

# The Baloch Who Is Missing: Representations of Balochistan in Anglophone Prose Writing

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In April 2015, Pakistani entrepreneur, arts patron, and human rights campaigner Sabeen Mahmud was shot and killed by unknown assassins. Sabeen was accompanied by her elderly mother, the redoubtable educationalist Mahenaz Mahmud, who took two bullets but survived. They were leaving an event in Karachi entitled “Unsilencing Balochistan” that the 40-year-old had organized at her arts space The Second Floor, widely known as T2F. It may be mere coincidence that Sabeen was killed immediately after the controversial talk about Pakistan’s explosive southwest province. However, not long before, the Lahore University of the Management Sciences (LUMS) had been halted from hosting “Unsilencing Balochistan.” Sabeen too received threats after stepping in to prevent the event from being cancelled altogether. While a culprit has supposedly already ‘confessed’ to the murder (Tunio n. p.), it will be years before the truth emerges about the circumstances surrounding this tragic murder. I didn’t know Sabeen, but many of my friends in Pakistan and its British diaspora knew her well and always spoke warmly of her. Her legacy is immense – but at what cost to her and her loved ones? Until April, I always thought I would go to T2F and meet her one day. The realization that this is now impossible set me on a path to find out more about Balochistan, its literary representation, and the reasons why the province needs “unsilencing.”

The Balochis have long been known for their “strong national consciousness” (Dashti 341), inter-clan rivalries, and practice of forming short-term alliances against a common enemy. During the Raj period, this made it easier for

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the British to exercise their classic tactics of bringing particular leaders into the fold, excluding others, and exercising divide and rule to accelerate the splintering of various factions. Not quite a princely state, officially a protectorate, the Khanate of Kalat (comprising the majority of Balochistan) was a loose federation of tribes and their *sardars* or chiefs. In one of Rudyard Kipling's least impressive poems, a piece of woman-hating doggerel entitled "The Story of Uriah" (1886), the British colonizers' attitude towards what they called the hill tribes is adumbrated. The poem centers on a hapless colonial administrator, Jack Barrett, whose superior officer banished him to what is sarcastically described as "that very healthy post" of Quetta (10). The officer was having an affair with Jack's wife in the verdant hill station of Simla and wanted him out of the way. Within a month of his enforced transfer, Jack died and his body was interred in a "Quetta graveyard," whereupon Mrs. Barrett "mourned for him | Five lively months at most" (10). Writ large in this poem is the sneering British attitude towards the important strategic base of Quetta as a remote, backward, and disease-ridden outpost.

There is scant more affection for the hilly landscape around Quetta in Bertram Mitford's *The Ruby Sword* (1899). Subtitled "A Romance of Baluchistan," this is a *fin-de-siècle* colonial adventure story by a scion of the aristocratic Mitford family. Its civilian hero Howard Campian is on his first visit to the region. He regards it as bleak, lacking in flora except uniform juniper bushes, and occasionally battered by vicious floods. Campian finds the landscape difficult to read; vast, indifferent, and alien:

Here a smooth, unbroken slab of rock, sloping at the well nigh precipitous angle of a high-pitched roof – there, at an easier slant, a great expanse of rock face, seamed and criss-crossed with chasms, like the crevasses on a glacier. No vegetation, either, to relieve the all pervading, depressing greyness, save where a ragged juniper or pistachio had found anchor along a ledge, or fringed the lip of some dark chasm aforesaid. No turn of the road brought any relief to the eye – any lifting of the unconscious oppression which lay upon the mind; ever the same hills, sheering aloft, fearsome in their dark ruggedness, conveying the idea of vast and well nigh untrodden fastnesses, grim, repellent, mysterious. (16–17)

Here Campian translates the sharp tilt of a Balochi cliff into the comforting domestic image of Britain's sloping rooftops, and cools down the desert heat with a glacier simile. Despite these attempts to make the landscape familiar, the featureless landscape depresses the spirit, troubles the eye, and afflicts the mind, with its "fearsome [...] dark ruggedness." This sort of portrayal chimes with intrepid British travel writer Harry de Windt's 1891 book *A Ride to India Across Persia and Baluchistan*, in which he claims that it is a "standing joke" that Balochistan only contains one single tree.

