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Exploring Nostalgia, Memory, and Identity in Mustansar Hussain Tarar's Historical Novel "Lenin for Sale"

Afghala Afiat
Ph.D. Scholar at Air University Islamabad
Email: naira12122012@gmail.com

Abstract
This research paper presents a comprehensive critical review of Mustansar Hussain Tarar's novel Lenin for Sale. Although the novel holds significant thematic and ideological importance, it has received relatively limited scholarly attention in Pakistan. This paper thoroughly examines the novel's portrayal of ideological disillusionment and the emotional impact of exile, exploring how these themes are woven into the narrative. By analyzing the novel, the study explores how displacement, return, and alienation affect the characters, and examines the symbolic meaning of Lenin and other revolutionary icons within changing political and social contexts. By situating the novel within its historical and ideological context, the study aims to bridge the existing gap in academic discourse within the field of South Asian literary studies and postcolonial literature. and contribute meaningful insights into the novel's complex themes and narrative strategies. Additionally, it highlights the novel's relevance to contemporary socio-political issues, making it a vital contribution to the field of literary studies. Ultimately, this paper aims to foster a deeper academic understanding of Tarar's work and encourage further scholarly exploration.

Introduction

Mustansar Hussain Tarar is regarded as one of Pakistan's most distinguished contemporary writers and an avant-garde literary figure. He initially gained prominence as a travelogue writer in the 1950s, a genre in which he established a distinctive narrative voice. From the 1990s onward, Tarar expanded his literary engagement to novel writing, exploring a wide range of themes, including the role of rivers in the sustenance of ancient civilizations, the transformation of the social and cultural landscape of Punjab, romantic relationships, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its far-reaching impact on a generation of South Asian idealists. Lenin for Sale is the English translation of Mustansar Hussain Tarar's novel Ay Ghazaal-e-Shab, by Durdana Soomro. Tarar presents a poignant and reflective account of the collapse of communism. The novel focuses on Pakistani individuals who, in their youth, migrated in pursuit of the communist ideal, envisioning the Soviet Union as a utopian space of equality and justice. Over time, they assimilated into their adopted land, developed deep attachments to its environment, established families, and raised children within Soviet society. However, with the gradual disintegration of the Soviet system, their ideological convictions and carefully constructed lives began to unravel. The collapse left them ideologically disillusioned and socially displaced, uncertain about their identity and future. Through this narrative, Tarar captures how the uncontrollable forces of history dismantled deeply held ideals, transforming lives once driven by optimism into experiences marked by loss, uncertainty, and alienation.

Literature Review

The story revolves around a group of Pakistanis who settled in the USSR and Eastern Bloc countries during the Cold War, a period when the Soviet Union supported left-wing activists and students across the world. In Pakistan, the political establishment found the left an easy target and actively worked to push its own agenda, making life difficult for left-wing parties, groups,

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and individuals. The plot and character development are engaging enough to draw the reader in and sustain interest throughout the narrative. As is characteristic of Tarar's writing, the novel also provides hints for further study of various subjects by incorporating historical and factual details about places and events.

The four main characters of the novel left Pakistan nearly half a century ago during what they perceived as the glorious era of communism. They married, had children, and settled in cities such as Moscow, East Berlin, and Budapest. Their desire was to live out the dream of equal rights for all oppressed people of the world through communism—an ideology that captivated their youth, spread across the globe, and played a decisive role in shaping the twentieth century. Eventually, however, the revolution was replaced by the very "monster" it sought to defeat: capitalism, which became synonymous with the greed and corruption that engulfed the former Soviet Union. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, their dreams and life ambitions were effectively brought to a standstill. In their twilight years, carrying the wounds of a shattered dream, all four individuals who had left Pakistan long ago return in search of a home. They revisit their origins and set out to rediscover forgotten places and long-lost relatives. The return of the lost, however, brings its own challenges and disappointments. The novel sensitively and realistically depicts their interactions, particularly their reunions with brothers and family members in Pakistan after a long absence. These encounters reflect the emotional complexity of return and mirror the experiences such individuals may face in real life.

Lenin for Sale is a great epic tragedy written against the backdrop of the fall of communism, which was perhaps one of mankind's greatest dreams. Mustansar Hussain Tarar's work reflects his deep interest in time and history. He writes narratives grounded in his personal life experiences and frequently explores the cultures of ancient civilizations. The idea for this novel began to take shape when the author visited Moscow after a gap of half a century, where he met overseas Pakistanis and learned about their experiences of migration, nostalgia, and the loss of connection with their homeland. There were millions of people across the world who believed in communist ideology.

