



**FEUDAL MODERNITY AND THE GOVERNANCE OF DEPENDENCY:
GOVERNMENTALITY, POLITICAL SOCIETY, AND PATRONAL RULE
IN DANIYAL MUEENUDDIN'S *THIS IS WHERE THE SERPENT LIVES***

Dr. Saleem Akhtar Dhera

Lecturer in English, Higher Education Department, Punjab, Pakistan.

Email: dherasaleemakhtar@gmail.com

Mudassar Javed Baryar (Corresponding Author)

*PhD Scholar English Literature, Department of Language and Literature, The
University of Faisalabad*

Email: 2025f-phd-el-004@tuf.edu.pk

Abstract

*This article argues that Daniyal Mueenuddin's *This Is Where the Serpent Lives* should be read not simply as a novel about class disparity or as a retrospective account of a residual feudal order, but as a literary anatomy of postcolonial governance in Pakistan. Rather than staging a familiar opposition between a traditional landed elite and an incomplete modern state, the novel depicts a hybrid political formation in which bureaucracy, landed authority, kinship, caste hierarchy, domestic service, police power, and entrepreneurial aspiration are deeply entangled. To illuminate this structure, the article brings Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality into dialogue with Partha Chatterjee's theorization of political society. This combined framework clarifies how the novel imagines rule not primarily through abstract legality or equal citizenship, but through the management of conduct by means of access, mediation, recognition, dependency, and selective coercion. The argument proceeds through the novel's major narrative arcs: Bayazid's incorporation into patronal service, Rustom Abdalah's encounter with infrastructural privilege and privatized violence, Hisham Atar's embodiment of feudal modernity, and Saqib's failed ascent through managerial competence and agrarian enterprise. Across these trajectories, Mueenuddin shows that roads, schools, telephones, ledgers, police stations, marriage negotiations, and household loyalties are not neutral instruments of modernization. They are socially differentiated technologies of rule. The article therefore contends that the novel's central achievement lies in exposing a postcolonial order in which elite power is neither premodern nor extra-state. It is modern, administratively mediated, and repeatedly secured through personal authority and sovereign force. By reading the novel through governmentality and political society, this study offers a more precise account of Pakistani social power than the broad and often static vocabulary of "feudalism" alone permits.*

Keywords: *governmentality; political society; patronage; feudal modernity; rural Punjab; postcolonial governance*

1. Introduction

Daniyal Mueenuddin's *This Is Where the Serpent Lives* is a major intervention in contemporary Pakistani English fiction because it treats social hierarchy not as a mere background condition but as a dynamic structure of rule. The novel moves from the bazaars of Rawalpindi to elite houses in Lahore and then to the estates, police stations, and agricultural zones of Punjab, tracing relations among abandoned children, chauffeurs, landlords, managers, gangsters, wives, policemen, and subordinates whose ambitions repeatedly collide with entrenched social power. What gives the novel its unusual force is that it does not isolate these



figures within separate moral worlds. It makes them legible as part of one connected order. Wealth, intimacy, coercion, mobility, and humiliation circulate through the same channels.

This point matters because the novel is too often grasped, at least at the level of first response, through the broad vocabulary of "feudal Pakistan." That language is not wholly inaccurate. Mueenuddin certainly depicts agrarian hierarchy, elite inheritance, labor dependency, and the durable asymmetry between landlord households and those who serve them. Yet the phrase remains conceptually blunt. It risks making the world of the novel appear static, premodern, or external to modern institutions. The novel itself argues otherwise. Its social order depends not only on land, kinship, and deference, but also on roads, telephones, police stations, school prestige, bureaucratic office, accounting systems, imported agricultural technologies, and access to politicians. Mueenuddin does not portray modern institutions as replacing patronage. He shows how they are absorbed into patronal rule.

The article's central intervention follows from this observation. I argue that *This Is Where the Serpent Lives* is best understood through an integrated framework drawn from Michel Foucault's governmentality and Partha Chatterjee's political society. Foucault helps explain how rule exceeds state repression in the narrow juridical sense and extends into the organization of conduct, space, aspiration, and useful subjectivity. Chatterjee helps explain how, in postcolonial contexts, large parts of collective life are not experienced through the ideal liberal grammar of equal citizenship, but through tactical accommodations, informal mediation, negotiated illegality, and unequal proximity to state power. Read together, these frameworks clarify the novel's deepest political insight: in Pakistan, modern administration and patronage do not form opposing systems. They form a hybrid regime of governance.

The article also responds to a methodological problem in the study of Pakistani anglophone fiction. Literary criticism on Mueenuddin's earlier work has often been strongest when exposing class domination, patriarchy, or subaltern vulnerability, yet those readings sometimes stop short of theorizing the specific mechanics through which domination is organized. A richer account is possible if the novel is read alongside political anthropology, South Asian state theory, and scholarship on Punjab's patronage networks. Such an approach does not reduce the novel to sociology. Rather, it takes seriously the novel's own insistence that the intimate and the institutional are inseparable.