In Mitford's novel, Campian settles down to an enjoyable Anglo-Indian routine of hunting, drinking "pegs" while having "gup" with other ex-pats (56, 30), and engaging

in directionless flirtation with a pretty young army belle. He quickly abandons these activities after a chance encounter with his ex-fiancée Vivien Wynier. The novel is really about the rekindling of Campian and Wynier's love, but this is pinned onto a preposterous but enjoyable plotline of the quest for a precious sword lost in Balochistan decades earlier. Hook-nosed, brutal Baloch characters pop up from time to time, almost always intent on murdering our hero. The "Pathan" servant Bhallu Khan is portrayed as brave and loyal, but with the authorial proviso that one never quite knows where one stands with "Mohammedans" (82, 160). The unlikeable British character Bracebrydge is overtly racist towards the Balochis and Pashtuns, calling them "niggers" and sanctioning the use of unprovoked violence on them (97). Yet even the more sympathetic British characters such as Campian and his host John Upward view the Baloch's "religious fanaticism" and "utterly fearless, utterly reckless" nature as pathological (21). This opinion accords with the racist martial race theory to which most colonizers subscribed. In his 1933 work *The Martial Races of India*, Sir George MacMunn lumped Balochis together with Pashtuns as having innately "sporting, high-spirited, adventurous" personalities (239).

Asked to explain Balochistan's post-1947 situation to British friends who know little about it, I use two analogies. The first compares the Balochis' tripartite scattering between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran with that of their relatives, the Kurds, between Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. Kurds and Balochis can be seen, to adapt Luigi Pirandello (1954), as two peoples in search of a homeland. Another inexact parallel is between Balochistan and Bangladesh. Both regions were subsumed under the Pakistani nation-state following the 1947 Partition, but each had proudly distinct cultural heritage, language, and loyalties. Whereas India eventually threw its weight behind the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971, Pakistan's hostile neighbor has never openly aided the Balochi struggle. Yet in her 2014 book *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, Arundhati Roy claims that India covertly funds the rebels in Balochistan (88). Unlike the Bangladeshis', the Balochis' 1970s nationalist struggle did not meet with the same support or success. The bloody insurgency that lasted between 1974 and 1977 caused the deaths of approximately 5,300 ethnic Baloch and 3,000 Pakistani military personnel (Dunne n. p.). Both Bengal and Balochistan had the misfortune of being overpowered by an alliterative Butcher in the shape of General Tikka Khan, who wrought terrible atrocities on both nations in the 1970s. As with the loss of Bangladesh, volatile Balochistan continues to trouble the idea of Pakistan.

In 1947, Balochistan was promised the status of an independent state, but after just nine months the first of four post-Second World War Balochi uprisings took place. Its consequence was that the Khan of Kalat signed an instrument of Balochistan's uneasy accession to the Pakistani state. After a revolt in the early 1960s that was partly influenced by Marxist-Leninist politics, there was a more serious struggle in the western borderlands between 1973 and 1977. Even Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's niece Fatima Bhutto admits in her book *Songs of Blood and Sword* that there was "no

larger problem” in her admired uncle’s tenure as Pakistani prime minister (between 1973 and 1977) than the repressive role he played in Balochistan, “a province blighted by Pakistan”(115). The official government line, by contrast, is that the insurgency was the work of a few miscreants manipulated by powerful *sardars*.

