



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

1

**Fictional Gateways to the History of Pakistan: Studying History-Fiction Interface in Uzma
Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God***

Dinesh Kumar

Abstract:

History and fiction abundantly interface in contemporary Pakistani literature in English. Due to Pakistan's turbulent socio-political history since its very foundation through Partition of British India in 1947, any literary endeavour in Pakistan, especially the genre of the novel, remains politically informed in historical sense. In recent decades the political edge in Pakistani English fiction has significantly sharpened for various reasons. Uzma Aslam Khan's novel *The Geometry of God* (2008) deals with the stereotypes of history attributed to Pakistan on account of the state's failure, especially since late 1970s, in curbing the coalition of fundamentalism and terrorism. Post-9/11, Islamophobia without Pakistan strengthened the bigoted forces within Pakistan, which all resulted in an exponential growth in blasphemy charges. *Geometry's* characters engage with extremist forces of modern Pakistan both at ideological and agential levels. In order to liberate the media-driven haunting image of Pakistan's monochromatic historiography, Khan also looks beyond the modern homogenized history of land (Pakistan) into prehistoric and ur-Islamic past driven by heterogeneous and syncretic traditions. The subtle appropriation of fictional and real anecdotes helps the novelist in opening new gateways to Pakistan's 'History' which lead to plural, inclusive and unconventional landscapes. The paper undertakes to examine the *fictional* foray into historical space of contemporary Pakistan by employing the concepts of New Historicism such as anecdote, counterhistory, power and subversion. The juxtaposition of the literary and non-literary texts would pave the way for understanding the discourse at a given time irrespective of disciplines and genres. The study would corroborate the idea that the novel, which is inherently heteroglossic in its form(as



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

2

Bakhtin suggests), can duly combat the demons of singularisation often ascribed to a particular historical period while simultaneously rewriting the past as a beacon for more humane and democratic future.

Keywords: Pakistan, history, fiction, rewriting, Islam, blasphemy, science, power, gender

Blasphemy laws introduced in 1860 by the British rulers still dominate the Pakistan legal system. General Zia ul-Haq's regime (1977-1988) made these laws more stringent by penalizing the acts of desecration against the Quran and Prophet Muhammad. In the wake of Zia's death, the Federal Shariat Court determined death sentence (under Section 295-C) for contempt of the Holy Prophet. Since then the blasphemy laws have arbitrarily been used to silence debate and dissent, plus as the instruments of persecution of vulnerable people. National Commission for Justice and Peace Pakistan, a human rights organization, has collected the data of victims under the statute which shows a total of 776 Muslims, 505 Ahmadis, 229 Christians and 30 Hindus as accused under various clauses of the blasphemy law from 1987 until 2018. As the data shows, it is not just religious minorities which are persecuted under the notorious blasphemy laws, skeptical Muslims too often face the similar brunt of fundamentalist powers. For example, in October 2000, Dr Younus Shaikh, a Muslim homeopathic doctor and medical college lecturer, was arrested on the charges of blasphemy regarding the desecration of Prophet Muhammad. He was charged for the answers 'he gave to his students about whether Prophet Muhammad followed Muslim practices before he declared his prophethood' (Ispahani, 147). After rotting in jail for almost three years with death sentence hovering over his head, Shaikh was luckily acquitted in 2003 by a higher court, and soon after he fled Pakistan for the fear of his life by non-state actors. The self-proclaimed protectors of faith often punish the acquitted in the name of justice if the judiciary has decided the otherwise. In March 2006 a Pakistani student, Amir Abdul Rehman Cheema, studying textile engineering in Germany attempted to kill the editor of a local newspaper for the alleged desecration of Prophet Muhammad. The editor had allowed the



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

3

republication of controversial cartoons of the Prophet in his newspaper which were already published in Denmark previous year. The incident had gradually irked Muslims throughout the world leading to violent clashes at some places. German newspaper's republication of cartoons provoked conservative minded Cheema to commit homicide. He was arrested from the scene of crime. He later committed suicide in German cell when he was still under trial. Subsequently, Cheema was made a hero in Pakistan for his 'martyrdom' for the Islamic cause of deterring blasphemers. His biography mentioning him a *ghazi* (hero in Islam) was published the same year and a shrine was constructed to commemorate his legacy.¹ Both the instances not much apart in temporal frame testify the stakes associated with the 'honour of the Prophet' in Pakistan.

