, and each document offers a partial view. This fragmented form enacts the novel's central claim: communal violence cannot be traced to one cause or explained by one truth.

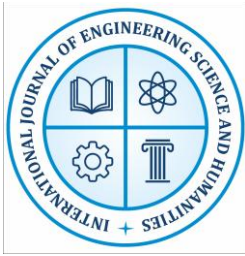
The novel stages identity as a set of competing historical claims. Ram Charan Gupta, a Hindutva activist, narrates the Ram Janmabhoomi story, in which a temple at Ram's birthplace in Ayodhya was destroyed by the Mughal emperor Babur to build the Babri Masjid. Professor Mohammed Sarwar, a Delhi University historian, counters with archival evidence and speeches that complicate the majoritarian account. Tharoor refuses to adjudicate between them. By juxtaposing their voices, the novel shows how selective uses of the past become fuel for mobilisation, a pattern Corbridge et al. (2012) identify in post-Partition riots that cluster around processions and contested sacred sites.

The district magistrate V. Lakshman embodies the contradictions of the secular Indian state. Professionally he represents rational, neutral bureaucracy; privately he is torn between his marriage and his affair with Priscilla, and between modern and traditional loyalties. His crisis mirrors the crisis of Nehruvian secularism, in which institutional neutrality coexists uneasily with rising religious politics (Chambers & Herbert, 2015). Priscilla, meanwhile, approaches India with liberal idealism and empathy, yet her outsider's knowledge cannot protect her. Her death suggests the limits of both Western universalism and romanticised cultural immersion.

Crucially, Tharoor presents the riot not as a sudden eruption of hatred but as the outcome of accumulated grievance, rumour, and political ambition. Identity in Riot is not inherently harmful; it becomes violent when it is made rigid, absolute, and instrumental to power. The novel's lack of resolution, ending with yet another news report, underlines that violence leaves no closure and that collective memory remains contested.

4.2 Post-truth and the minority citizen in Majumdar's A Burning

A Burning moves the question of identity into the digital age. After a train is firebombed outside Kolkata, killing more than a hundred people, Jivan, a young Muslim woman from a slum, writes



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a Facebook post asking why the police failed to protect ordinary people and implying that the government also acts like a terrorist. She is arrested and charged with the attack on thin evidence (Majumdar, 2020). Her religion and class make her a convenient scapegoat, illustrating how minority identity becomes a liability under majoritarian nationalism.

The novel alternates between three narrators whose fates are bound to Jivan's. PT Sir, her former physical education teacher, drifts into a right-wing party that offers him status and purpose. Majumdar shows that authoritarian politics thrives not only on hatred but on ordinary desires for recognition and belonging. Lovely, a hijra who dreams of acting, could testify to Jivan's innocence, but her testimony is shaped by her own ambitions. Through Lovely, the novel shows how marginalised people must bargain between authenticity and survival in a system that offers them few choices.

A Burning is above all a novel about the ownership of truth. Television, social media, the police, and the courts produce a narrative in which Jivan's guilt is assumed and her own voice is drowned out. PT Sir selectively reshapes his memories of her to fit the terrorist label. The courtroom becomes a theatre where the powerful script the outcome. Jivan's lyrical final monologue, in which she imagines returning to her mother as a cloud or a presence among the leaves, marks what rational public discourse cannot hear: the subaltern voice excluded from the nation's normative language. In this way, Majumdar extends Datta's (2010) insight that identity in India is layered, by showing how state and media collapse those layers into a single, punishable category.

