



**FROM A DE-COLONIZED STATE TO A NEO-COLONIZED  
STATE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MOHAMMAD  
HANIF'S *A CASE OF EXPLODING MANGOES***

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**Abstract**

Mohammad Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* is a scathing critique of neocolonialism in Pakistan under the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq. In Hanif's depiction, the emergence of neo-elites in the country serves as external agendas that lead to the deprivation of Pakistani people's rights, the manipulation of religious and military institutions in the name of Islamization, and the subversion of democracy to fulfill the interests of the upper class. Using the postcolonial theory, particularly Kwame Nkrumah's concept of neocolonialism, the paper examines how Zia's regime illustrates ongoing domination by ex-colonizers through economic, political, and religious influence, often mediated through a class of neo-elites. By exposing these neocolonial strategies, the novel is a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggles in postcolonial nations.

**Keywords:** *A Case of Exploding Mangoes, Dictatorship, Islamization, Mohammed Hanif, Neo-colonialism, Neo-elites.*

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## 1. Introduction

Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) vividly portrays Pakistan neo-colonial conditions that continue even after its freedom under military governance, deceiving the populace by manipulating state ideology, principles, and religion to continue colonial legacies. Zia's regime, as portrayed in this novel, serves as a prime example of the abuse and hostile effects on Pakistan's democracy. This research aims to delve deeper into Zia's regime, highlighting its neo-colonial aspects and the resulting socio-political impact on the country.

The onset of colonial rule in Pakistan coincided with the country's establishment in 1947. The new ruling elite that assumed power either having prior collaboration with the colonial powers or joining the ruling class for personal gains often prioritized serving foreign interests over the domestic population, leading to a state of internal colonization where the people found themselves subjected to the rule of the old colonial masters through the new elite (Abbas, 2002). This phenomenon, referred to as neo-colonialism by Nkrumah, has resulted in a chaotic environment and the deterioration of the political system, with the military frequently intervening to disrupt elected governments and assert its control over key areas (Sartre, 2001; Appiah, 1992). Pakistan's political landscape has been significantly shaped by extended periods of military rule, with the military acting as a kingmaker and intervening whenever elected governments challenged its control over areas like defense, nuclear programs, and foreign policy. The country has faced chronic regional tensions and successive failures in forming a stable constitutional framework, as its diversity in terms of languages, ethnicities, and regional demands has led to political and social fragmentation (Asia Society, 2011). Despite infrequent periods of democratic transitions, Pakistan still grapples with the ongoing challenges of establishing a true representative and responsive government due to military domination and enduring colonial legacies. The failure of state institutions to provide reliable, peaceful avenues for resolving grievances has led groups to pursue alternative methods resulting in the rise of extremism and lack of tolerance for diversity and dissent (United States Institute of Peace, 2023).

Nations in Asia, Africa, and North America are replete with histories of rulers who safeguarded the interests of their colonial centers over their nations. Unfortunately, Pakistan is no different, with several of its leaders, either by choice or unwillingly. It still serves imperial agendas in its post-independence era. Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* narrates the story of one such ruler who seized power dictatorially and disrupted Pakistan's democratic progress.

Similar to Hanif's critique, Ian Talbot exposes the detrimental impact of Zia's regime. Talbot states that Zia emphasizes the "regulative, punitive and extractive" basics of Islam, neglecting its 'social aspect' (Talbot, 1998). He argues that Zia's conservative

representation of Islam damages both the image of Islam and Pakistan. ‘Zia left behind not only a political process distorted by the Eight Amendment’ but also set a precedent to sustain their power through unethical practices. Zia’s regime fosters the ‘atmosphere of bigotry, fanaticism and distorted values’ (Talbot, [1998](#), p. 286). More insightfully, Maya Chadda uncovers Zia’s lousy strategies: ‘He had benefited immensely from the Afghan war and the U.S, Saudi and other foreign aid that Pakistan’s ‘front line’ states had brought’. Like Hanif, she also came to know the reality of Zia’s Islamization practice by saying, ‘Zia skillfully used Islam to create the ideological basis for his regime and divide his opposition. The bottom line was force, but Zia was also a master manipulator of collective psychology’ (Chadda, [2000](#)). Moreover, Tahir Kamran investigates how Zia’s policies strengthened his power and control, which resulted in the biggest harm to the nation. ‘Most significantly, the *Revival of Constitution of 1973 Order* granted Zia the power to dissolve the National Assembly virtually at will’. Such acts of Gen. Zia reveal his real intention of ‘sharing decision-making power with the political elite in the matters of national interests’ (Kamran, [2008](#)).

In *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective*, Ayesha Jalal noticed the role of the comprador class in Pakistan: ‘Pakistan drew heavily on the colonial state’s method of bureaucratic control and centralization’ (Jalal, [1995](#)). Further, she reveals Zia’s Islamization policy as an effort to gain material pursuits rather than the real Islamic society. However, the misuse of religion by Zia did not go well and ‘Zia’s Islamic democracy elicited more contempt than it did respect’ (Jalal, [1995](#), p. 106). In a similar way, Iqbal et al. ([2015](#)) explore the role of the comprador/bourgeois class in perpetuating neocolonial power structures. Drawing on postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon’s insights, they argue that these elites inherited colonial-era power dynamics and prioritized the interests of external powers over national development. Their analysis sheds light on the continued influence of colonial legacies in shaping post-independence governance.