It is the fractious period of the early 1960s to early 1970s that Jamil Ahmad examines in his *The Wandering Falcon*. Ahmad finished his collection of loosely interlinked short stories around the time that the major Balochistan conflict started in 1973. The book was not published for almost three decades until 2011, when the region was again roiled by state violence against separatists. From a Balochi perspective, Ahmad might appear just as much of an interloper as those earlier British authors Kipling, Mitford, and de Windt. Yet because he worked for many years as a civil servant in the western borderlands and Northern Areas, his fiction has insight and texture. For example, Ahmad’s characters convey a different view of the topography than the three Britons’ impressions:

the land – their land – had seen to it that beauty and colour were not erased completely from their lives. It offered them a thousand shades of grey and brown with which it tinted its hills, its sands and its earth. There were subtle changes of colour in the blackness of the nights and the brightness of the days, and the vigorous colours of the tiny desert flowers hidden in the dusty bushes, and of the gliding snakes and scurrying lizards as they buried themselves in the sand. To the men, beauty and colour were rampant around them. (21)

Rather than the “depressing greyness” (16), which is all Mitford’s Campian can see in Balochistan, the locals’ trained eyes can make out hundreds of earthy hues in the parched landscape. Flora and fauna add still more color to the vista.

Suffused with this understated iridescence, Ahmad’s first story “The Sins of the Mother” is set near Balochistan’s Siahpad Tribal Area. It concerns a young couple who elope from Kurd Killa and are eventually slain in an ‘honor’ killing. Locations of other stories include a waterhole belonging to the Mengals (a Brahui tribe) and the cross-Af-Pak routes of the nomadic Kharot tribe. The story collection loops northwards as it progresses, following the progress of Tor Baz and a shifting cast of other characters into Waziristan, a frontier area near Peshawar, then up to Chitral, dropping back down into the nomadic Gujjars’ trekking routes, and ending in the Swat Valley. The third story “The Death of Camels” is set in 1961, when the Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan (first established in 1893) was officially closed. This had a deleterious impact on the Kharot nomads, “whose entire lives were spent in wandering with the seasons” (37) and who are now required to procure travel documents if they wish to traverse the frontier. The Kharots allow one of their women to advance towards the border soldiers carrying a Qur’an on her head, since their Ryvaj tribal code dictates that this gesture will cause a cessation of violence (Ahmad 59; Lieven 353). This is disregarded by the soldiers, and “[m]en, women and children died. Gul Jana’s belief that the Koran would prevent tragedy died too” (60).

The shooting of the woman bearing a copy of the Qur'an also metaphorically indicates that Pakistan's creation myth as a state designed to protect the region's Muslims of all different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds is a hollow promise. Ahmad's narrator criticizes the Pakistani government for its harsh treatment and corrupt manipulation of the Baloch and Pashtuns, as when twin brothers from the Wazir tribe are compelled to commit a crime in order to pay a 2000-rupee bribe extorted by government officials (88). Yet, in this remarkably even-handed collection, Ahmad also conveys without judgement the Balochis' macho factionalism and their strong, corrosive sense of dishonor. The rough justice meted out by their jirga (assembly of leaders) has a particularly devastating impact, especially on women, adulterers, and minority ethnic and religious groups.

In 1983, Salman Rushdie published his novel, *Shame*, which in his memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012) he describes as "the second part of the diptych in which he examined the world of his origins" (6). Following the triumphant publication of the mostly Indian-based *Midnight's Children* in 1981, *Shame* focuses on a country that is "not Pakistan, or not quite" (29). Rushdie eventually gives his fictional land the name Peccavistan, from the apocryphal declaration supposed to have been made by General Charles Napier (1782–1853), "Peccavi," meaning "I have Sindh/sinned" (88). Although Rushdie penned this novel in the early 1980s, the principal decade it examines is the 1970s. As several critics have noted (Almond 1146; Ben-Yishai 195; Strandberg 144), Rushdie explores the adversarial relationship between Zia-ul-Haq (Raza Hyder in the novel) and his predecessor Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Iskander Harappa). Less commonly recognized is the emphasis that the novel places on the "genocide in Balochistan" (70) between 1973 and 1977.