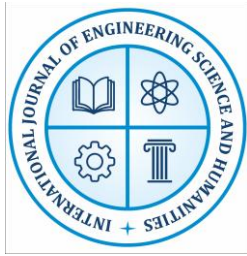
5. Islamic Fundamentalism and Identity in Pakistani Fiction

5.1 Science, faith, and the state in Khan's *The Geometry of God*

The Geometry of God is set in the 1980s and 1990s, against the Soviet–Afghan war and Zia-ul-Haq's programme of Islamisation. Riaz (2010) notes that Zia's regime made a particular Sunni reading of Islam the criterion of true Pakistani identity and strengthened blasphemy laws that were later used against minorities and dissenters. Khan (2008) dramatises this context through Zahoor, an elderly palaeontologist who discovers a fossil whale and teaches evolution. For the state-backed Party of Creation, his science is heresy and his secular outlook is "Western."

From its opening pages the novel stages identity as a contest over meaning. Young Amal learns that the first letter of the Urdu alphabet, alif, stands for Allah according to her father, but for aql, or reason, according to her grandfather Zahoor. Zahoor later mocks the notion of a "genuine" Pakistani defined by prayer and language, and reminds his critics that science has deep roots in Muslim history. The novel thus rejects the binary of Islamic East versus scientific West, a binary that Cilano (2013) identifies as central to the state's construction of the nation.

Violence in the novel is institutional before it becomes physical. Noman's father, a party leader, coerces Zahoor's students into testifying that he committed blasphemy, and Zahoor is sentenced



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to life imprisonment. He is murdered on the day of his release. The trial illustrates how law itself becomes a weapon when the state claims a monopoly over religious truth.

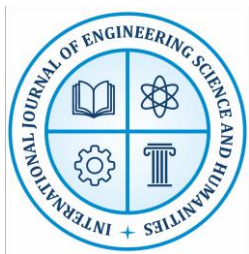
Khan tells the story through three narrators. Amal, who becomes a palaeontologist, faces patriarchal hostility at home and in the laboratory, and her testimony works to recover Zahoor's reputation. Her blind sister Mehwish reshapes language through inventive puns, turning palaeontology into "pale into logic," and speaks through an imaginary companion, Clog, in ways that echo the banned protest poetry of the Zia years. Noman, the party's reluctant spokesman, is literally a "no-man" caught between his father's dogma and his attraction to Zahoor's reasoning. His eventual resignation from the party magazine marks a turn from passive complicity to conscience. Through this polyphony, the novel dismantles the state's single narrative of "the true Pakistan" and replaces it with a plurality of voices (Kanwal, 2015).

5.2 Reluctance and fundamentalism in Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Where Khan examines fundamentalism within Pakistan, Hamid turns to its global dimension. The novel is a dramatic monologue in which Changez, in a Lahore café, tells an unnamed American his story. It opens with a line that captures the novel's central tension: "Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America" (Hamid, 2007, p. 1). A Princeton graduate and star analyst at the valuation firm Underwood Samson, Changez initially identifies with the corporation more than with his nation.

The 9/11 attacks shatter this identification. Changez admits that his first reaction to the falling towers was an involuntary smile, a response he later explains as satisfaction at seeing the powerful humbled. Afterwards, he is separated from his colleagues at immigration, abused as an "Arab," and increasingly read as a threat. His decision to keep the beard he grew in Pakistan illustrates reactive identity formation: hostility pushes him to affirm a Muslim and Pakistani identity he had previously held lightly (Nagra, 2011). Yet he never becomes religiously orthodox. As Kennedy (2018) argues, following Hamid, the "fundamentalism" the novel critiques is the single-lens worldview of market capitalism, the "fundamentals" that Underwood Samson teaches its analysts. A conversation in Valparaíso with the publisher Juan-Bautista, who compares Changez to the janissaries who served an empire against their own people, completes his disillusionment.

The novel's critique of America, however, has limits. Changez defends Pakistan by invoking Mughal monuments and past grandeur, which risks reproducing an Orientalist image of a glorious but faded East (Lau & Mendes, 2018). He also rarely reflects on the class privilege that shields his own family in Lahore. These tensions show that the escape from one fundamentalism can create new blind spots. Hamid (2015) reminds readers that Islam is not a monolith, and the novel's open, ambiguous ending refuses to tell us whether Changez or his American listener is the true danger.