Previous studies have analysed *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* from various insightful perspectives. This study, however, is to analyse this novel through the lens of Kwame Nkrumah’s Neo-colonial theory. The concept ‘neocolonialism’ was popularized by Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, in his book *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* published in 1965. By Neo-colonial, Nkrumah reveals the fact that various countries similar to Ghana, got freedom from the colonizers, but they still remain under the governance of the imperial powers. These imperial powers play a crucial role in the political, financial, and cultural matters of postcolonial states. According to Nkrumah, neo-colonialism epitomizes the most deceitful manifestation of imperialism, where previous colonial powers persist in maintaining authority over supposedly independent nations. In contrast to direct colonialism, which concluded with the political autonomy of

colonized nations, neo-colonialism guarantees the enduring impact of imperial powers through economic and political mechanisms. Within the realm of neo-colonialism, nations uphold the semblance of sovereignty, yet their economic and political frameworks are significantly swayed or regulated by past colonial powers through diverse methods. These encompass economic dependencies, military interventions, and political maneuvers. For instance, the military forces of imperial nations might directly intercede in the affairs of a neo-colonial nation, or more subtly, govern its economy and politics by stipulating the acquisition of imperial commodities, thus stifling local competition and progress. Foreign aid, ostensibly allocated for progress, frequently advances the interests of imperial powers rather than those of the beneficiary states. Investments fail to bridge the divide between affluent and impoverished segments of society; instead, they intensify economic discrepancies and perpetuate the reliance of the neo-colonial state on imperial powers. This corresponds with Nkrumah's position that foreign aid in the context of neo-colonialism functions as a tool for exploitation rather than genuine development (Nkrumah, [1965](#)).

Neo-colonialism may also entail a shift in alliances among imperial powers. For instance, South Vietnam transformed from being a French colony to falling under the control of the United States during its neo-colonial era. Furthermore, a coalition of financial interests, rather than a singular nation, can exert neo-colonial dominance, as evidenced in Congo, where multiple imperial interests converge (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 239). In a neo-colonial state, foreign aid is frequently utilized to exploit local resources and advance the agenda of the imperial powers, rather than fostering authentic development. Investments in these states do not alleviate the wealth gap; instead, they frequently exacerbate it. Consequently, the battle against neo-colonialism revolves around empowering less developed nations to attain self-reliance and autonomy, rather than outright rejecting foreign aid (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 243).

Neo-colonialism is viewed as a notable menace to global peace as it perpetuates economic exploitation and political manipulation sans direct military conquest. Imperial powers favor neo-colonial arrangements as they enable control and advantages without the obligations linked to direct governance. This indirect wielding of power often leaves the neo-colonial states economically reliant and politically precarious (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 249). The practice of neo-colonialism frequently entails partitioning vast, viable territories into smaller, economically nonviable ones so that the post-colonial nations have to continuously depend on former colonial powers for development, security, and defense. This fragmentation obstructs these nations from attaining genuine independence and self-sustainability. Imperial powers profit from this setup by regulating prices of goods and upholding economic supremacy over these fragmented states (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 252).

The rivalry among imperial powers for dominion over neo-colonial states exacerbates these challenges. While ostensibly independent states may endeavor to affirm

their autonomy, they often remain ensnared in a cycle of dependence and exploitation. This persistent control and manipulation underscore the severe nature of neo-colonialism as a form of imperialism that subverts the authentic independence and progress of less developed nations (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 260). Therefore, neo-colonialism is a system in which a state's authorities act against the will of their constituents and instead follow the wishes of their imperial overlords. The neo-colonial state permanently depends on foreign aid since local industry, education, and living standards are not prioritized in favor of serving imperial objectives.

In light of Nkrumah's insightful perceptions, the present study would show how the neo-colonial aspects have been represented in the novel and, in particular, how General Zia-ul-Haq has used military powers to control the government of the country, which have given rise to a hectic situation where the people of Pakistan suffered a lot. By exploring the neocolonial elite's alignment with foreign interest, their religious manipulation, democratic deception, and authoritarian rule, this paper is to demonstrate how the new elites in Pakistan rule their countrymen, and how they have in fact brought the decolonized country into a neo-colonization.

## **2. From a De-Colonized State to a Neo-Colonized State**

### **2.1. The Rise of Neo-Colonial Elite and Their Alignment with Foreign Interests**

#### **2.1.1. Prioritizing Personal Gain over National Development**

*A Case of Exploding Mangoes* offers a rich insight into the intricate dynamics of how the decolonized Pakistan has descended into a neo-colonized one. The novel's critique begins with the depiction of the ruling elite. The baleful portrayal of General Akhtar Abdur Rehman underscores his image and status, since he always has 'half a dozen medals on his chest... as if he is the only man in the group who knows that they shouldn't be boarding this plane' (Hanif, 2008, p. 2). Obviously, as the head of Inter-Services Intelligence Akhtar prioritizes self-importance over the nation's well-being. As Nkrumah argues, the ruling elite in neocolonial states are often more concerned with maintaining their own power and status than with the welfare of their nations. 'The result of neocolonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world' (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 239).