The research problem addressed here is straightforward. Existing language for reading Mueenuddin, especially the highly recurring discourse of feudalism, often identifies hierarchy without fully explaining the changing institutional forms through which hierarchy persists. This article seeks to move the conversation from descriptive social diagnosis to a more analytically precise theory of rule. Its purpose is therefore not simply to state that the novel represents inequality, but to demonstrate how it dramatizes the management of dependency in a specifically postcolonial setting.

The article has four objectives. First, it situates *This Is Where the Serpent Lives* within ongoing scholarship on Pakistani English fiction, class, patronage, and subaltern representation. Second, it develops a combined theoretical model based on governmentality and political society. Third, it applies that model to the novel's major character arcs and narrative structures. Fourth, it explains why this integrated framework offers a stronger basis for publication-level literary analysis than a generalized appeal to feudalism alone.



The analysis is guided by three research questions. How does the novel represent governance beyond the frame of formal legality? In what ways do patronage, caste hierarchy, domestic service, and police coercion become mutually reinforcing? Why does the novel repeatedly depict ambition, education, and managerial competence as insufficient for durable social mobility?

The significance of the study lies in three related areas. First, it contributes to the still emerging body of scholarship on Mueenuddin's first novel by offering a sustained, article-length theoretical reading. Second, it brings literary study into conversation with political sociology, anthropology, and South Asian state theory, thereby widening the methodological horizons of Pakistani literary criticism. Third, it offers a framework that is especially suitable for journal publication because it links close reading to larger debates about postcolonial governance, mediated citizenship, agrarian power, and the reproduction of inequality.

My thesis is that *This Is Where the Serpent Lives* represents Pakistan as a space of feudal modernity in which governmentality and political society converge. The novel shows that roads, telephones, schools, police stations, ledgers, electoral access, household service, and kinship networks all belong to a single uneven field of rule. In that field, people are rarely governed as abstract citizens. They are governed as dependents, brokers, retainers, kin members, supplicants, or populations whose access to institutions is always mediated by social power.

2. Literature review

Scholarship on Daniyal Mueenuddin has understandably concentrated on *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, the collection that established his reputation as one of the most acute chroniclers of class, vulnerability, and moral compromise in Pakistani writing in English. That body of criticism has yielded useful insights into landlord culture, household hierarchy, and the precariousness of subordinate lives. Tariq's Marxist reading, for instance, interprets Mueenuddin's fictional Punjab as a structure of class domination in which exploitation is normalized and the lower strata remain trapped within oppressive social arrangements (Tariq, 2018). More recent work has extended that emphasis by examining false consciousness, hegemony, resistance, and gendered subordination in the collection (Afzal & Imran, 2023; Farid, 2025; Qureshi et al., 2024). Collectively, these readings have demonstrated that Mueenuddin's world is shaped by asymmetrical relations of labor, desire, and dependence.

Yet there is a conceptual limit to much of this criticism. The dominant vocabulary remains tied to feudalism, class oppression, patriarchy, or subaltern suffering. Those frames are valuable, but they can also become static. They often explain who dominates whom without fully explaining how modern institutions become part of the machinery of domination. This limitation becomes especially visible in *This Is Where the Serpent Lives*, where power is not only lodged in landownership or family prestige. It is routed through roads, police offices, elite schools, district administrations, imported farm technologies, and managerial accounting. The novel therefore asks for a framework capable of reading administration, mobility, and coercion together.

A second cluster of scholarship on Pakistani anglophone writing offers a broader literary context. Studies of Pakistani fiction in English have repeatedly emphasized the way such texts negotiate nation, state, Islam, class, and uneven modernity (Cilano, 2013; Kanwal & Aslam, 2019). This work is important because it resists the reduction of Pakistani literature to a limited repertoire of terrorism, extremism, or geopolitical crisis. Instead, it shows that Pakistani novels



in English frequently stage national life through disputes over belonging, authority, memory, and state formation. Mueenuddin's novel fits powerfully within this field, but it also narrows the scale from the abstract nation to the intimate infrastructures of rule. It asks how the state is encountered in the household, on the estate, through the police station, and in the everyday making of deference and aspiration.

A third and indispensable body of literature comes from political sociology and anthropology on Pakistan and Punjab. Alavi's seminal work on the postcolonial state in Pakistan and Bangladesh remains foundational for understanding how state formation in South Asia is inseparable from inherited elite structures and asymmetrical class power (Alavi, 1972). Jalal (1995), Waseem (1994), Wilder (1999), Lieven (2011), Lyon (2004), and Martin (2015) all demonstrate, in different registers, that Pakistani politics cannot be understood through constitutional form alone. Kinship, landed influence, local brokerage, patron-client ties, and coercive mediation continue to shape access to public institutions. Mohmand and Gazdar (2007) and Usman (2016) further show that biradari and rural hierarchy remain deeply consequential in Punjab, especially in relation to political participation, social standing, and the mediation of claims. This scholarship provides the social backdrop against which Mueenuddin's fictional world becomes legible. The novel does not invent those arrangements. It renders their experiential texture.

