

Institutional Collusion and State Apparatuses: A Foucauldian Analysis of Jamal Abro's Pirani & Other Short Stories (2017)

Wajid Hussain Khoso ^{1*} Nadia Noor Muhammad ²

¹ Head of the Department of English, iRoots College, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan.

Email: officialwajidhussain@gmail.com

² Lecturer, Department of English, Benazir Bhutto Shaheed University, Lyari, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan.

Email: nadiaa8832@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The present study explores the collusion of the state institutions, legal apparatus and local power networks that are used to exercise biopower in Pirani & Other Short Stories (2017), a collection of short stories by Jamal Abro. The main objective of this research is to dissect the functioning of the various administrative institutions, judicial systems, police and medical institutions, which come together to control, discipline and regulate human populations in rural Sindh. This paper adopts a qualitative interpretive research design based on the theories of Michel Foucault on biopower, disciplinary power and state apparatuses, which goes beyond the traditional thematic analysis of state corruption as a failure of ethics and/or governance. The study has been done in four stages of textual analysis: close reading, thematic coding, identification of discursive elements and theoretical synthesis, which has led to the exploration of the systemic subjugation of subaltern subjects in the text. The results show that institutional collusion can be seen as a localized administrative machine that, through regulatory surveillance, spatial containment and legal manipulation, helps to uphold the hegemony of the ruling class and leaves bodies of the margins to strategic abandonment and systemic vulnerability. This research is an important critical approach to comprehending the ways literature maps the institutional power and political management of life.

KEYWORDS: Pirani & Other Short Stories, Biopower, Institutional Collusion, State Apparatuses, Jamal Abro, Michel Foucault, Subaltern Subjects

Introduction

Postcolonial literature often exposes the formal administrative power and the local power structure, and their intertwined nature. In South Asia, especially in Sindh, state mechanisms don't exist in isolation, but are embedded in the existing social, economic and regional structures that are rural and semi-feudal. This research aims to investigate the relationship between institutional networks and political management of physical life in *Pirani & Other Short Stories* (2017) by Jamal Abro, by using the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault, which is biopower. Foucault's concept of biopower is a state or local mechanism of structural control over life, which moves the focus of analysis from the individual deviations to the calculated management, optimization and regulation of whole populations (Foucault, 1976, p. 139). This study suggests that in rural areas, formal state institutions (judiciary,

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Corresponding Author

Wajid Hussain Khoso

✉ officialwajidhussain@gmail.com

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police, public healthcare, etc.) are directly involved in the monitoring, disciplining and regulating of subaltern bodies, in collaboration with informal agrarian power structures, rather than only traditional political critiques focusing on the explicit laws of the state.

Jamal Abro is one of the pillars of modern Sindhi literature for his contribution of introducing a social realism in the literature of his time, which challenged the romanticized and folkloric stories of his time. Abro's writings, mostly from the mid-to-late twentieth century, were inspired by his keen observations of rural Sindh and his own experiences as a member of the state judiciary and civil service, in which he documented the harsh realities of the marginalized, working-class labourers and subaltern subjects (Hussain, 2019). His fiction charts the complex social interactions of the region, and how cultural norms, corrupt administration and property ownership limit personal freedom (Laghari, 2023; Jamali, 2023). But the study of Abro's representation of institutional systems has often been limited to descriptive and moralistic ones. Administrative malfeasance and structural corruption are usually presented as a snapshot of regional suffering and/or as an individual moral failure, without being explored as a systemic functioning of institutional networks as an integral part of a wider biopolitical framework (Hussain, 2019).

Although the broad fields of subaltern and postcolonial studies have been a major force in questioning institutional violence and class exploitation in literature from South Asia (Mohanty, 2003), they have not been very active in engaging with literature from the region, such as Abro's anthology, in a meaningful way. On the other hand, the regional criticism in Pakistan is more interested in linguistic subtleties, regional memory and cultural preservation (Laghari, 2023) than in a theoretical discussion of the representation of the structure of power in the text. A significant lacuna in the field of Pirani & Other Short Stories is the lack of discussion on the way the institutional state networks are represented and how they are functioning in the field of power and knowledge. Judicial courts, police actions and professional medical interventions are not just administrative apparatuses, but the very apparatuses of the biological sorting, disciplining and management of populations that are necessary for the socio-political order. This study aims to fill this gap by analysing the institutional collusion in the text as a localised apparatus of biopower.