Initially, Zia-ul-Haq governed through a council of military generals, later transitioning to civilian rule. During the first meeting concerning Pakistan's situation, Zia was uncertain about the trust and respect of the eight generals forming the council: 'how much the eight generals who formed his council trusted him or – more important – respected him' (Hanif, 2008, p. 37). Unlike Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Zia encircled mistrusted generals with trusted staff officers for their safe conduct. He meticulously managed the promotion and transfer of army officers, favoring religiosity and subservience over

professional talent, thereby undermining military norms. The ruling elite declared themselves religiously conservative, aligning closely with right-wing parties, and recruited conservative individuals over those from liberal military families, leading to a decline in liberal military recruitment and resignations among serving officers. Nkrumah highlights how neocolonial leaders manipulate internal structures to maintain control: 'The essence of neocolonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside' (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. ix).

The primary theme evident from the first conference summoned by General Zia was the generals' selection of who prioritized serving him over the country. The generals, which included the naval chief and chiefs of security agencies (such as Lieutenant General Faiz Ali Chishti, General Mehmood Arif, and General Ghulam Ali) were enticed by the prospect of 'lucrative cabinet posts' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 4), ensuring their unwavering loyalty to Zia. Although ostensibly concerned with the safety and affairs of the country, their foremost obligation was loyalty to Zia. The conference concluded with Zia-ul-Haq's comments that 'I need governors for the provinces, I need ministers to run the ministries. Who can I count on except the professionals gathered around this table?' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 43-44) Nkrumah criticizes the phenomenon where neocolonial rulers rely on patronage and loyalty rather than merit: 'The post-colonial State's economic system and political policy is manipulated by external interests through internal puppets' (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 45).

The incentives presented engendered a palpable sense of immediacy among the members of the council, as numerous individuals recognized the impending nature of their retirements alongside the potential for being designated to governmental roles. Zia's actions effectively shaped a ruling class predicated on loyalty to the chief martial administrator, undermining fairness in the process. Consequently, governance and official appointments were largely contingent on allegiance to the administration. 'In the neocolonial situation the population is controlled by a small group of local administrators who are often the only ones to benefit' (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 244). Here Nkrumah asserts that neocolonialism perpetuates a system where governance is compromised by loyalty to external powers and internal elites.

In addition, media was not free. In the news pictures, we often see the generals are engaged in serious discussion or community service, creating a misleading image that they were diligently working for the state and people's well-being. However, when describing the first conference in the novel, Hanif exposes the reality by penetrating the true inner feelings of Zia and his generals as self-interest over national welfare. 'Control of the mass media enables the neocolonial state to maintain its influence over the population by presenting a distorted image of the reality' (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 58). Hanif has vividly

illustrated how neocolonial states often suppress media freedom to maintain control and propagate their 'favorable' images.

Zia's interest in praise, like many other neo-colonial rulers, led his information minister to curate news that portrayed him favorably, with Zia eagerly reading headlines after public addresses. Notably, Zia even suggested nominating the Pakistan Times editor, who idealized his presidency, for a national literary award.

'He was particularly pleased with the three-picture strip idea that the Pakistan Times had come up with to illustrate the main points from the extempore part of his speech. First of all, I am a Muslim ... Then I am a soldier of Islam ... And then, as an elected head of the Muslim state, I am a servant ... tell the Information Minister to nominate the editor of the Pakistan Times for a national literary award' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 113-114).

Here the novel vividly describes how neocolonial rulers manipulate public perception to legitimize their authority. Just as Nkrumah pointed out, 'By controlling the information that reaches the public, the neocolonial state can maintain an image of benevolence and efficiency that conceals its exploitative practices' (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 97).

This constituted the extent of the president's focus at the time. He prioritized news about himself over state matters, leaving ministers with the sole duty of pleasing him, neglecting other national concerns. The neo-elite, controlling governmental affairs, remained indifferent to the populace's needs, prioritizing personal interests over national welfare. Their focus remained on self-preservation and fulfillment of personal wishes. Even after the death of Zia-ul-Haq, when Zia's son filed the case, many sought to exploit the political crises to secure 'lucrative cabinet posts' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 4), which exemplifies how these elites use political appointments as a means to secure loyalty and support. As Nkrumah exposed, 'neocolonialism is designed to keep the former colonial powers in control of the economies of the newly independent states, ensuring that local elites remain subservient to external interests' (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 31). Nkrumah's theory encapsulates this behavior, noting that neocolonialism ensures the perpetuation of power within a small group of elites, often at the expense of national development and the populace's welfare.

### **2.1.2. Subjugating National Interests to Foreign Agendas**

In the novel Hanif artistically depicts the ambitions of the ruling elite, especially their aspirations for elevated status. These ambitions compel all the generals to prioritize the interests of the Martial Law Administrator. Ostensibly, the custodians of the nation appear to be working towards Pakistan's advancement. However, their true focus is on legitimizing General Zia's presidency. Surrounded by individuals hungry for power and position, General Zia's entourage neglects the declining economic and democratic conditions. The military government's reliance on foreign aid fosters a sense of

complacency among its members, who benefit from their involvement in aid distribution. The generals understand that elevating one among them to the presidency would pave the way for others to attain significant power, 'second most powerful in the land' (Hanif, 2008, p. 224). Compared with direct colonial rule, neocolonialism is more implicit to detect and more difficult to combat. Consequently, neocolonialism 'affects every aspect of the life of the people, distorting national policies and promoting foreign interests' (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 239).