Clientelism and patronage studies are equally relevant. Scott's classic formulation of patron-client politics identifies vertical dyadic ties as a central means by which unequal societies organize dependency and reciprocal obligation (Scott, 1972). Platteau's work on evolving patron-client ties in agrarian economies demonstrates that such relations do not disappear with modernization; instead, they often adapt to new economic and institutional conditions (Platteau, 1995a, 1995b). Auyero's work on political mediation likewise underscores that clientelism should be studied not merely as corruption but as a lived system of problem-solving, access, and political subject formation (Auyero, 2001). These studies illuminate a key feature of Mueenuddin's novel: dependence is never only coercive. It is also affective, aspirational, and infrastructural.

The theoretical literature on governmentality and postcolonial governance further sharpens the argument. Foucault's later work shifts attention from the state as a purely juridical apparatus to the dispersed rationalities through which conduct is shaped, populations are managed, and life is administered (Foucault, 1991, 2007, 2008). Governmentality has since been developed by scholars such as Dean (2010), Rose (1999), Lemke (2001), and Gordon (1991), who have shown how liberal and neoliberal orders govern not only through law but through normalization, expertise, and self-management. However, political society, as theorized by Chatterjee (2004), complicates the universalizing assumptions of this model by insisting that in much of the postcolonial world people do not stand before the state primarily as rights-bearing citizens. They often negotiate their existence through tactical claims, brokers, group identities, and administrative exceptions. Corbridge et al. (2005), Gupta (2012), Ferguson and Gupta (2002), Hansen and Stepputat (2001), Mitchell (1991), and Migdal (2001) all contribute to this wider effort to think the state as socially embedded, spatially uneven, and entangled with informal power.



What remains underdeveloped is the application of these debates to recent Pakistani literary fiction. Literary texts often register the emotional, symbolic, and domestic dimensions of rule more acutely than sociological prose. *This Is Where the Serpent Lives* is especially important in this regard because it does not merely describe the gap between rich and poor. It shows how that gap is managed, reproduced, and periodically enforced. The present article addresses that gap in scholarship by arguing that the novel is a literary study of postcolonial governance, not simply a representation of social hierarchy.

3. Theoretical framework

Foucault's concept of governmentality provides the first half of the article's framework. Governmentality directs analysis away from a narrow focus on sovereign command and toward the broader management of conduct. It names a field of institutions, calculations, procedures, and habits through which subjects are shaped and populations administered (Foucault, 1991, 2007). What matters for literary analysis is not whether a text explicitly references policy or bureaucratic doctrine, but whether it shows how lives are ordered through training, aspiration, differentiation, supervision, and managed opportunity. Governmentality is therefore useful for reading schools, households, estates, and workplaces as sites in which people learn to inhabit ranked positions and to regulate themselves accordingly.

This aspect of Foucault is particularly illuminating for Mueenuddin's novel. Bayazid learns discipline, service, and social mimicry long before he gains anything that resembles formal citizenship. Saqib becomes a highly efficient manager precisely because he internalizes elite expectations and seeks to make himself worthy of recognition. In both cases, subordination does not persist only because force exists in the background. It persists because aspiration itself has been structured. Characters strive upward, but they do so within normative horizons set by those already in power.

Yet governmentality alone is not enough. Foucault's account emerged from European histories of state reason, liberalism, and biopolitics. While it is productive for understanding conduct and management, it can understate the uneven and often improvised character of rule in postcolonial settings. This is where Chatterjee's concept of political society becomes essential. Chatterjee argues that large numbers of people in postcolonial democracies do not live their political existence inside the polished realm of civil society, where autonomous citizens supposedly engage the state through transparent rights and institutions (Chatterjee, 2004). Instead, they encounter the state as populations whose claims must be mediated, negotiated, regularized, or tactically accommodated. Their inclusion is often contingent and collective rather than universal and abstract.

Political society is especially apt for a Pakistani novel that repeatedly shows institutions functioning through proximity, not impartiality. In *This Is Where the Serpent Lives*, the police do not stand outside society as neutral enforcers. Roads do not emerge as universal public goods. Telephones, administrative access, and even police restraint are all filtered through patronage and rank. Political society makes it possible to describe this not as a mere failure of modernity but as a patterned mode of postcolonial governance.

The two theories together produce what I call feudal modernity. This term does not mean that Pakistan remains unchanged from an earlier agrarian past. Nor does it mean that modernity is superficial. On the contrary, the novel is deeply modern. Its world contains imported



technologies, elite schools, transnational education, entrepreneurial agriculture, parliamentary office, bureaucratic files, and coercive policing. What makes this modernity distinct is that those institutions are socially absorbed into older structures of patronage, kinship, and sovereign privilege. Feudal modernity names a historical formation in which modern infrastructures and administrative mechanisms intensify, rather than dissolve, asymmetrical personal power.

This combined framework is stronger than a generic feudalism thesis for three reasons. First, it explains why power in the novel survives through modern institutions rather than outside them. Second, it captures the text's constant movement between affective dependence and institutional coercion. Third, it allows the analysis to move beyond class as a static category and toward the processes by which subjects are made governable.