During the 1960s, the Soviet Union offered scholarships to individuals who identified as socialists and supporters of communism, enabling them to study at Moscow State University in Russia. However, because they pursued their education in Russia, many of them were unable to secure employment upon returning to Pakistan. Then came 1992, the year of disintegration, which transformed their lives and reduced them to outsiders, as capitalism introduced ethnic hatred as part of the system. By this time, the characters were in their sixties and had no close relatives left in Pakistan, either because their relatives had passed away or because ties had been lost over time. Their wives remained committed to their own cultures, and their children were largely shaped by Russian culture. While the characters were originally Pakistani by upbringing, their migration to Russia led them to live lives marked by denial and a persistent sense of homesickness for their homeland. However, it remains a mystery why they did not choose to return earlier. Ultimately, they return to Pakistan only to discover that they are perceived as strangers in the country they once loved. Disillusioned by this realization, they return once again to Russia.

The title Lenin for Sale is symbolic of the statue of Vladimir Lenin. When the Soviet Union was at its peak, it was possible not to see the sun or the moon, but it was impossible not to see the statue of Vladimir Lenin in the centers of cities, towns, and villages, along roads, in parks, and in front of ancient churches. However, the termites of economic decline gradually hollowed out the

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pillars of that great temple of the Soviet Union, until it suddenly came tumbling down. In its place, a new capitalist order emerged, one that could not permit its eternal foe to remain standing in every street and public square. The Department of the Ministry of Labour, which had once been constantly engaged in ensuring that no street, quarter, or square was without a statue of Lenin, was now assigned the task of removing these statues, bringing them down, and erasing their presence from public spaces.

The novel opens with four young protagonists: Zaheeruddin, the son of labourer Shamsuddin Inqilabi from Burewala in Punjab; Arif Naqvi, a writer and young communist volunteer from Karachi who was previously a stage actor in Lucknow; Mustafa Islam Sheikh, a philosophy student and the son of a shoemaker from downtown Lahore; and Sardar Qalib, the son of a drunken revolutionary poet from Baghbanpura, whose nine children often slept on empty stomachs. These characters eventually settled in cities such as Budapest, Moscow, Hungary, and Berlin. Mustafa Islam, Zaheeruddin Inqilabi, Sardar Qalib, Waris Chaudary, and Arif Naqvi function as different masks worn by individuals. Furthermore, these characters symbolize deeply felt experiences of migration and the struggle for adjustment. They illustrate how individuals can remain attached to their homeland while simultaneously falling deeply in love with another country. The characters also represent the spirit of "Asiatic patriotism," reflecting an inseparable bond with ancestral land, culture, tradition, and religion. Their personal stories, ideological choices, and imaginative steps toward realizing their beliefs serve as responses to existential crises and collectively embody an adventurous desire to create a version of heaven on earth.

The plot appears to be a simple one. Tarar narrates several stories that merge around a common thread: the desire to bring socialist change and uphold the glory of communism. However, there is nothing simple about the manner in which these stories are told. All the narratives revolve around families bound by complex interactions and relationships. Zaheeruddin was studying Marxist theory at Moscow State University, where he fell in love with Galina, a Russian woman. It is often said that Russian women are practical in matters of marriage; when they meet a well-settled individual, they prefer marriage over prolonged struggles for livelihood. Consequently, many migrants married Russian women. In the Soviet Union, migrants were respected, as the state valued young people who left their own countries to support Soviet ideology. These individuals abandoned their homeland and cultural affiliations, married Russian women, and committed themselves to life in the Soviet Union.

After the decline of the Russian Revolution, their lives began to change. The life partners who had once been enthusiastic companions in the dream of an ideal world gradually appeared emotionally fragile and unable to provide support. The skies of Moscow changed before their eyes—eyes that had once been bright with hope, dreaming of a red dawn. In their youth, headstrong and inflamed with passion for socialism, they could think of nothing but the rejected and oppressed of the Third World, people who had nothing to lose except the fetters on their feet. It was Zaheeruddin who grasped their hands, pulled them out of humiliation, and led them toward the Soviet paradise. There were many like him from different nations and races—Africans, Asians, and South Americans—who abandoned their inherited identities and ancestral beliefs to settle in the empire of workers, longing for the arrival of the red dawn. Through these narratives, the author vividly portrays the characters' deep sense of lost identity and enduring nostalgia.

"After the unpredicted collapse of communism, the red sea of socialism that had been surrounding their ideological boat had suddenly moved away. Its waves moved farther and

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farther away until the sea vanished leaving only sand behind and their boat stuck in the desert alone, helpless and abandoned. They were tormented by nostalgia for their land"

Zaheeruddin, in his sixties, often dreamt of white-haired sprites, lighter than cotton, emerging from milkweed plants—visions of fields and landscapes from his past. He recalled memories of his childhood, when he used to chase these sprites in the barren wastelands of Burewala sixty years ago. He feels an uncontrollable nostalgia for his native land, which leads him to consider visiting Pakistan once again. Arif Naqvi, who had settled in East Berlin, was once a young communist volunteer who played revolutionary tunes on his flute in an attempt to soften social divisions and spread the message of peace and equality. That same idealistic figure later became a pop singer within the capitalist system. The collapse of the Soviet Union left him rudderless and directionless. He began to long for Karachi and Lucknow, and in an effort to overcome his nostalgia, he returned to Karachi for a brief visit. There, he discovered that time had not stood still—neither for him nor for the coastal city. Most of his contemporaries had died, and he could not find a single familiar face.