Foreign aid from imperialist states enables powerful nations to exert influence through their chosen ruling class in less developed countries. The United States and its allies funded Zia to undermine Russian forces in Afghanistan, distributing funds to mujahideen fighters. This exposes Zia's alignment with the United States to consolidate his power, even if it jeopardizes national security, such as the destabilization of the region through covert operations in Afghanistan against Russian forces, demonstrates the lengths to which these elites would go to align themselves with foreign interests. By prioritizing American interests in the region, Zia effectively becomes a 'puppet' for the US agenda, sacrificing national well-being for continued financial and political support. 'Foreign aid is often a disguised means of keeping a country in bondage, ensuring that its policies remain favorable to the interests of the donor country' (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 230). As depicted in the novel, they were 'running the logistics of guerrilla war in Afghanistan for General Zia...was liaising between the Americans who were funding the war and ISI, which was responsible for distributing these funds to the mujahideen' (Hanif, 2008, p. 141).

These neo-colonial elites, including President Zia-ul-Haq and his associates, put personal material interests under the guise of national saviors. They exchanged the country's interests for foreign gains, sacrificing the state apparatuses and services for cash. Ignoring the welfare of millions, they became puppets of foreign powers, fighting in Afghanistan without any regard for Muslim Afghan citizens. In fulfilling duties assigned by the USA and its allies, Pakistan's ruling elite jeopardized national security. Particularly, Pashtun society experienced radicalization, leading to increased intolerance and injustices. The proliferation of the Kalashnikov culture contributed to rising crime rates, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Karachi. Drug trade and consumption also surged, with the ruling elite profiting from smuggling and illegal drug sales. As Nkrumah observes, 'the neocolonial state may be in theory independent, but in reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside' (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 23). In short, the new elite in Pakistan were mere puppets manipulated by colonial powers. While the ruling elites reaped their benefits, colonial and imperial powers exploited their gains.

It is normal with the neocolonial rulers and elites that they always please their masters to gain personal benefits. Within such a setup, the ruling class usually becomes

mentally Westernized and adopts Western lifestyles and tastes. ‘Neocolonialism encourages the adoption of foreign cultural patterns by the ruling elite, who often become estranged from their own people’ (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 158). This is obviously manifested during Zia’s regime where the ruling class’s thinking was not native-centric. Zia’s imitation of his masters is visible in his first conference address to the generals where Zia-ul-Haq ‘mimicked the clipped English accent many of his generals preferred’ (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 41). Subsequently, his ruling undermined substantial changes for the country’s prosperity, remaining submissive to their masters and unable to make free decisions.

General Zia-ul-Haq meticulously maintained his wardrobe, cherishing both his sherwanis and military attire. His fixation on attire extended even to his counterparts, as evidenced during his visit to the US: ‘His host, his comrade in struggle, Joanne, would be here shortly, and just thinking about what she might be wearing and what she would smell like, made him nervous’ (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 121). Despite the crucial bilateral discussions awaiting him, his thoughts were consumed by his counterpart’s attire, indicative of his neo-colonial mindset. Viewing the American counterpart as a fellow struggler underscored Zia’s subservience to colonial powers, positioning himself merely as a conduit for their agendas. Nkrumah describes such leaders as ‘agents of foreign powers, whose primary concern is to ensure that the interests of their foreign masters are upheld’ (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 97).

Zia-ul-Haq choice of English language in the Nobel Prize ceremony is yet another illustration of pleasing the colonial masters as he preferred to speak English over Arabic. He might have opted for Arabic to please Allah and embody a genuine Muslim leader. This reflects Nkrumah’s assertion that ‘Neocolonial leaders often adopt the language and customs of their former colonial rulers to signify their allegiance and cultural alignment with the West’ (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 101).

### **2.1.3. The Neglect of National Security for Personal Safety**

In this novel, the author also insightfully exposes the self-serving nature of the elite by highlighting how they prioritize personal safety over national security. Nkrumah observed that ‘neocolonial leaders often prioritize their security over the national interest, using state resources to ensure their personal safety’ (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 147). In the late 1980s, Zia’s policies, both internal and regional, began to backfire which constructed threats to his security. Instead of addressing policy concerns, he confined himself to his military house in Rawalpindi. He even doubted the loyalty of his important generals, as evidenced in his request to General Akhtar about raising his security level. “‘Can you raise my security level?’ ‘Raise it to level red please’” (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 45), to which General Akhtar responded very enthusiastically. Intelligence agencies and defense authorities prioritized the security and well-being of General Zia, rather than addressing threats to the state or ensuring public safety. For instance, on November 21, 1981, Zia opted to ride a

bicycle to a market in Rawalpindi as part of a public relations effort. However, news circulated that the Kaaba, a holy site for Muslims, had been seized. In response, Zia attributed the incident to the United States, based on international radio transmissions. Consequently, security apparatuses redirected their focus to safeguarding Zia, neglecting broader security concerns and public safety measures. This is reflective of Nkrumah's assertion that 'under neocolonialism, the interests of the ruling class often diverge significantly from those of the general populace, with leaders focusing on their survival and comfort' (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 185).