Much of *Shame* is set in the border town of Q., which, despite the narrator's insistence that "Q. is not really Quetta at all" (29), has clear parallels with the frontier outpost depicted in Kipling's "The Story of Uriaah." As with the nineteenth-century poem, Rushdie portrays the city in purgatorial terms, as "some borderland of hell" (14) that is "near the very Rim of Things" (22). Plagued by earthquakes like the one that tore apart Balochistan in 1935, Q. is fringed by the Impossible Mountains and the fiercely sought-after gas fields of the Needle Valley. The unforgiving "noonday insanity of the sun" (12) in this region causes Zoroaster, the father of "peripheral hero" (126) Omar Khayyam Shakil's first love, to lose his wits. Zoroaster lives out his days as a customs officer, stark naked among the broken mirror shards and bollards that mark the border he is supposed to be guarding. Q. itself is shaped like a dumbbell: that is, it comprises two ellipsoids, one the white Cantonment area and the other the "higgling and piggling edifices" of the South Asian area (11), with only the slightest point of tangency in between.

It is in the "no-man's-land" (41) between Cantt and bazaar that the Shakil family live: Mr. Shakil, who dies on the novel's opening page; the "isolated trinity" (13) of

his daughters Chhunni, Munnee, and Bunny; and their shared son Omar Khayyam. As in the colonial texts, there are few mentions of the south-west's indigenous peoples. When they do come, the initial references are ominous and homogenizing: these "thin-eyed, rock-hard tribals" (23) belong to "a culture of the edge" (24). The only individuated Balochis that readers encounter are the widow Farida and her brother Bilal Balloch. They are stereotypically bent on revenge for the death of their loved one, the handyman Yakoob. He is suspected to have been poisoned by the Shakil sisters after building the women and their son a dumb-waiter to allow them perfect seclusion. The Balloches' attempt at garlanding Omar Khayyam with a necklace of shoes is thwarted, and instead they accidentally festoon the apparently devout postman Muhammad Ibadalla with the insulting string of footwear. Soon afterwards, we learn that, unbeknownst to each other, both Farida and her best friend Zeenat Kabuli enter into affairs with Ibadalla. Conforming to the received image of the Balochis' ruthlessness and penchant for blood feuds, the affairs end with Ibadalla, Bilal Balloch, and Zeenat's husband all dying in a knife fight. Not unduly dismayed, the two women "shack [...] up together instead" (45) and disappear from the narrative.

Rushdie's portrayal of Balochistan and its "suspicious tribals" (5) therefore has many continuities with the nineteenth-century tales of the wild-eyed, feuding Baloch. But as a South Asian, Rushdie is simultaneously alert to the "need and desire in primal fantasies" (Bhabha 118) that are at play in such stereotypes. He is also struck by the tragedy that, in Pakistan, religion is incapable of "bind[ing] together peoples (Punjabi, Sindhi, Bengali, Baloch, Pathan) whom geography and history had long kept apart," so that he perceives the country with its broken wings as a "misshapen bird" (Rushdie *Anton* 60). Finally, Rushdie writes with sympathy, albeit in the abstract, about "the guerrillas in Baluchistan" and castigates the Pakistani government's "draconian punitive measures" against them in the 1970s (28, 101). Omar Khayyam's younger half-brother Babar Shakil goes off to join these separatists, convinced as he is by a Balochi's speech to him in a bar about the Pakistani government stripping the province of its food, minerals, and gas, and "screwing [the Balochis] from here to eternity" (131). Babar's end is swift, as he is cut down by Raza Hyder's bullets, whereupon in anticipation of the "angelicdevilish" theme of *The Satanic Verses* (5), he is transformed into a seraph. Rushdie's portrayal of Balochistan culminates in the unveiling of 18 shawls created by the scorned wife of Iskander Harappa (Bhutto's alter ego), on which are stitched the shameful details of his presidency:

What he did for the sake of no-more-secessions, in the name of never-another-East-Wing, the bodies sprawled across the shawl, the men without genitals, the sundered legs, the intestines in place of faces [...] I have lost count of the corpses on my shawl, twenty, fifty, a hundred thousand dead, who knows, and not enough scarlet thread on earth to show the blood, the people hanging upside down with dogs at their open guts, the people grinning lifelessly with

bullet-holes for second mouths, the people united in the worm-feast of that shawl of flesh and death (194–5; emphasis in original)

In her field-defining book *Resistance Literature* (1987), US academic Barbara Harlow includes a short discussion of “The Case of the Baluch” amidst exploration of the Palestinian, Sandinista, Mau Mau, and other liberation struggles. At the time of writing, under General Zia’s 1977–1988 dictatorship, there existed an uneasy truce between the Pakistani Army and the Balochis, part of Zia’s policy of “non-provocative firmness” towards this region (Dunne n.p.). Yet the 1980s was also the decade in which vast numbers of refugees, fleeing the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, crossed the porous border with Pakistan to seek sanctuary in Balochistan and the North-West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). This caused diplomatic wrangling, resource squeeze, and ethnic and religious tensions between Baloch, Pashtun, and Hazara, Sunni and Shia (Shaikh 56; Dunne n.p.). Harlow perceives in Balochi poetry “a sadness engendered by an ongoing struggle, a struggle not yet consummated”(41). Through readings of poems by Balach Khan, whom she terms a “Baluch resistance poet”(43), Harlow makes the case against Punjabi hegemony and the stripping of the region’s natural resources. The more positive part of her argument is in favor of the Balochis’ right to territorial self-determination. But Balochistan is no Palestine; it has had little experience of self-governance. What is more, unlike the Bengalis and Kurds, there isn’t an established Balochi middle class or a history of political activity. Writing in 2011, Anatol Lieven argues that independence would only bring “a Somali-style nightmare, in which a range of tribal parties – all calling themselves ‘democratic’ and ‘national’ – under rival warlords would fight for power and wealth” (357).

Perhaps a solution can be found in between Harlow’s resistance and Lieven’s pro-army stance. The creation of a semi-autonomous Pakistani Balochistan in which only its currency, defense, and foreign affairs are the responsibility of central government might go some way towards assuaging the Balochis’ grievances. Their complaints are mostly about unequal distribution of the region’s rich resources, of gold, copper, zinc, oil, and natural gas. Balochistan is easily Pakistan’s largest province, but it has the least numerous, poorest, and most undereducated population. A new bone of contention is the deep sea port of Gwadar, which from the early 2000s onwards was being developed as part of Sino-Pakistani collaboration. Many Balochis feel that the port has generated another invasion of Punjabis to the area and is doing nothing to help indigenous uplift. As Babar Ayaz writes, “For over six decades Balochistan has been exploited. This has now convinced many Baloch leaders that nothing short of independence would solve their problems” (77).

The nationalist view that Balochistan is being colonized by outsiders has become more convincing since 2005. That year a woman doctor called Shazia Khalid was allegedly raped by a Pakistani army officer in Dera Bugti District (Cowanjee n. p.). Her assault sparked an angry Balochi uprising to which the government responded

with force. Since then Balochistan has been in something approaching a civil war situation. For the first time, nationalists have been subjected to enforced disappearances. Sometimes they are released but are so badly tortured and frightened that they refuse to speak of their experiences (Human Rights Watch 43). However, increasingly, they are being murdered and their bodies dumped in public places, purportedly often by or at the behest of Pakistan's intelligence agencies or the paramilitary Frontier Corps.

In 2013, Pakistani novelist and journalist Mohammed Hanif wrote a short, generically-indeterminate book for the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. He conducted interviews with relatives of the disappeared and wove them into the six loosely connected, laconic, hard-hitting true stories that comprise *The Baloch Who Is Not Missing and Others Who Are*. From the father who is overwhelmed by paperwork when his son disappears in "The Baloch Who Is Not Missing Anymore," to the sister who puts her personal life on hold as she protests for her brother's release in "A Sister's Vigil," voices tell of the Kafkaesque bureaucracy and callous authorities these families are up against.

