

## Undermining Cultural Hegemony and Sartorial Identity in *Ode on the Lungi*: A Psychological Exploration

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### ABSTRACT

In *Ode on the Lungi*, Kaiser Haq presents the lungi as a symbolic flag of the subaltern, challenging Western cultural dominance and advocating for sartorial equality. Employing wit and comedy, Haq explores the psychological impact of cultural hegemony, shedding light on the subaltern's sorrows as the once-prideful lungi becomes a source of shame. The article intends to look into the historical roots of the lungi, its significance in Bangladeshi culture, and its diminishing presence in the face of globalization. Haq, a self-proclaimed "lungi activist", calls for collective resistance against the marginalization of this cultural artifact. Walt Whitman's allusions and a comically promoted symbolic quest for sartorial equality in the poem underscore conflicts between non-white subalterns and Western values. This study deconstructs the psychological aspects of cultural hegemony and offers insights into how it affects traditional dress and cultural identity in an age of globalization.

## INTRODUCTION

In the diverse tapestry of global cultures, traditional attire serves as a poignant marker of identity, reflecting not only the historical roots but also the evolving dynamics of societies. Kaiser Hamidul Haq, a prominent Bangladeshi poet, translator, critic, and academic, delves into the complex interplay of cultural identity and modernity in his celebrated poem, *Ode on the Lungi*. The lungi, a traditional garment worn by men across South and Southeast Asia, becomes the focal point of Haq's exploration as he navigates the nuanced terrain of cultural hegemony and its impact on personal and societal perceptions. The research focuses on the changing significance of the lungi as a symbol of Bangladeshi ethnic culture in the face of modern difficulties in an effort to explore the many layers buried in Haq's lyrical narrative. Through a close reading of Haq's poetry, the article aims at analyzing how the once-loved and essential clothing is progressively giving way to the effects of globalization and cultural changes, resulting in its seeming marginalization in contemporary culture. Haq's sad lyrics reveal a profound remark on the invasion of cultural hegemony into private places, in addition to being a beautiful appreciation of the lungi. The poet illuminates the situations in which the lungi, which was previously a source of pride and consolation, turns into a cause of shame for newer generations who see it through the prism of externally imposed cultural standards. Examining the psychological aspects of cultural hegemony as exposed through *Ode on the Lungi*, the ways in which the portrayal of the lungi relates to concerns about identity, pride, and the deterioration of traditional values will be evaluated very critically. The historical context of the lungi, its regional significance, and how attitudes toward this traditional clothing have changed over time will be explored here. Haq's own declaration as a "lungi activist" serves as a call to action for a group effort to recover and commemorate the value of this cultural item, since it is about to perish. The investigation goes beyond national borders to include a more comprehensive analysis of the effects of globalization and how indigenous cultures may be threatened by them. In this research paper going through Haq's poem *Ode on the Lungi* the cultural identity strands that are interwoven with the lungi will be examined. Through an examination of the poet's viewpoint, it is expected to further knowledge about the ways in which cultural hegemony appears, permeates personal areas, and molds ideas about traditional dress in the modern globalized world.

## METHODOLOGY

Utilizing a qualitative approach, this study integrates cultural studies, postcolonial literary analysis, and psychological investigation to provide a thorough comprehension of Kaiser Haq's *Ode on the Lungi*. It explores the cultural relevance and historical background of the lungi within Bangladeshi ethnic culture through a close reading, highlighting the lungi's changing position as a symbol of resistance against Western cultural dominance. The analysis goes beyond comparisons to Walt Whitman to include a psychological investigation of the anguish of the subaltern and the conflict between non-white subaltern representations and Western norms. The study also explores Haq's

“lungi activism”, advocating collective resistance against the marginalization of the lungi. The research connects with the wider conversation on the impact of globalization on indigenous cultures and the preservation of cultural assets by placing the findings in the context of historical and cultural data. In addition, the study follows the APA 7th manual for citation and references guaranteeing academic rigor and uniformity in the listing of sources used for this work. The intellectual integrity of the research is enhanced by the inclusion of a list of references at the conclusion of the article, which improves the transparency and traceability of the sources referenced in the study.