The most sarcastic situation arose when ISI and other intelligence agencies on Zia's command were busy with unimportant duties such as National Cleanliness Week. 'If general Zia announced a National Cleanliness Week' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 197), all the important responsibilities armed forces and the intelligence agencies would become the second priority while the major concern was to make sure that the 'gutters were disinfected and security-checked before the President could show up to get his picture taken' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 224). This is exactly what Nkrumah severely criticized: 'neocolonial rulers divert state resources to trivial projects that enhance their public image rather than addressing the critical needs of the nation' (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 202).

Noticeably, national security is reduced to a tool for self-preservation, sacrificing the genuine concern for the safety and well-being of the Pakistani people. This prioritization of personal safety over national defense demonstrates the elite's indifference to the suffering of ordinary citizens. As Nkrumah states, the ruling elites are 'more concerned with its own survival than the development and security of the nation, leading to policies that benefit the rulers and foreign interests at the expense of the populace' (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 211).

## **2.2. The Use of Religion as a Tool of Deception**

### **2.2.1. Islam as a Facade for Power**

In the novel Zia's efforts of Islamization is portrayed as a carefully constructed facade, lacking genuine religious conviction. His focus is on outward displays of piety, such as public recitations and Islamic pronouncements, rather than on the core principles of Islam like social justice and accountability. The façade of Islamization is manifested through various events and characters. For instance, the novel depicts the influence of Zia's regime on the military, with characters such as General Zia-ul-Haq himself and General Akhtar. Additionally, Hanif satirizes the impact of Zia's policies on society, including the rise of religious extremism and the suppression of dissents. This aligns with the assertion that neocolonial leaders often adopt superficial religious or cultural measures to legitimize their rule while neglecting genuine developmental goals (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 89).

Zia skillfully manipulated religion to deceive the public for his personal desires.

He made use of religion at almost every event, publicly confessing his devotion yet failed to implement its true basic principles such as elites' accountability, fostering the country's socio-economic development, and ensuring the well-being of the people. Under the pretense of Islamization, he became the president and was revered as the Ameer ulMominoon.

"Was it Caliph Omar who used to go out at night disguised as a common man to see if his subjects lived in peace?" General Zia nodded his head. The First Lady really had a sense of history, he thought. He wouldn't mind being remembered as Caliph Omar the Second. 'Was he the one who said that even if a dog sleeps hungry on the banks of Euphrates, he'll never find salvation?' 'Yes,' General Zia said. His moustache did a little dance" (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 277).

Here, Islamic Penal Code execution worked as a tool of intimidation, allowing him to solidify his control over the country. The neocolonial leaders often invoke historical and cultural symbols to legitimize their authority.

General Zia felt more comfortable in the company of common people than in the presence of elites who discuss administration matters. Despite the public's adoration, as reflected in slogans like 'Mard-e-Momin, Mard-e-Haq, Ziaul-Haq, ZiaulHaq' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 187), he uses Islam to serve his and foreign interests rather than genuine religious objectives. His Islamization efforts were politically motivated, focusing on limited ordinances while excluding vast areas of politics and economics. Media censorship ensured a one-sided portrayal of the ruling elite, shielding the public from their true nature. This is consistent with Nkrumah's argument that neocolonial regimes often suppress dissent and manipulate media to maintain control (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 102). His public appearances were staged events lacking a genuine emotional connection with the people, often orchestrated using state resources. Zia's bicycle rides in Islamabad aimed to gauge public sentiment, influenced by Ceausescu's advice that, 'the key (to power) is they should either love you or fear you; your decline starts the day they become indifferent to you' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 275). This staging of public appearances to maintain a facade of concern and connection with the people insightfully exposes the performative nature of neocolonial leadership.

Zia trained the ruling class in such a way that the ruling elite could not understand the demands of the common people, 'You are a part of the reactionary bourgeois establishment which has never understood the dialectics of our history'. Events like 'National Cleanliness Week' exemplify this superficiality. 'Cleanliness is half the faith' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 166-167). 'If General Zia announced a National Cleanliness Week, General Akhtar had to make sure that the gutters are disinfected and security-checked before the President could show up to get his picture taken' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 224). This is a sarcastic critique of neocolonialism, where leaders focus on trivial projects to create an

illusion of progress while neglecting substantial reforms.

The above analysis showcases how Zia manipulates Islamic rhetoric to garner public support and suppress dissent while neglecting the religion's true essence. He uses Islamic rhetoric to delegitimize any criticism of his regime, portraying it as un-Islamic. By conflating his rule with Islam, Zia positions himself as the ultimate defender of the faith, 'Man of Faith, the Man of Truth' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 145), effectively discouraging dissent. This strategy of using ideological rhetoric to stifle opposition is a hallmark of neocolonial regimes. Anyone who questions his actions risks being labeled as un-Islamic, silencing potential opposition.

### **2.2.2. Selective Islamization for Power Preservation**

In *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, Hanif vividly depicts the targeted agenda behind Zia's Islamization efforts. He strategically crafts ordinances that strengthen his authority, and deliberately ignores issues that could potentially challenge his authority. This selective approach represents Zia's Islamization as a political maneuver rather than a sincere effort to establish an Islamic society. Zia's actions exemplify that neocolonial leaders often use ideological fronts to maintain control while ignoring fundamental societal issues.