One story, "The Journalist who Became a Uniform Contractor," is about Mohammed Bilal Mengal who ekes out a living covering local events for a small newspaper called *Independent*. Through his journalism contacts, Bilal and his 22-year-old son Khalid make a little money on the side sewing uniforms for soldiers at Noshki Fort. One day Khalid is forced to disappear by their previously friendly army employers. A soldier named Naib Subedar Ramzan had gone into the city without permission, perhaps to have a tryst with a woman, and was injured in a firing incident. Bilal, and then Khalid, come under suspicion of having orchestrated the attack, even though neither man fits the physical description of the assailant. One Frontier Corps official tells him frankly, "Their man was ambushed in the city, what were they supposed to do? Sit quietly and tell their bosses they didn't know who attacked their man?" (22-23). Needing an arrest, the soldiers detain the nearest people to hand: "their own tailoring contractor and his son" (23). Whereas Bilal is soon released, the younger Khalid has been in detention for over a year, his whereabouts unknown. Neither man takes much of an interest in politics; certainly, they are not the violent separatists portrayed by the military. For being from the wrong ethnicity in the wrong place at the wrong time, they can be punished like this with impunity. The 2011 Human Rights Watch report, "We Can Torture, Kill, Or Keep You for Years," supports this account of the Balochistan situation: "Those responsible for enforced disappearances [...] have not been held accountable" (5).

Taken together, Hanif's rendering of the 2010s 'kill and dump' policy, Rushdie's depiction of the mass killings of the 1970s, and Ahmad's portrayal of both governmental and inter-tribal violence in this lawless region in the 1960s, show the severe and longstanding human rights problem in Balochistan. However, it is worth considering the poignant rhetorical question Kamila Shamsie poses of academic

Mushtaq Bilal in his forthcoming book of interviews with Pakistani authors, “Where is the English language novel about Baluchistan?” (n.p.). Although Balochistan was a popular setting for colonial writers such as Kipling and Mitford, until recently Balochis were missing from Pakistani prose writing in English. This may partly be accounted for by censorship (whether from the state or self-restraint). As the narrator of Ahmad’s story “A Point of Honour” observes,

There was complete and total silence about the Baluchis, their cause, their lives and their deaths. No newspaper editor risked punishment on their behalf. Typically, Pakistani journalists sought salve for their conscience by writing about the wrongs done to men in South Africa, in Indonesia, in Palestine and in the Philippines – not to their own people. No politician [...] would [...] expose the wrong being done outside their front door. (33)

In the 1970s Ahmad made the bleak observation that the dead of Balochistan “will live in no songs; no memorials will be raised to them” (34). This is starting to change. Although the songs are currently being sung by only a few weak voices and the memorials are makeshift and puny, they nonetheless create an impact. An increasing number of writers are turning their attention to this war-torn nation. Perhaps more will join their ranks in the wake of *littérateuse* Sabeen Mahmud’s tragic murder.

In her 1988 essay, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously argues that academics must not “speak for” subalterns (303), but rather “learn” from them, recognizing their “heterogeneity” (Young 210, 215). In *Shame*, Rushdie similarly complicates his own legitimacy, as a diasporic outsider, in speaking for the indeterminate border region of Quetta, and doing it in “Angrezi” to boot (38). “You have no right to this subject,” he chides himself, only to counter this with the questions, “is history to be considered the property of the participants only? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories?” (28). It is certainly disappointing that very little Balochi Anglophone fiction exists, but it is heartening that an increasing number of non-Balochi Pakistani writers are venturing into the territory of this “insufficiently imagined” (Rushdie 87) province. In 1971, Cara Cilano published a monograph about representations of the 1971 war in Pakistani writing. It is my hope that one day a scholar will find enough material to do the same for Balochistan.

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