Another significant character is Mustafa Islam and his daughter, Gina Islam. Mustafa, who lived in Budapest, travels to Lahore in search of his daughter, who had adopted a gypsy life. She is a Roma gypsy, living a nomadic existence and wandering across different countries. Gina visits Lahore, the birthplace of her father, Mustafa Islam, and lives near the River Ravi in his broken apartment in Koocha Kemangaran. Her father arrives in Lahore in search of her, and as he stands on the empty balcony, he sees the stained-glass window, hears the voices of long-lost loved ones, feels the echo of his father's dying pleas in the house, and relives the taste of food, the weather, and the atmosphere of his old home. He shares these nostalgic memories with his daughter in the following lines.

"I realized that home is just an illusion. If you have remained away from it for a long time it becomes unfaithful and refuses to recognize you. All my ties and relationships had vanished into the air and those that were still present had become so estranged due to the long separation that there was not a spark of affection left, nor the sense of shared blood. Home is not just a romantic name for nostalgic memories, some lanes and alleys, flowers and herbs, and familiar plants or tastes. It is where someone waits for you; where you are needed; where is a reason for living."

Mustansar Hussain Tarar is a versatile writer who employs a wide range of narrative techniques in his work. He skillfully amalgamates stream of consciousness and magical realism, which makes his novels both engaging and compelling. Lenin for Sale stands out as a remarkable achievement in storytelling and characterization. Alongside its central theme, the novel introduces several significant minor themes that enrich the narrative. The images of life presented in the text are vivid and richly textured. Like the author's other works, Lenin for Sale uses seemingly small details to convey larger realities. For instance, a Lahori returns to Lahore after forty years and wonders what has happened to the tongas that once ran along the mall Road. Similarly, the statues of Lenin and Stalin that once adorned the public squares of Moscow and Leningrad are now stacked in underground warehouses and sold as scrap. These details subtly but effectively reflect broader social, cultural, and historical transformations.

Mustansar Hussain Tarar offers deep insight into both social culture and human psychology. The inner turmoil and nostalgia experienced by his characters draw them back toward their native land. Tarar's work also reflects the influence of writers such as Salman Rushdie and Milan Kundera. This novel explores themes similar to those found in Kundera's Ignorance. In

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Kundera's novel, the characters initially feel the first pangs of nostalgia for their homeland; however, when they return, they realize that it is as if they are emerging from a grave after twenty years. They find no place for themselves and recognize that they have lost their identity. The loss suffered by the characters in Ignorance demands a moment of confrontation—either a desire for revenge or a struggle against self-reproach for forgetting—within which there are no victors, no recovery, and nothing except the enactment of loss itself.

For the most part, Lenin for Sale is a surreal journey through the dark, icy, dirty, and narrow streets of Eastern European cities, a landscape that forms the core of many novels and films set during the Cold War. The only element that prevents the reader from becoming lost in this imagined world and helps maintain grounding is the presence of vividly developed Pakistani characters. These characters are unable to detach themselves from their homeland and equally unable to come to terms with the collapse of their revolutionary dream to transform the world through socialist ideology. The novel traces a journey of searching for home and arriving at the realization that the place in which they are living is not their true home; rather, the place they once left behind was home. This journey of realization constitutes the true journey of the novel, and it is rendered with remarkable sensitivity and depth. Similar narratives of displacement and return are also reflected in well-known Pakistani television dramas such as Daldal and Pardais.

Conclusion

The novel deals with broken dreams, fractured souls, dissidents, and delusional notions of status and identity. It also explores the dependence of human happiness on the imaginative worlds that both create and destroy individuals, as well as the consequences of the rise and fall of systems and the people within them. Mustansar Hussain Tarar has produced a seminal work in contemporary literature that not only offers an engaging narrative but also traces a part of the history of Pakistani-born socialists. The English translation does justice to Tarar's philosophical and heartfelt exploration of personal relationships, human existence, ambition, aging, and religious belief. The experiences of the characters and their inner turmoil provide insight into the spiritual, social, familial, and fundamental aspects of life. Tarar's novels address universal themes such as ambition, disillusionment, youth, true love, and hope, sustaining reader engagement until the very last page and offering continuous reflection on the complex, fast-paced plot. Tarar's storytelling and distinctive way of thinking ensure that the reader's interest remains alive throughout the narrative.

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