The narrative highlights Zia's disregard for crucial Islamic principles in areas such as economic justice and military accountability. He favors actions that bolster his dominance while conveniently overlooking those that advocate for equality or transparency, as witnessed in the process of promotions, selections, elections, etc. 'You are a part of the reactionary bourgeois establishment which has never understood the dialectics of our history' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 167). Zia's selective application of Islamic principles is evident in his policies, which are designed to suppress dissent and reinforce his control. By instituting laws that promote his authority, such as the Hudood Ordinances, Zia ensures that the legal system serves his regime's interests rather than the public's. This selective Islamization is not aimed at creating a just society but at sustaining Zia's dominance of a few over the many.

Moreover, Zia's manipulation of religious sentiment to garner support and legitimize his rule can be seen as a tactic to distract from his regime's failures in other critical areas. By directing public attention to religious observance and moral policing, Zia diverts scrutiny from the lack of genuine socio-economic reforms and the pervasive corruption within his administration. Thus his Islamization in fact is merely a tool for political expediency, exploiting religion to solidify his regime's position while neglecting the fundamental tenets of Islamic justice and accountability. This strategy is often adopted by leaders of neocolonial nations to maintain control and suppress opposition (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 110).

### **2.2.3. Manipulation of Faith for Neo-Colonial Interests**

In *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, the drive of Zia's Islamization was not solely for

bolstering his rule within Pakistan but also served the agenda of foreign powers, mainly the United States, which considered Pakistan a crucial regional ally. The neocolonialism often entails the subjugation of national interests to foreign powers' agendas, with local elites facilitating this subjugation for personal gain (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 239). Zia's willingness to overlook violations of human rights in Afghanistan, prioritizing American interests despite contradictions with Islamic principles, exemplifies this manipulation. Serving foreign interests at the expense of national welfare is especially highlighted in the novel through the characters' actions and Zia's policies. 'You are a part of the reactionary bourgeois establishment which has never understood the dialectics of our history' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 167). To maintain power through foreign support, neocolonial rulers, much like Zia, often betray the very ideologies they profess to uphold.

Further, for the interests of Saudi Arabia, the United States and the generals, the Zia government radicalized Pakistani society in general and the Pashtun population in particular. For radicalization purposes, thousands of Islamic seminaries were established in the Pashtun areas as nurseries for producing cannon fodder for the war against the USSR in Afghanistan. This strategic manipulation of faith to produce ideological warriors is criticized by Nkrumah for its detriment of the local population (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 245).

Zia's Islamization policies, therefore, were not rooted in genuine religious fervor but were a calculated move to gain support from powerful foreign nations. By fostering radical elements within society, Zia ensured a steady supply of militants for the US-backed jihad in Afghanistan, thereby securing continued financial and military support from the United States. Driven by personal ambition, Zia manipulates religion to serve both his and foreign interests, to consolidate the elite's power as well as the external powers, thereby undermining true national sovereignty and development.

### **2.3. Democracy as a Pretense of Authoritarian Rule**

#### **2.3.1. Breach of Election Promises**

The novel opens by highlighting the self-serving nature of Zia's elites. In the novel, General Akhtar Abdur Rehman is the Director-General of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), a key player in the Afghan War, and a close confidante of President Zia. He is sarcastically described as weighed down by medals. 'On General Zia's left, his former spymaster and the head of Inter Services Intelligence Akhtar seems weighed down by half a dozen medals on his chest and drags his feet as if he is the only man in the group who knows that they shouldn't be boarding this plane' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 2). As a representative of the elites, he prioritizes personal gain over national service, forming a sharp contrast to the ideals of national service. This portrayal echoes Kwame Nkrumah's observation that neocolonial elites often focus on personal aggrandizement and maintaining their privileged positions rather than genuine national development (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 223).

In the nascent phases of General Zia's regime, a notable trend emerged that involved the elevation of loyalty above competence in significant appointments. Upon assuming the role of martial law administrator, Zia convened a crucial assembly in which he accentuated the necessity of appointing loyal generals to pivotal positions, frequently recompensing their fidelity with prominent cabinet roles. This transformation placed personal allegiance at the forefront instead of the considerations of national security. In the assembly, Zia openly declared 'I need governors for the provinces; I need ministers to run the ministries. Who can I count on except the professionals gathered around this table?' (Hanif, [2008](#), p. 43-44). These words of Zia highlight his dependence on a cadre of trusted officials rather than on a more extensive meritocratic selection framework. His strategic placement of loyalists is a classic neocolonial tactic, ensuring that the ruling elite remain indebted to the leader rather than the state, thus perpetuating a cycle of dependency and control (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 230).

The allure of rewards fostered a competitive atmosphere among council members, many of whom anticipated forthcoming retirements and aspired to secure appointments to esteemed governmental positions. Through the implementation of these practices, Zia nurtured a team of governing elites that was profoundly interconnected with personal loyalty, which subsequently had enduring ramifications on political frameworks. This emphasis on allegiance to the administration undermined democratic institutions, as official appointments and governance decisions increasingly depended on fidelity to the regime rather than on the observance of democratic tenets. This exactly mirrors Nkrumah's critique of how neocolonial regimes often undermine democratic institutions by placing loyalists in power, thus ensuring that the regime's interests are prioritized over those of the nation (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 236).