## DISCUSSION

Kaiser Hamidul Haq, a Bangladeshi post-colonial poet, translator, creative writer, critic, and academic, is celebrated globally for his poems. At the University of Dhaka, he was a former professor of English department. Kaiser Haq gains recognition across the world as “a writer worth noticing” because to his poetry, the majority of which are in free verse in standard English and are inspired by Bangladeshi rural life and culture. Through a rich store of original poetry pictures laced with a touch of sarcasm and humor, he has been conveying his cultural identity in a way that is unique within the settings of Bangladesh, a third-world nation plagued by poverty, starvation, floods, tornadoes, political unrest, and most lately anomalies from various angles. A lungi is a traditional garment worn by men in various parts of South and Southeast Asia. It is a piece of cloth that is wrapped around the waist and tied securely, similar to a sarong or a kilt. It is a comfortable and functional item of apparel, especially in hot and humid environment of this region. Lungi is frequently worn at home, for informal outings, or as sleepwear. Cultural customs and personal tastes can have an impact on its appeal. According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary ‘Culture’ means “the customs and beliefs, art, way of life, and social organization of a particular country or group” (Hey and Holloway, 2015, P. 374). Each country has its own culture and beliefs. South Asian countries with shared religious beliefs, financial connections, or political ties may exhibit comparable cultural practices. Asian and South-Asian nations, such as India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Myanmar and others, may share a culture with one another due to having similarities in their belief systems, financial systems, political systems, and governments.

On the other hand, Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary again defines that ‘Hegemony’ is “control by one country, organization, etc. over other countries, etc. within a particular group” (Hey and Holloway, 2015, P. 731). According to Antonio Gramsci, hegemony involves the ruling class persuading other classes that their interests represent the interests of the entire society. In simpler terms, hegemony signifies cultural dominance. The realms of subalternity and clothing exemplify instances where cultural dominance is conspicuous, as specific garments are considered superior to others in cultures characterized by dominance. (Gramsci, 2004, p. 673). Thus, Hegemony refers to the geopolitical technique of indirect imperial dominance, in which the domineering state known as the ‘hegemon’ governs subordinate nations via the

threat of intervention, an indirect form of control, as opposed to using direct military action, such as invasion and conquest. Therefore, cultural hegemony refers to one culture's domination or control over another. It entails imposing a certain group's values, beliefs, and behaviors as the norm, which frequently leads to the marginalization or repression of alternative cultural manifestations. This article vows to show Kaiser Haq's stance exploring the psychological standard of his people who undermine their ethnic cultural hegemony presented through *Ode on the Lungi*.

Lungi is a trendy garment for mass people, especially for men in Bangladesh (Ahmed et al., 2000). Now, the lungi is used psychologically as the hegemonic dress of Bangladeshi ethnic culture in modern society. According to Kaiser Haq, Lungi, or "ethnic attire," is a representation of a nation's flag and allows people a voice to express their hardship and the democratic hypocrisy they experience. In Tamil Nadu, the veshti or dhoti holds significance as traditional attire, commonly worn during formal occasions. Conversely, lungis find favor as informal or casual wear among certain individuals. Checked patterns particularly enjoy popularity in the realm of lungis. Additionally, in South Tamil Nadu, it goes by the names kaili or s̄aram/ch̄aram.

The lungi, a fundamental component of Bengali culture, appears to be vanishing with time more speedily as American-born Bengali dads find it awkward to get their kids dressed in lungi at home. Because they believe it to be decultured from their on going tradition psychologically in that alien societal environment. In this regard Haq says:

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". (2008, p. 141/ Lines 67-73)

Even twenty years ago in Bangladesh, the lungi was popular among men in villages and towns. Lungi was the favorite dress for people in gossiping (adda), in market places, and in various activities. Kaiser Haque exposes an immense cultural hegemony in his poem highlighting a 28 year old youth having bath at Cox's Bazar beach:

Grandpa Walt, I celebrate my lungi  
and sing my lungi  
and 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)

watched 28 young men in lungis bathing in the sea. (2008, p. 143/ Lines 90-100)

In 90s of the last century, in dramas or movies, we see lungi being represented in a very beautiful way. However, the current state of affairs is quite contrary to the then time. Because today lungi is no longer recognized as a part of our daily existence. Lungi is currently shown as lower-class attire in Bangladeshi plays and films. We are hesitant to present our new outfit lungi.

The lungi stands as one of the most ancient traditional garments, embraced by both men and women throughout India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. Historically, it adorned individuals residing in regions characterized by hot to extremely hot climates. Crafted from soft cotton fabric, the lungi's weave guarantees a cool and comfortable experience for the wearer. Notably, fishermen and farmers favor the lungi for its convenience in folding and quick drying attributes:

with only a couple of lungis,  
dipping in pond or river  
or swimming in a lungi  
abbreviated into a G-string,  
then changing into the other one. (Haq, 2008, p. 143/ Lines 137-141)

Historical accounts reveal that the lungi has been an enduring presence for several centuries. In diverse wardrobes across India, this traditional garment featured an array of colors and styles, each designated for specific occasions; for instance, white was reserved for weddings, blue for casual gatherings, and chequered patterns for home wear. The meticulous process of hand-weaving cloth marked an artisanal tradition, with skilled craftsmen passing down their expertise from generation to generation. For centuries, factories, workshops, and cottage industries thrived in this practice, until the advent of power looms marked a significant shift in production methods. The transition to power looms signaled a transformative era in the evolution of lungi manufacturing. Kaiser Haq shows the multiple use of lungi on his poem 'Ode on the Lungi'. He proudly claims himself as a lungi activist:

I live in an Ivory Tower  
I'll proudly proclaim  
I AM A LUNGI ACTIVIST!  
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, 2008, p. 141/ Lines 81-89)

In Kaiser Haq's whimsical vision, the esteemed American poet Walt Whitman, champion of democracy, is humorously contemplated donning a

lungi for a White House event instead of the conventional Western attire. However, the jesting scenario anticipates a predictable outcome, as the 'laureate of democracy' is expected to prefer a kilt over a lungi. The lungi, associated with non-white subalterns, is juxtaposed against the Western-linked kilt. This playful contemplation raises thought-provoking questions: Can a white man, conditioned to see the 'kilt' as superior, embrace the subaltern 'lungi' as his attire? Would his conscience permit transcending cultural differences, or would it potentially lead to a 'clash of civilizations'? Kaiser Haq, the poet, dismisses the concept of a 'clash of civilizations,' a term coined by Samuel P. Huntington. He refutes the idea of a cultural clash as fundamentally nonsensical.

Is it a clash of civilization?  
The sheer illogicality of it -  
the kilt is with ,us`  
but the lungi is with ,them!` (Haq, 2008, p. 140/ Lines 45-48).

The style and design of lungi can vary across different regions. They are often made from lightweight cotton or other breathable fabrics. Lungi is popular in countries such as India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and parts of Southeast Asia. They are commonly worn for everyday activities, casual occasions, or as sleepwear. In some regions, lungi is known by different names, such as "mundu" in Kerala, India, or "sarong" in some Southeast Asian countries. The versatility and comfort of the lungi make it a practical and culturally significant garment in many communities. A Kafeel Ahmed says in this regard:

poet retorts that there are hundreds of millions of people from East Africa to Indonesia wear the lungi with different names such as sarong (popular ethnic dress in Indonesia), munda (popular among Adivasis both in India and Bangladesh), htamain (used in Myanmar), saaram (ethnic Korean traditional dress), kitenge (ethnic African dress), kanga (a colourful African garment similar to Indonesian sarong and mostly worn by women), etc. day in day out (Chowdhury,2013, p. 64).

As the poet says, "there are more people in lungis/ than the population of the USA" (Haq, 2008 p. 140/ Lines 33-34). Women's traditional clothing in the Indian subcontinent is called saris, sometimes spelled sarees. It is made up of an unstitched stretch of woven fabric that is draped in different ways over the body. The length of the stretch of cloth is usually 4.5 to 9 yards. In nations like Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka, the sari is a traditional garment that is worn on important occasions and as a versatile and stylish outfit. It is created from a variety of materials, including as synthetic fibers, cotton, and silk, and comes in an extensive array of patterns, colors, and designs. In addition to its cultural and aesthetic value, the sari's role in society is also being debated and scrutinized. It is a versatile and timeless piece of clothing that has evolved over the years, adapting to changing fashion trends and cultural influences. While it is deeply rooted in tradition, the sari has also found its place as a symbol of modernity and style.

Western fashion designers have been influenced by the grace of the sari, and as a result, sari aspects have been incorporated into modern Western apparel. This influence from other cultures highlights how versatile and timeless the sari is. The sari has become well-known around the world because to the growth of social media and worldwide fashion trends. The sari's reputation as a representation of contemporary sophistication and cultural richness has been enhanced by the widespread adoption of the garment by influencers and celebrities in South Asia and beyond. In our culture, the lungi is often viewed with embarrassment by men, whereas women confidently embrace the sari, considering it a fashionable and contemporary garment.

## CONCLUSION

Kaiser Haq's *Ode on the Lungi* emerges as a profound exploration of cultural resilience and resistance against hegemonic forces, particularly Western cultural dominance and the encroachment of globalization. The lungi, a representation of the underclass, became a moving metaphor for the challenges faced by underprivileged population as their traditional identity is being lost. Self-described "lungi activist", Haq is fervently committed to the preservation of this customary clothing and calls for group action to counteract its marginalization. In contrast to references to Walt Whitman, the poem's comical call for sartorial equality highlights the conflict between non-white subaltern images and Western ideals, casting doubt on the idea of a "clash of civilizations." The study explores the psychological aspects of cultural hegemony as it moves through Haq's poem, showing how it permeates personal areas and shapes ideas about traditional dress in the context of an increasingly interconnected globe. This study makes a substantial contribution to our knowledge of the difficulties indigenous cultures experience in maintaining their cultural legacy in the face of the powerful forces of globalization. In the end, *Ode on the Lungi* is a potent example of the value of appreciating variety, opposing cultural uniformity, and preserving the distinctive cultural strands that are woven into the Lungi's fabric.

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