Objective

- To explore the working of state apparatuses and institutional collusion in the socio-cultural context of Sindh, and how these are used to perform biopower in detail by analysing the text *Pirani & Other Short Stories* (2017) by Jamal Abro.

Research Question

1. In *Pirani & Other Short Stories* (2017), Jamal Abro explores how the apparatuses of the state and institutional collusion signify, institutionalize and enforce Foucault's notion of Biopower.

Theoretical Overview & Literature Review

In order to analyze the institutional power dynamics in Jamal Abro's work, this study draws on Michel Foucault's political philosophy, which emphasizes his notions of biopower, disciplinary power and the power/knowledge nexus. Foucault's genealogical research identifies a change in the way political power is exercised, from that of classical sovereign power, the power to kill or let live that is exercised through public acts of coercion, to biopower, which is concerned with the administration, regulation and cultivation of biological bodies and populations (Foucault, 1976, p. 139). Biopower is manifested in two directions: the anatomopolitics of the body and the biopolitics of the population, the former of which involves disciplining the individual body into a compliant and efficient instrument,

while the latter is about regulating collective demographic processes like reproduction, mortality, health and the capacity for labor (Foucault, 1975; Rabinow, 2006).

A key element of this theoretical synthesis is Foucault's notion of the power/knowledge nexus, which claims that power can only be exercised in the production of fields of knowledge and truth: "power produces knowledge... power and knowledge directly imply one another" (Foucault, 1975, p. 27). This nexus is realised in the making of legal, administrative and institutional truths in a semi-feudal administrative society that naturalises the subjection of the subaltern. Dominant institutional and feudal elites create the knowledge of what a good citizen, a good legal testimony or a good worker is, in order to maintain their power. These modalities are all at work in postcolonial agrarian contexts. The state apparatus uses the spectacular violence of sovereign power as well as the calculated management of biopower, which is based on resources, to control the capacity of the agrarian population to work, its legal visibility and its spatial mobility.

The text under analysis, *Pirani & Other Short Stories* (2017), is a critical archive which can be used to explore these dynamics. These stories, originally written in Sindhi and published together in a volume titled 'Pishu Pasha', are Abro's own and show his unique point of view as a high-ranking official in the legal system of Sindh and as an observer of rural Sindh. (Ahmed, 2021). There are sixteen short stories in the collection – Black Water, Brigand, Discourteous, Flame, Hair Parting, He was a Hur, Brat of a Shah, Macho Man, Lorry, Pirani, Pishoo Pasha, Gratitude, Blackened Face, The Coat of Khameeso, The Angel and A Mother's Lap. In this study, fifteen of these narratives are examined systematically, and how the institutional networks work as a biopolitical apparatus throughout the collection is evaluated.

Jamal Abro's stories have been the subject of growing interest in the socio-political significance in the recent academic literature on South Asian literature. In Abro's fiction, there is an uncompromising social realism that refrains from romanticizing the characters and shows the reality of the lives of the marginalized and subaltern, surrounded by solid representations of discrimination, hunger and lawlessness (Jabbar, 2024). His characterization strategies are analysed by Jamali and Hussain (2023), which shows that his characters are a reflection of the structural tensions of the everyday Sindhi society and symbolically loaded in the short narrative structures. Structural analyses focused on the story have started; Kulsoom et al. (2022) analyse the titular story "Pirani" in the light of Simone de Beauvoir's theory of Gendered Otherness, which shows how the economic decisions and marital arrangements are made by the dominant without the consent of the marginalized, which leads to their structural subjection. Laghari et al. (2023) analyse "Pirani" to explore the intersections of cultural practices and class inequalities, rural poverty and biological distinctions of bodies based on labour and status. Finally, Malik (2024)'s semiotic analysis of "Pirani" with the help of Roland Barthes' narrative codes, which helps in understanding the process of commodification of the subaltern form in feudal, patriarchal and emerging institutional structures. This paper, however, examines how these various state and institutional networks function as a whole as a biopolitical apparatus throughout the anthology, which has yet to be analyzed in this way.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research approach with a focus on text analysis that enables the analysis of how language, the form of narration and the characters create and reinforce the institutional power dynamics (Creswell, 2013; McKee, 2003). This approach does not use quantitative measures but rather literary fiction is seen as a [complex](#) discursive archive, which is able to reflect, critique and deconstruct political and biopolitical structures of its cultural context. The main data set comprises the English translations of 15 selected stories in *Pirani & Other*

Short Stories (2017) by Jamal Abro. Purposive sampling was employed to select stories that revolve around state administration, legal procedures, judicial engagement and/or professional involvement in the narrative arc, character decisions, and institutional struggles.