4. Methodology

This study uses qualitative textual analysis grounded in close reading, theoretical interpretation, and socio-historical contextualization. It does not treat the novel as documentary evidence of Pakistan, nor does it claim that literature transparently mirrors social reality. Instead, it approaches the novel as a literary construction that condenses, intensifies, and interprets historically recognizable forms of power. The method is therefore interpretive rather than empirical. Its central task is to identify recurring motifs, narrative structures, institutional settings, and symbolic patterns through which the text imagines rule.

Close reading remains the primary method. The article pays particular attention to short textual moments in which the novel reveals how authority operates through mediation, infrastructure, aspiration, and coercion. These include scenes of Bayazid's adoption into work, Rustom's confrontation with estate violence, Saqib's managerial ascent, the police torture sequence, and Gazala's plea to Shahnaz. These moments are not treated as isolated set pieces. They are read as nodes in a broader structure of governance that extends across the novel's linked narrative arcs.

At the same time, the analysis is contextual. The novel is situated within scholarship on Pakistan's postcolonial state, Punjab's patronage structures, biradari-based social organization, and agrarian political economy. This contextualization does not collapse fiction into sociology. It serves a more limited and precise purpose: to show that the novel's representation of personalized state access, infrastructural privilege, and coercive mediation is historically and politically intelligible.

Finally, the study is deliberately interdisciplinary. It draws on literary criticism, political theory, anthropology, and South Asian studies because the novel itself crosses those domains. Its world is at once domestic, institutional, affective, and political. A method restricted to formal literary description would miss the novel's larger argument about governance; a method reduced to social science would miss the texture and irony through which that argument is made. The article therefore adopts an interdisciplinary close-reading method designed for publication in literary and cultural studies.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Bayazid and the making of dependent subjects

The novel's first great lesson in governance appears in the story of Bayazid. Abandoned in Rawalpindi, he is introduced not simply as a victim of poverty but as a life for whom formal protection is minimal and uncertain. When Karim Khan goes to the police station, he finds the



duty officer "quite uninterested in a street boy's troubles" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 13). This brief phrase is crucial. The state is not absent, but it is not meaningfully available. Bayazid's survival does not begin in the sphere of public welfare or rights-bearing citizenship. It begins through informal incorporation into a small regime of work, supervision, food, and discipline.

Karim Khan does not adopt Bayazid as a son in any sentimental or legally transformative sense. Instead, the boy is treated "not like a son, perhaps, but like a cherished apprentice" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 13). That distinction is politically revealing. Bayazid is brought inside a paternal order that secures him while also assigning him a place. His safety depends on usefulness. He enters the world not as an autonomous subject but as a dependent one. Governmentality becomes visible here in miniature: labor, routine, and proximity to authority form the conditions of life.

This early incorporation also trains Bayazid in social perception. He learns not only to work but to read hierarchy. When he observes the students of Nizamuddin College, they appear "very conscious of their uniforms and their elite status" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 15). The sentence captures how institutions distribute symbolic capital before they distribute formal opportunity. Uniforms, schooling, speech, and bodily assurance mark some lives as already authorized. Bayazid is drawn to these signs, studies them, and seeks to imitate them. His aspiration is therefore not merely economic. It is pedagogical and embodied. He is learning how power looks.

This is why Bayazid's later proverb is so politically resonant. When he remarks that "whoever holds the whip owns the buffalo" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 26), he condenses an entire social theory of Pakistan into one line. The remark is not a cynical rejection of politics. It is an experiential understanding of rule as control over the means of compulsion and mediation. What matters is not formal rhetoric about progress or reform but who actually commands the field in which ordinary people must live. The proverb anticipates the argument of the entire novel. Ownership is less important than enforceable control.

Bayazid's trajectory also shows that mobility under patronal order is always compromised by intimacy with power. He can rise through service, refine himself, gain access, and move closer to elites, but the terms of that movement are never his to define. He is shaped by what Rose (1999) would call the making of an enterprising self, except that in Mueenuddin's Pakistan enterprising conduct never becomes fully autonomous. It remains tethered to patronage. Bayazid's life therefore demonstrates a foundational principle of feudal modernity: the subordinate subject is not excluded from modernity but included on unequal terms.

5.2 Infrastructural privilege and estate sovereignty

If Bayazid's story shows how a subject is made governable, Rustom Abdallah's narrative shows how territory itself is governed through selective infrastructure. The Duniapur estate is introduced not simply as inherited land but as a privileged enclave within the administrative geography of Punjab. The novel notes that when Mian Abdullah rose in state service, "a knee-bending district administration metaled the road" to the estate and pushed a telephone line to the farmhouse, "the first phone on any farm in the district" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 49). The significance of this detail cannot be overstated. The road and telephone are not neutral signs of development. They are state resources personalized through elite proximity.