From the first day of martial law, Zia opened up a window of opportunity for his rule over the country. At this early stage of the coup, the casual observer had no real idea of the main purpose of General Zia. However, things seemed to be certain. Firstly, Zia promised to Bhutto that in 90 days he would again be prime minister only because Zia, on the basis of his intelligence report, was sure that Bhutto could not win the coming elections. Secondly, Zia had noted that the Islamic passion and sentiment had permeated the anti-Bhutto protests, and he would certainly exploit it to his advantage if such an occasion were to arise. Obviously, neocolonial leaders are often expertise at using populist rhetoric and unfulfilled promises to manipulate public sentiment and consolidate power (Nkrumah, [1965](#), p. 240).

The elections which he promised in 90 days to transfer powers to elected representatives of the people were not conducted until nine years later (in December 1984). This shattered promise illustrates the ruling elites' contempt for genuine democratic processes. Rigged in favor of Zia's regime, these elections were merely manipulated to

entrench the neo-colonial elites' grip on power. All the armed forces and intelligence agencies were skillfully used to control the electoral processes so as to maintain their hold on power which undoubtedly would undermine true democratic governance.

After the general non-party elections to the national and provincial assembly in 1985, Zia selected Muhammad Khan Junejo as the Prime Minister of Pakistan. As a puppet in the hands of President Zia, Junejo was not free in his decision; and under this new government, nothing has really changed. Through these maneuvers, Zia subverted the will of the people, ensuring the perpetuation of his authoritarian regime at the expense of genuine democratic governance, 'the key (to power) is they should either love you or fear you; your decline starts the day they become indifferent to you' (Hanif, 2008, p. 275). This scenario echoes Nkrumah's depiction of neocolonial regimes, where the facade of democracy is maintained while real power remains concentrated in the hands of a few, often manipulated by external powers.

### **2.3.2. Suppression of Political Opposition**

The novel mercilessly exposes how Zia manipulates political parties and how intelligence agencies are used to stifle dissents and control the political landscape. Any potential challenges to Zia's authority would be suppressed. Zia initially announced that election was to be held in October 1977, but later he postponed the election and started accountability of the politicians. In this process of accountability, he put Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto behind bars and later on managed to execute him via the judiciary by which he successfully removed a very big hurdle on his way to power. After executing a prominent politician of Pakistan, he again postponed the election in 1979 and declared that he would remain in power to Islamize Pakistani society with various excuses like 'law and order situation', 'accountability', and 'Islamization'. The election that he promised in 90 days was held until 9 years later. These elections were on non-party basis, and many politicians were deprived of being candidates for national assembly seats. He deliberately postponed the elections because he has foreseen the election might challenge his power. This unquenchable lust for power resulted in rigged elections after nine years, in which intelligence agencies and armed forces skillfully manipulate political parties to ensure Zia becoming the president of Pakistan through an unconstitutional referendum.

Generals in dictatorship work for the interests of colonial and imperial powers, disregarding the needs and concerns of the public. During Zia's regime, the ruling class was trained in a way to overlook people's demands, and the post-colonial elites often serve as proxies for external powers, prioritizing their own interests over those of the populace. This is evident in Zia's suppression of political opposition, manipulation of democratic processes, and aligning with the strategic interests of foreign powers, particularly the United States. By controlling the political landscape through rigged elections and the manipulation of political parties, Zia effectively ensured the continuation of his

authoritarian rule at the expense of genuine democratic governance and the well-being of the Pakistani people. As Nkrumah observes, post-colonial elites often maintain a system of dependency and exploitation, serving the interests of former colonial powers rather than those of their own citizens. Zia's regime exemplifies this dynamic, as he prioritized his own power and the interests of foreign powers over the democratic aspirations of the Pakistani people, thereby perpetuating a system of neocolonial domination.

### 2.3.3. Erosion of Democratic Institutions

In *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, Hanif paints a scathing picture of how democratic institutions were eroded under General Zia ul-Haq regime. General Zia's inner circle was comprised of generals chosen for their unwavering loyalty instead of their competence. As Zia proclaims, 'I need governors for the provinces; I need ministers to run the ministries. Who can I count on except the professionals gathered around this table?' (Hanif, 2008, p. 42). The prioritization of loyalty over merit has unavoidably weakened institutions, eroded democratic principles and undermined national development. Zia's Islamization efforts lacked genuine religious purpose; instead, it focused on limited ordinances that served his political agenda, as reflected in slogans like 'Mard-e-Momin, Mard-e-Haq, Ziaul-Haq, ZiaulHaq' (Hanif, 2008, p. 187), which politicized religion and betrayed trust in religious institutions, demonstrating how neocolonial powers often manipulate cultural and religious sentiments to maintain control.

In the same way, media under Zia's control becomes a tool for portraying the government in a positive light, which often misleads public perception, silences dissent ideas, and further weakens democratic accountability.

"How the hell am I supposed to know about civilians or what they think? All I know about them is from television or newspapers. On Pakistan National Television they are always singing our praises. The only newspaper that we get in the Academy is the Pakistan Times which on any given day has a dozen pictures of General Zia, and the only civilians who figure in it are the ones lining up to pay their respects to him. They never tell you about the nutters who want to spit at you'. ... 'These newspapers are full of what you said and what you did and who you met. And you are always here, lounging around the house. Don't I see enough of you that I shouldn't have to see you staring at me from every page of every single rag'" (Hanif, 2008, p. 164-166).