The analysis is done in a four-stage qualitative interpretive model that is based on Gibson and Brown (2009). The first stage involves several close readings of the text, in order to identify common themes of institutional collusion, judicial manipulation, state surveillance and administrative abandonment throughout the anthology. The second stage is a thematic coding of the text segments in order to be able to categorize them into the analytical concepts of institutional biopower, such as Judicial Weaponization, Coercive Police Alignment, Medical Stratification, Spatial Biopolitics and Administrative Abandonment. The third stage analyzes the discursive components of the text and how the dialogue of the characters, administrative terminology and descriptive prose normalizes state-sanctioned assumptions and make them into regulatory truths that must be obeyed by the subaltern. The fourth stage then synthesises the results of the previous ones, by mapping the institutional mechanisms of population and bodily management as they are represented in Abro's work in the light of Foucault's theoretical concepts of biopower, sovereign power and state apparatuses.

Discussion & Analysis

The textured terrain of Pirani & Other Short Stories by Jamal Abro is an in-depth analysis of the functioning of state institutions and formal legal structures as a localised biopolitical apparatus in rural Sindh. Abro's stories are not about the neutral institutions of administration, police and courts of law, which are supposed to maintain civil order, but about a complex topography of a space in which formal state institutions are directly involved with informal feudal power. This institutional network is integrated and acts as a management, regulation, discipline and even abandonment of the subaltern bodies depending on their place in the socio-economic hierarchy. These overlapping institutions of power are organized in a systematic manner in the anthology in relation to individual security, legal visibility and biological survival.

One of the main ways this institutional collusion is realized is by the direct connection between the state's coercive apparatuses and the local elites to enforce the property boundaries and to exert social control. Brigand is a game where this dynamic is combined with the authority of the micro-level and the enforcement of the macro-level (the state). If a subaltern character trespasses on his property, the local chief "uses his influence with the state police to put 'immense pressure' (p. 10) on him to get his property back. The state apparatus is literally an extension of the will of the landlord and results in a public exhibition of the sovereign's power over the body. The police take the brigand's sister's clothes off her, and make him "pluck her pubic hair" (p. 10). This is a spectacular act of violence, which humiliates the subaltern body, breaks its resistance and shows the absolute power of the dominant alliance. Such internal coercion is backed up by the normalization of patriarchal authority in the private sphere: when neighbours complain about the protagonist's son's aggressive behaviour, the father responds, "They must have a solid reason to complain" (p. 8), thus giving his family a licence to be dominant.

This weaponization of state power is further institutionalized in the legal and judicial systems, which are used to keep people under social subjection instead of providing justice. The architecture of the court, its "proud and haughty walls" (p. 56) and black iron hooks are a visual reminder of state power in Pishoo Pasha. In this realm, the legal system is not an independent and impartial adjudicator. Rather, it is a pliable apparatus which is used by the police and landed elites to produce evidence and twist the accounts to suit their needs in the guise of the law, to maintain control over subaltern groups.

The state's power to control life and death also goes through the public medical institutions that classify and treat people according to their socioeconomic status. Discourteous has a highly hierarchical access to the life-saving medical care. The narrator, a magistrate, is a "well-to-do person with a lot of well-wishers" (p. 13), and is treated with great respect by doctors and nurses. A poor bullock-cart driver with a very sick family member, on the other hand, is given a "stern and grim" (p. 13) reception. The state doctor's prescription of a diet of "milk, orange juice, and grapes" (p. 13) to a family that can't afford a basic four-rupee injection is an example of a system that is unconcerned with subaltern realities and disconnected from medical knowledge. Medical authority is not to cure, but to discipline and dispense with the poor, and make their survival secondary in the state's health care system.