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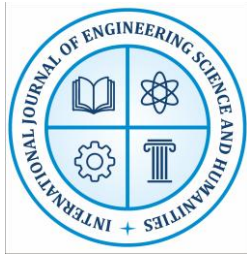
6. Comparative Discussion

Read together, the four novels reveal a shared diagnosis despite their different national settings. In each, violence follows when one identity is elevated into the sole measure of belonging. In India, the threat is majoritarian nationalism that erodes the constitution's secular, plural promise; Gupta's temple narrative in *Riot* and PT Sir's party in *A Burning* both define the nation through a Hindu majority. In Pakistan, the threat is a state that has already fused nationhood with a single reading of Islam, as in *The Geometry of God*, while in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* the pressure comes from outside, through Western Islamophobia and global capital. The mechanism, however, is the same: a complex person is reduced to one label, and that label becomes grounds for suspicion or punishment (Gould, 2012).

A second convergence concerns institutions. The riot in *Zalilgarh*, Jivan's trial, Zahoor's blasphemy conviction, and Changez's airport interrogation all show violence working through legitimate structures such as bureaucracy, courts, police, and immigration. Physical violence is often the final stage of a longer process of institutional and discursive exclusion. This supports the view of Corbridge et al. (2012) that communal violence is organised and political rather than spontaneous.

Third, all four texts turn their form against authoritative truth. Tharoor's documents, Majumdar's rotating narrators, Khan's three voices, and Hamid's one-sided monologue each deny the reader a single, trustworthy account. This formal plurality mirrors what Tickell (2016) describes as the dispersed, fast-moving aesthetics of recent South Asian fiction, and it has an ethical function. By making readers weigh competing testimonies, the novels train the very habit of dialogue that fundamentalism forbids.

There are also significant differences. The Indian novels centre on the fate of minorities and outsiders within a nominally secular democracy, whereas the Pakistani novels depict dissent within a confessional state and a diaspora. *A Burning* is the most pessimistic: the innocent Jivan is executed, and those who could save her advance by betraying her. *The Geometry of God* ends with loss but also with renewal through Noman's reconciliation with Mehwish. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* remains deliberately unresolved. Gender further differentiates the texts: Jivan, Lovely, Amal, and Mehwish show how women and gender minorities bear a double burden of religious and patriarchal control, a dimension less central in Tharoor and Hamid (Clements, 2016).



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7. Conclusion

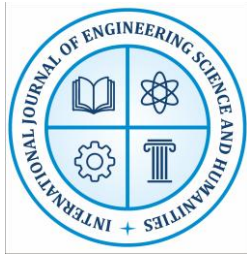
This paper has argued that *Riot*, *A Burning*, *The Geometry of God*, and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* represent identity in twenty-first-century South Asia as constructed, contested, and vulnerable to capture by power. Tharoor shows how rival histories of Ayodhya are mobilised to turn neighbours into enemies. Majumdar shows how media and state collapse a poor Muslim woman into the figure of a terrorist. Khan shows how a confessional state turns blasphemy law against reason and dissent. Hamid shows how global capital and post-9/11 suspicion push a cosmopolitan Pakistani into a reactive identity he never fully inhabits.

Across these differences, the novels agree that violence is rarely a sudden eruption. It grows from the rigid assertion of a single truth, whether religious, national, or economic, and it works through ordinary institutions before it reaches bodies. Their fragmented, polyphonic forms answer this rigidity with an ethics of plurality: truth emerges, if at all, from many partial and competing voices.

The study has limits. It examines four novels in English, and future research could extend the comparison to Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan fiction, to regional-language literatures, and to reader reception in each country. Nonetheless, the analysis suggests that contemporary South Asian fiction does more than reflect communal conflict. It intervenes in it by modelling empathy, dialogue, and the recognition that identities are many-layered, qualities that the region's shared future will require.

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