The effect is reinforced when the novel describes the wire as serving "for all the area as a symbol of the Duniapur estate's preeminence" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 49). Infrastructure here



becomes heraldic. It does not merely connect space; it marks rank. Corbridge et al. (2005) argue that state presence in South Asia is often experienced unevenly through roads, offices, schemes, and local intermediaries rather than as a uniform juridical order. Mueenuddin turns that insight into literary image. The wire crossing "many forlorn miles" is a material line of privilege, a visible reminder that administrative capacity has been bent toward one family's authority.

The estate residence itself deepens this logic. It is "built in the style of a British colonial dak bungalow" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 49), an architectural detail that links present privilege to colonial spatial forms. The point is not simply decorative. The novel suggests that postcolonial authority has inherited, adapted, and domesticated older imperial infrastructures of command. What appears as private landed life is already saturated with state history. The estate is a governmental enclave, not a survival outside government.

Rustom initially imagines that estate management can be brought under rational and lawful control. He worries about finances, visits the deputy superintendent of police, and attempts to address theft through formal channels. Yet the novel steadily reveals the limits of this belief. The police office is shabby and theatrical at once, marked by a gaudy portico and symbols of official dignity. Bureaucracy appears as performance before it appears as legality. Soon the deeper truth is stated with brutal clarity: "under their uniforms the police are cousins to the thieves" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 65). This line crystallizes the novel's theory of political society. The police are neither simply criminal nor simply lawful. They occupy a relational field where legality, kinship, interest, and violence overlap.

Rustom's dilemma is therefore not merely that the countryside is corrupt. It is that the estate cannot be governed through abstract proceduralism alone. Violence is privatized, inherited, and available through families like Sheikh Sarkar's. When the driver later tells Rustom to "take control" because "then you'll have the police to do these jobs" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 76), the novel makes plain that official force is itself a patronal resource. The crucial follow-up, that "they know how much to do and how much not to" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 76), is chilling because it treats calibrated violence as professional expertise. In this order, police legitimacy lies not in impartiality but in controlled brutality.

This is precisely where Chatterjee's political society becomes illuminating. Populations and subordinates do not encounter the police as equal citizens before law. They encounter them through mediated power, personal access, and graded vulnerability. Rustom's foreign education does not free him from this structure. It simply delays his recognition that modern administration and privatized coercion are mutually sustaining rather than mutually exclusive.

5.3 Hisham Atar and feudal modernity

If Rustom reveals the governmental estate, Hisham Atar embodies the social form that rules it. Hisham is not a residue of premodern landlordism. He is the fully modernized landlord-politician. The principal characters page identifies him as educated at elite institutions, a member of the National Assembly, a landowner, and an industrialist (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. xii). Even if this information appears in paratextual form, it matters because the novel frames Hisham from the outset as a composite elite figure whose authority extends across parliamentary, economic, agrarian, and domestic domains. He is not the opposite of the state. He is one of the ways the state becomes socially embodied.



This embodiment is central to the article's argument. Hisham's power is neither reducible to brute coercion nor limited to symbolic prestige. He commands by inhabiting multiple institutions at once. He is legible in the language of property, parliament, business, urban civility, and rural authority. This is why the concept of feudal modernity is especially apt. Hisham's authority survives not because modernity has failed to arrive, but because modernity has arrived in a class-differentiated form that enriches inherited privilege.

The domestic world around Hisham also reveals how governance exceeds public office. His house runs through service hierarchies, codes of decorum, affective performances, and carefully maintained distinctions between those who belong and those who assist belonging. Bayazid and Saqib occupy positions in this world that are intimate but not equal. The household is therefore neither private refuge nor mere lifestyle setting. It is a site of rule. As Gupta (2012) reminds us, bureaucratic and structural violence are often encountered through mundane routines and relational expectations rather than only through spectacular state events. Mueenuddin shows the same dynamic within elite domesticity.

The Hisham-Shahnaz world also demonstrates how elite rule depends on cultural competence. Taste, schooling, speech, and bodily ease are not superficial features of this world. They are technologies of exclusion and authorization. What Bayazid once admired in the schoolboys of Rawalpindi reaches its fullest form in Lahore's drawing rooms and estate houses. Hisham's legitimacy is social before it is juridical. His name can travel through institutions because it is already installed within a network of prestige.

At the same time, the novel does not romanticize elite polish. It persistently reveals the coercive underside of Hisham's order. The same networks that secure civility can activate police violence. The same household that cultivates elegance can determine a subordinate's future. Hisham's modernity is therefore not liberal. It is managerial, paternal, and sovereign by turns. He exemplifies the novel's central claim that postcolonial elite authority in Pakistan is both bureaucratically enabled and personally concentrated.

5.4 Saqib, aspiration, and managerial governmentality

Saqib's arc is the novel's most searching inquiry into ambition under patronal rule. Unlike Bayazid, whose early life is defined by abandonment and apprenticeship, Saqib appears as a subject especially attuned to modern improvement. He is diligent, observant, numerate, and capable of administrative growth. He learns how elite households function, how estates are supervised, how agricultural projects are organized, and how profits might be generated. In a more conventional social novel, these qualities might underwrite a narrative of meritocratic ascent. Mueenuddin deliberately refuses that logic.