This exercise of professional power to control populations is extended in *The Angel*, where a state physician from the hub of Islamabad's administration assures patients that "Everything is going to be alright... This is a very peaceful place" (p. 87). This pacifying discourse renders structural systemic inequalities as individual medical problems, thereby defusing potential political opposition and transforming public grievances into 'managed' health problems, and inducing subjects to internalise passivity.

The biopolitical government of populations comes to light in times of environmental and economic crisis, when the state's resources are mobilized in a strategic way to save the lives of the elite, leaving the subaltern population to die and suffer. This is demonstrated in *Black Water* in the way that a major flood is responded to. The feudal lords, who have a structure over the villagers, exploit them to construct mud barriers with the purpose of protecting private agricultural property and the elite households (p. 4). At the same time, the elites protect themselves from the rising waters by relocating "along with their families, to safer towns" (p. 4), leaving the working-class population vulnerable to the rising waters. State-allocated relief funds are used, and the bureaucratic-feudal system comes into play to intercept the relief funds, so that the financial compensation is usurped by "landlords living in the towns" (p. 4). This systematic redirection of resources renders the agrarian poor completely vulnerable and is an example of institutional networks' sovereign right to abandon life.

The physical vulnerability and exposure of the labouring body is reflected in *The Coat of Khameeso*, where an eleven-year-old child herder has to protect a landowner's commercial pea crop from frost. The child is "barefooted," and wearing "no shirt... a tattered winter coat" (p. 83). This situation reveals an inversion of biopolitical values; the child's body becomes a disposable resource in the quest for profit in agriculture, and the subaltern worker's physical health and life are not given due consideration.

Flame also explores how the subaltern body is incorporated into the agrarian economy via systems of uncompensated toil, and the structural extraction of subaltern labour and the absolute physical dependency of the subaltern body. The protagonist is depicted working "without any wages, just to get two meals a day" (p. 18), and this level of dependency is increased when he becomes a sharecropper, when the landlord takes most of the harvest, "leaving just two bags for the peasant's family" (p. 20). The peasant is not open to resistance, because he/she has internalized a fear of state coercion and of possible starvation.

The historical shift and internalisation of the state surveillance apparatus is a key element of the pervasive management of human life. He was a Hur who dealt with the transition from the containment of the colonial to the governance of the postcolonial. The story is about how the colonial state used space to regulate populations by the encampment system, which involved "set[ting] on fire" rebellious villages and "captive women, children and military men" (p. 30) being under strict military surveillance. This biopolitical management is space-based, meaning that a whole community is identified as a security threat to be monitored and contained. This outside pressure becomes an

inside pressure: "Their own government made a home in their hearts and minds" (p. 31). The main character, Khairo, goes from being a rebel to being a collaborator, justifying his collaboration by the thought that "God could forgive a man but the government could not" (p. 32). The state's power to punish and control life is internalised, and how external monitoring becomes internal monitoring, making the subject compliant, is illustrated.

The State's deprivation of communities of the basic institutional and economic guarantees turns the human body into a commercial commodity in the survival equation of the people. The migratory tribe of Brohi are the victims of deprivation in Pirani, and it is evident in their physical appearance: they are "barefooted" and their "shredded and fading" (p. 52) clothes. When there is a serious famine, which threatens the collective survival, paternal authority turns into an economic transaction. The father asks the buyers if anyone needs a girl, and gives his young daughter to them. A financial sale (p. 53), which is done in the socially accepted form of a marriage contract. The child's body is turned into a means of survival, a basic currency, for the biological survival of the other family units, in the face of severe poverty.

This is also a theme of Hair Parting, which reveals a culture in which women are part of the financial equation, along with real estate and livestock. "Oh, my beauty!", boasts a husband of his wife's monetary worth, "She was worth five thousand rupees" (p. 23), and the narrator notes that "daughters... are auctioned for peanuts" (p. 26) and "the same as a pair of oxen, a few acres of land" (p. 23). The woman tries to break out of this situation, but the husband is unwilling to give her a divorce, and asks, "Has anyone ever given away one's land or wife?" (p. 26). Her body, her physical and reproductive life, is permanently under the regime of ownership, under the regime of private property.