The media of neocolonial regimes create a facade of legitimacy while suppressing genuine public discourse. Zia's public appearances were carefully staged events which lacked genuine connection with the people, often orchestrated using state resources. This manipulation undermined the democratic ideals of leaders who are accountable to the public thus strengthening his authoritarian control, a characteristic feature of neocolonial regimes. Zia's bicycle rides in Islamabad also aimed to gauge public sentiment, influenced by Ceausescu's advice, 'Believe only ten percent of what your intelligence agencies tell

you about public opinion. The key (to power) is that they should either love you or fear you; your decline starts the day they become indifferent to you' (Hanif, 2008, p. 275). Such actions reflect the neocolonial strategy of maintaining power through superficial engagement with the populace while real decision-making remains centralized and unaccountable. To prioritizing positive media coverage over addressing national concerns, Zia even nominates the Pakistan Times editor for a national literary honor.

To ensure his continued rule, Zia commands the military and intelligence agencies to interfere elections. If General Zia wanted to become an elected president, General Akhtar not only had to ensure that ballot boxes were stuffed in time but was also expected to orchestrate spontaneous celebrations all over the country after the votes were counted' (Hanif, 2008, p. 223). After the assassination of General Zia in an airplane crash, elections were announced in the country, resulting in the formation of a weak democratic government. Throughout the 1990s, even under government selected by the people, the military and neo-elites still held significant power, marginalizing the voices of the people's representatives in key political areas, such as the military budget, military accountability, and relations with foreign countries, all of which profoundly affected Pakistan's social, economic, and political fabrics. 'The ruling classes are a part of the reactionary bourgeois establishment which has never understood the dialectics of our history' (Hanif, 2008, p. 167). The control of these essential areas by the ruling elites, instead of by the elected government, deprived the latter of addressing the needs, requirements, and welfare of its people.

This scenario, where local elites serve as proxies for foreign interests and where true democratic governance is subjugated, has completely marginalized the ordinary people in Pakistan. Once in June, General Zia was distributing cheques among the widows, showing off that the president is 'the Man of Faith, the Man of Truth' and 'the Friend of Widows'. At this sight, Hanif ironically 'praises' that General Zia-ul-Haq 'was busy playing the President' (Hanif, 2008, p. 144-145). It is evident that Zia's disregard for the public good stands in stark contrast to the core principles of democracy.

### 3. Conclusion

*A Case of Exploding Mangoes* offers profound insights into the enduring legacy of neo-colonialism in Pakistan, as exemplified by the interplay of the ruling elite with foreign interests, the strategic manipulation of religion for political gain, and the systematic erosion of democratic norms under authoritarian rule. Through the lens of Kwame Nkrumah's neo-colonial theory, we can better expose the intricate mechanisms through which the neo-colonial elite prioritize personal gains and political ambitions over national well-being, and exploit their positions of power to serve foreign interests. Characters such as General Akhtar Abdur Rehman and President Zia-ul-Haq are depicted as self-serving figures who team up with foreign powers to strengthen their control and subordinate

national interests to external agenda. The practice of enticing military officials with cabinet positions, manipulation in military promotions, and disregarding for national security in pursuit of personal well-being – all this illustrates the ruling class’s tendency to prioritize personal gain and power over the benefits of the ordinary populace. Furthermore, Zia’s strategic use of religion, apparently aimed at safeguarding Islamic principles, is exposed as politically motivated and self-centered, highlighting the misuse of faith by neocolonial elites to continue their dominance. Lastly, the deterioration of democratic standards under Zia’s regime is marked by electoral deception, political opposition repression, and deliberate stifling of opposition voices. By controlling elections, overpowering dissent, and destabilizing democratic institutions, the ruling elite prolonged their neo-colonial agenda, strengthening the progression of exploitation and subjugation.

In short, this novel is a powerful criticism of neo-colonialism in Pakistan, and it relentlessly reveals how the ruling elites emphasize self-interest, abuse religion, and weaken democratic norms to retain their authority. By exploring these themes, Hanif conveys a sarcastic critique of Pakistan’s political sphere due to the lasting influence of colonial legacies, highlighting the persistent need for extensive reform and genuine democratization.

#### 4. Declarations

##### Researcher’s Declaration of Academic Neutrality

I solemnly declare that the present research is an academic and literary investigation conducted in accordance with the principles of scholarly objectivity and ethical research practice. The study examines *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* as a literary text and analyzes the representations, themes, and ideological positions articulated by its author.

The novel presents particular perspectives on historical events, political developments, and military institutions. Any discussion of these representations within this research is undertaken exclusively for the purpose of literary and critical analysis. The interpretations offered in this study do not reflect the personal opinions, beliefs, affiliations, or political positions of the researcher.

The researcher acknowledges that literary texts often contain subjective, fictionalized, satirical, or critical portrayals of individuals and institutions. Consequently, references to such portrayals in this study are examined as textual and literary phenomena rather than as factual assertions or personal endorsements. The purpose of this research is to understand and evaluate the narrative and ideological dimensions of the novel within its literary and socio-cultural context.

Accordingly, this study should be read as an academic inquiry into the author’s representation of events and institutions, and not as an expression of support for or opposition to any individual, organization, institution, or state body. The researcher

remains committed to neutrality, fairness, and scholarly rigor throughout the research process.

**Conflict of interest**

There is no conflict of interest.

**Data availability**

Not applicable.

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