What the novel shows instead is that Saqib's competence develops inside a governmental regime of recognition. In one of the most important sentences in the book, Saqib is described as being moved by a "desire for their approbation" and by "his will to please" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 230). The force of this line lies in its inwardness. Saqib is not merely supervised from above. He has internalized the desire to become worthy in the eyes of those who rule him. Governmentality here is not an abstract theory but a felt structure of aspiration. He disciplines himself because approval has become a value around which his sense of possibility is organized.

This desire is not trivial or merely emotional. It is materially productive. Saqib becomes useful precisely because he can anticipate elite standards, manage spaces, and convert household



discipline into managerial capacity. He crosses from domestic labor to agricultural responsibility, but the transition does not free him from dependence. It deepens it. His authority on the estate is delegated authority. He appears empowered because he has become a competent instrument of someone else's project.

The scene in which Saqib tells Shahnaz, "You taught me to hope for more" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 234), is therefore one of the novel's most revealing moments. Hope itself has been pedagogically produced inside elite domestic culture. Saqib's imagined future, including his wish to marry differently and live differently, emerges through exposure to the Atars' world. He explicitly claims that "a different life is possible" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 234), yet the sentence does not announce autonomy. It reveals how the horizon of a different life has been authorized by patrons. His aspiration is real, but it remains socially curated.

This is where Rose's work on subject formation and Dean's account of power as rule through freedom become especially useful (Dean, 2010; Rose, 1999). Saqib is encouraged to improve, to manage, to calculate, and to expand his capacities. But these freedoms are conditional. They are freedoms inside hierarchy, not beyond it. He is invited to become more capable, but not fully independent. Governmentality, in this sense, does not repress initiative. It organizes it.

The Warraich episode clarifies the political economy of this arrangement. Agrarian modernization in the novel is linked to tunnel farming, imported materials, manipulated accounts, and the skimming of commissions. Saqib's entry into this world marks his movement into a form of entrepreneurial governmentality in which calculation, innovation, and deception are intertwined. He is no longer simply serving tea or carrying bags. He is handling inputs, invoices, margins, and projections. Yet this apparent modernization does not dismantle patronage. It becomes its contemporary vehicle. Sanyal's work on postcolonial capitalism is instructive here, because it shows how capitalist expansion and governmental management can coexist with persistent exclusion and uneven incorporation (Sanyal, 2007). Saqib's upward motion belongs to exactly such a world.

His tragedy is not that he misreads morality alone. It is that he misreads the structure of mobility. He begins to believe that managerial competence and entrepreneurial cunning can convert delegated trust into autonomous rise. The novel insists otherwise. Usefulness to power is not the same as emancipation from power. The distinction is the central lesson of Saqib's story.

5.5 Police torture, biradari, and sovereign correction

The sequence of Saqib's arrest and torture constitutes the novel's most devastating exposure of how governmentality gives way to naked sovereign force. Up to this point, the novel has shown how subjects are shaped through work, desire, recognition, and delegated responsibility. The police sequence reveals what happens when that disciplinary order no longer suffices. At this point, the managed subordinate becomes a punishable body.

Inspector Janjua's statement that "The Punjab Police is like my mother and father" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 292) is one of the most revealing sentences in the novel. The line collapses institution, kinship, masculinity, and personal honor into a single identification. The police officer speaks not as a neutral servant of law but as someone whose own symbolic parentage is fused with the institution he represents. The result is not legal sobriety but wounded



proprietorship. The police appear as a family order that demands affective allegiance and punishes disrespect.

The torture itself is important, but so is the explanation that accompanies it. Janjua's next taunt, "Where the fuck is your biradri?" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 293), exposes the underlying social logic of protection. Saqib has risen in usefulness and visibility, yet when he is trapped inside the police station he discovers that delegated importance is not the same as collective backing. His partial separation from ordinary village solidarities has left him vulnerable. Usman's work on marginalized voters in rural Punjab and Lyon's ethnography of patronage both help explain this structure: biradari is not merely an old-fashioned social residue; it remains a channel of standing, pressure, and mediated access (Lyon, 2004; Usman, 2016). Mueenuddin turns that sociological insight into a scene of existential exposure.

What the inspector means is brutally clear. A fruit seller with the right biradari backing, he implies, would already have people outside the station. Saqib has competence, proximity to wealth, and delegated authority, but not secure protection. He has entered elite circuits without ever becoming safe inside them. The line therefore dismantles the meritocratic fantasy at the heart of his ascent. In moments of crisis, the novel suggests, people are sorted not by capacity but by the strength of the networks that can claim them.

The police sequence also completes the article's theoretical argument. Governmentality explains how Saqib was trained, motivated, and made useful. Political society explains why his access to institutional restraint remains contingent and mediated. But the torture scene reveals a third dimension that the novel never lets us forget: sovereign correction remains available whenever needed. Rule in this world is not exhausted by the management of conduct. It retains the power to break bodies. Hansen and Stepputat (2001) argue that the postcolonial state often combines dispersed governmental techniques with spectacular assertions of sovereign force. Janjua's police station is exactly such a site.