These institutional hierarchies are often reinforced by the combination of religious and feudal power, and produce strong ideological systems of truth which require absolute submission. Brat of a Shah illustrates how the discourses of divinity are a powerful means of power/knowledge. The agrarian community is not at all respectful of the secular landowner (wadera), but they are uncritical in submitting to "Saeen Peeral Shah" just because of his being a Sayed. His unshapely beard, his blackened eyes with antimony and his oily hair (p. 35) serve as a visual signifier of authority. Commoners and local religious leaders (mullaahs) physically bow down, recoil and touch his feet before this act of holiness. This is done through religious descent, thus legitimizing a hierarchy of the elite who have absolute power over the social and spiritual lives of the subaltern.

The local shrine economy, in conjunction with the feudal system, is another form of manipulation of spiritual power revealed in Blackened Face, which controls resources. The story is about the difference in the reproductive success of a rich landlord (Pir Dino), whose newborn son is celebrated with gold and silk clothes at the shrine and a subaltern child, Allah Dino, who is ill. The poor family cannot afford to take the child for a routine four-rupee injection, and the child dies, which could have been prevented. The shrine economy not only legitimates and glorifies the elite lineage, but also ignores the biological life of the poor, which is a reflection of the interplay of religious and feudal institutions and marginalisation of the subaltern.

These class divisions are enforced and internalized in the way the population is organized for everyday transit and domestic space, and thus in the habits and expectations of the population. The public transport vehicle is a localised metaphor of spatial segregation of the state in Lorry. Landed elites and senior bureaucrats are allowed to travel free, on the basis of their "connections with government officials" (p. 47), in the front compartment, whereas the back compartment is overcrowded with working-class passengers. This spatial division is a technology of power, which helps to normalize class differences, and makes the subaltern travellers internalize their position and treat the elite travellers with respect: "We have to travel anyway, but you are really a big gun!" (p. 46).

In *A Mother's Lap*, spatial regulation is at the domestic level, as well. The protagonist Begum Sahiba is an elite who polices her home for contamination by lower-class people. When she meets a migrant worker with dark-skinned children, she tells her to get away, saying, "Surely she is a sweeper!" (p. 91). This caste-coded labor labelling of subaltern bodies as bodies to be kept out of the home in order to preserve the purity of the home is a good example of how class-based biases work through spatial segregation to maintain social distance.

Lastly, *Gratitude* breaks down the upper class's ideology that is used to explain these structural inequalities. The elite characters talk about their relations with "feudal lords, ministers, CSP officers, secretaries, and ambassadors" (p. 74) and proclaim their identity based on these. In their worldview, subaltern bodies are completely disposable, and they say that they have the right to "put in jail and kill with bullets" (p. 74) anyone who questions the status quo. Such a potential for violence goes hand in hand with an assumed ideological submission, because the elites believe that the working class should be grateful to them for creating jobs and industrial facilities. This expectation forms a paternalistic discourse that represents systemic exploitation as economic goodwill and makes the exploited and subjugated subjects of the discourse feel that they must be exploited and subjected to such exploitation if they wish to survive.

Conclusion

This study shows that the state apparatuses and institutional collusion in Jamal Abro's *Pirani & Other Short Stories* (2017) is a single biopolitical apparatus which regulates, disciplines and manages subaltern populations. The detailed study of these fifteen stories shows that institutional power is not the rule of law, but a well-planned system of the judiciary, the state police, the medical profession and the shrine economy to uphold the feudal rule. The results show that in this semi-feudal setting, human life is valued in an asymmetric manner, in terms of class and institution. The sovereign power operates by means of the direct use of police force to protect the property of the elite, as in *Brigand*, and by falsifying legal documents to suppress dissent, as in *Pishoo Pasha*. Moreover, the organisation of public health care, emergency relief and spatial systems to defend the interests of the elite is systematically exposed to vulnerability and neglect of the marginalised bodies as seen in *Discourteous*, *Black Water*, *Lorry* and *The Coat of Khameeso*.

In sum, Jamal Abro's short stories are a significant literary repository which reveals the institutional inequalities that are normalised by their structures in rural Sindh. The anthology maps the formal legal, administrative and professional discourses and practices that constitute the exercise of state power, revealing the mechanisms of subordination. This Foucauldian analysis is valuable for South Asian and postcolonial literary studies because it moves the critical attention from description of the corruption in the region to questioning the biopolitical practices that regulate the survival, legal visibility and institutional containment of humans. In Abro's work, literature is still a powerful tool to dissect the politics of the state administration and biological exposure in the postcolonial world.

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