The sequence also retroactively transforms earlier scenes. Rustom's discovery that the police are linked to thieves, the driver's advice that police know "how much to do and how much not to" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 76), and Hisham's broader access to state channels all converge here. The torture of Saqib is not an exception to the order the novel has described. It is the truth of that order, revealed when mediation becomes punishment.

5.6 Domestic mediation and gendered brokerage

The last movement of the novel is especially important because it prevents the analysis from becoming too narrowly masculinist. Although the dominant networks of public force are male-coded, the novel insists that domestic mediation is central to the circulation of power. Gazala's appeal to Shahnaz makes this plain. She does not go to a court, an NGO, or an abstract legal forum. She goes to the woman whose position within the patronal household gives her the capacity to intervene. Her plea is effective because household sovereignty and political society overlap.

Shahnaz's eventual response, "For your child, then. Saqib will not be harmed. He will be released" (Mueenuddin, 2026, p. 310), is one of the novel's most revealing acts of elite mercy. It is also a political act. Saqib's release does not occur because due process has prevailed. It occurs because domestic intercession has activated a chain of influence. Political society, in other



words, includes the drawing room, the wife, the child, and the household relation. The public and private are not separate domains. They are linked sites of brokerage.

This scene also complicates simplistic accounts of women in the novel. Shahnaz is not outside patriarchy, but she is not powerless within it. Her authority is relational, classed, and domestic, but it is real. Gazala likewise is not merely a victimized wife. She is a tactical actor who recognizes that in this order justice must often be translated into plea, kinship, and embodied appeal. Her strategy is not liberal, but it is politically astute.

Feminist literary criticism on Mueenuddin has already shown that domestic spaces in his fiction are saturated with gendered labor and asymmetrical vulnerability (Afzal & Imran, 2023; Farid, 2025). This novel extends that insight by showing that domestic femininity can also become a mediating force within patronal rule. Such mediation is limited and unequal, but it matters. It underscores the article's larger claim that governance in the novel is never reducible to formal institutions. It is carried through relationships, gestures, dependencies, and appeals that move between household and state.

6. Discussion

Taken together, the novel's major arcs produce a coherent political theory of Pakistan. Bayazid's abandonment shows that formal institutions are weak or indifferent for those without mediation. Rustom's estate world shows that infrastructure and administration are distributed through elite proximity. Hisham Atar exemplifies the modern landlord whose authority is simultaneously economic, political, social, and domestic. Saqib demonstrates how aspiration can be cultivated as a mode of rule while remaining vulnerable to abrupt sovereign correction. Gazala and Shahnaz reveal that even mercy circulates through patronal channels rather than universal rights.

This is why the article insists on feudal modernity as a more useful term than feudalism alone. Feudalism, as often used in literary criticism, tends to imply stagnation, archaism, or a social order not yet transformed by modern institutions. Mueenuddin's novel shows something more unsettling. Modern institutions have arrived, but their distribution and use are classed, mediated, and frequently coercive. Roads, telephones, police, ledgers, school prestige, and agrarian technology do not democratize the social field. They sharpen its asymmetries.

The synthesis of governmentality and political society is productive precisely because it can register both the soft and hard forms of this rule. Governmentality clarifies how the novel's subordinate figures are disciplined through work, aspiration, intimacy, and delegated responsibility. Political society clarifies why their access to law, protection, and mobility remains contingent upon brokers, patrons, and social embeddedness. Together the two concepts explain why subjects in the novel are neither wholly excluded nor securely included. They are differentially governed.

The article also contributes to the study of Pakistani English fiction in a broader sense. Much scholarship on the field has rightly emphasized national crisis, ideological contestation, religion, gender, migration, and violence. Mueenuddin's novel adds another crucial dimension: the administration of inequality. It shows how social reproduction occurs not only through spectacular oppression but through the ordinary routing of institutions toward elite advantage. This is a point with implications beyond one novel. It suggests that Pakistani literary criticism



may benefit from taking governance itself, rather than merely the state as an abstract theme, as a central object of analysis.

7. Conclusion

This Is Where the Serpent Lives should be read as a major Pakistani novel of governance. Its importance lies not simply in representing class disparity, landlord culture, or social cruelty, but in revealing the techniques through which dependency is organized and reproduced. Mueenuddin's Pakistan is neither a simple survival of premodern hierarchy nor an incomplete copy of liberal modernity. It is a social order in which modern infrastructures and institutions are absorbed into patronal networks, caste hierarchies, domestic arrangements, and coercive force.

An integrated framework of governmentality and political society makes that order legible. Governmentality explains how Bayazid and Saqib are shaped through discipline, aspiration, and delegated opportunity. Political society explains why access to protection, legality, and mobility remains mediated through patrons, biradari, and unequal proximity to the state. The novel's recurring movement from household intimacy to police violence, from administrative calculation to bodily vulnerability, confirms that these are not separate systems. They are parts of one postcolonial regime of rule.

The novel therefore offers more than social description. It offers a theory of feudal modernity. Roads, telephones, schools, account books, parliamentary office, marriage negotiations, and police stations all become instruments in the governance of unequal life chances. Elite authority survives not by resisting modernity, but by inhabiting it. That is the novel's most unsettling claim, and it is why *This Is Where the Serpent Lives* deserves sustained attention within Pakistani literary studies, postcolonial theory, and the wider study of literature and power.

References

- Afzal, I., & Imran, R. (2023). Gender dynamics in Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*: A textual analysis. *Kashmir Journal of Language Research*, 26(2), 29-46.
- Alavi, H. (1972). The state in post-colonial societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh. *New Left Review*, 74, 59-81.
- Auyero, J. (2001). *Poor people's politics: Peronist survival networks and the legacy of Evita*. Duke University Press.
- Burchell, G., Gordon, C., & Miller, P. (Eds.). (1991). *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality*. University of Chicago Press.
- Chatterjee, P. (2004). *The politics of the governed: Reflections on popular politics in most of the world*. Columbia University Press.
- Cilano, C. (2013). *Contemporary Pakistani fiction in English: Idea, nation, state*. Routledge.
- Corbridge, S., Williams, G., Srivastava, M., & Veron, R. (2005). *Seeing the state: Governance and governmentality in India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dean, M. (2010). *Governmentality: Power and rule in modern society* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Farid, S. (2025). A Marxist feminist analysis of Daniyal Mueenuddin's short story 'In Other Rooms, Other Wonders'. *The Journal of Contemporary Social Sciences*, 3(1), 40-46.
- Ferguson, J., & Gupta, A. (2002). Spatializing states: Toward an ethnography of neoliberal governmentality. *American Ethnologist*, 29(4), 981-1002.



- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. In H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (2nd ed., pp. 208-226). University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 87-104). University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977-1978* (M. Senellart, Ed.; G. Burchell, Trans.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979* (M. Senellart, Ed.; G. Burchell, Trans.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gordon, C. (1991). Governmental rationality: An introduction. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 1-51). University of Chicago Press.
- Gupta, A. (2012). *Red tape: Bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in India*. Duke University Press.
- Hansen, T. B., & Stepputat, F. (Eds.). (2001). *States of imagination: Ethnographic explorations of the postcolonial state*. Duke University Press.
- Jalal, A. (1995). *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia: A comparative and historical perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kanwal, A., & Aslam, S. (Eds.). (2019). *Routledge companion to Pakistani anglophone writing*. Routledge.
- Lemke, T. (2001). The birth of bio-politics: Michel Foucault's lecture at the College de France on neo-liberal governmentality. *Economy and Society*, 30(2), 190-207.
- Lieven, A. (2011). *Pakistan: A hard country*. PublicAffairs.
- Lyon, S. M. (2004). *An anthropological analysis of local politics and patronage in a Pakistani village*. Edwin Mellen Press.
- Martin, N. (2015). *Politics, landlords and Islam in Pakistan*. Routledge.
- Migdal, J. S. (2001). *State in society: Studying how states and societies transform and constitute one another*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mitchell, T. (1991). The limits of the state: Beyond statist approaches and their critics. *American Political Science Review*, 85(1), 77-96.
- Mohmand, S. K., & Gazdar, H. (2007). *Social structures in rural Punjab*. Asian Development Bank.
- Mueenuddin, D. (2009). *In other rooms, other wonders*. W. W. Norton.
- Mueenuddin, D. (2026). *This is where the serpent lives*. Bloomsbury.
- Platteau, J.-P. (1995a). A framework for the analysis of evolving patron-client ties in agrarian economies. *World Development*, 23(5), 767-786.
- Platteau, J.-P. (1995b). An Indian model of aristocratic patronage. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 47(4), 636-662.
- Qureshi, M. F., Shah, Z., & Zakir, M. M. (2024). Naturalistic approach in Daniyal Mueenuddin's 'Saleema' and 'In Other Rooms, Other Wonders'. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 5(4), 212-218.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought*. Cambridge University Press.



- Sanyal, K. (2007). *Rethinking capitalist development: Primitive accumulation, governmentality and post-colonial capitalism*. Routledge.
- Scott, J. C. (1972). Patron-client politics and political change in Southeast Asia. *American Political Science Review*, 66(1), 91-113.
- Scott, J. C. (1976). *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*. Yale University Press.
- Tariq, H. (2018). Feudal system of Pakistan in Daniyal Mueenuddin's short stories: A Marxist critique. *Linguistics and Literature Review*, 4(1), 30-40.
- Usman, A. (2016). Marginalized voters and supporters: Biradari system, caste hierarchy and rights to political participation in rural Punjab. *Journal of Political Studies*, 23(2), 607-616.
- Waseem, M. (1994). *Politics and the state in Pakistan*. National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research.
- Wilder, A. R. (1999). *The Pakistani voter: Electoral politics and voting behaviour in the Punjab*. Oxford University Press.