Amnesty International has repeatedly highlighted about the misuse of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan and the need for their urgent revocation at the earliest. In *Purifying the Land of the Pure* (2015) Farahnaz Ispahani maintains that Pakistan president 'Musharraf responded to the calls for repeal of blasphemy laws by promising to amend the procedure for their implementation' what his military predecessor (Zia) had launched in full realization (148). Musharraf fearlessly explained himself in his memoir, *In the Line of the Fire* (2006): 'Music, dance, and art have flourished in our land for millennia. Ironically, all this has remained the best-kept secret of Pakistan. Worse, the forces of religious extremism and obscurantism reject this cultural activity as being un-Islamic. No previous government had the courage to tell them that they were wrong' (320). Despite having commented on other unduly sanctioned practices, Musharraf (1999-2008) could not do anything for amending the blasphemy laws despite their gross misuse even in his own rule due to fears of backlash from religious parties whose support he needed so as to legitimize his illegal and authoritarian rule. His policy of "enlightened moderation" had to

¹ See Jürgen Schaffelechner's "Blasphemy and the Appropriation of Vigilante Justice in 'Hagiohistoric' Writing in Pakistan." Also see, Khalid Mehmood Qadri's *Ghāzī Āmir AbdulRaḥman Chīmāh Šahīd* (2006)—though not available in English.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

4

exempt this religiously sensitive issue. Even the quasi-secular political parties like Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) kept themselves away from the controversial religious cauldron for vote-bank politics. Post- 9/11 political climate has worsened the chances for the withdrawal of contentious law. However, Musharraf's government was able to amend regressive *Hudood* laws (introduced by Zia as a part of his *Nizam-e-Mustafa* movement) which had augmented the gender discrimination under the banner of Islamization of Pakistan. The Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act passed in 2006 helped reverse many of the *Hudood* laws. It does not mean that before Musharraf's taking on the oppressive statutes promulgated by the self-styled "soldier of Islam" (Zia) there was no reaction opposing them. Against religio-military dictatorship of Zia's regime, Women Action Forum (WAF)—in Urdu it was called *Khawateen Mahaz-e-Amal*—fearlessly expressed women's issues more on the streets than in academia. One anecdote is quite famous from this period. In 1985, the acclaimed female singer Iqbal Bano sang Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poem "Hum Dekhenge" (*We Will See*) in front of 50,000 strong crowd as a symbol of protest against Zia's oppressive rule in general and his ban on Faiz's poetry in particular. Faiz's poems have also been used to criticize Musharraf's military regime as well.² To dissuade the Islamophobic attitude prevalent in the west, people in Pakistan also came up with unique ideas like the digital (online) movement "Yeh Hum Naheen" (This is Not Us) in early 2007.³ Such movements and their cultural reproduction in songs, movies and texts—first two sites of cultural production remain checkered due to their having been seen as 'haram' (prohibited) in some strands of Islamic societies—have ventured into devising a distinct national discourse which is more inclusive, progressive and peaceful. In short, both religious diktats (*fatwas*) and resistance to them have been part and parcel of Pakistani life.

² See <https://scroll.in/article/869697/faiz-ahmed-faiz-pakistans-symbol-of-revolution-is-today-a-universal-symbol-of-peace-democracy>

³See <https://www.yehhumnaheen.org/>



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

5

New historicism as a critical paradigm examines the text for the power plays which are prevalent during its writing, publication and consumption. These power plays often remain latent in cultural products like literature and arts. New historicists tellingly look for such intricacies involved in power relations within a society or culture which keeps reproducing itself through various forms. In *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (1998) John Brannigan succinctly defines new historicism as ‘a mode of critical interpretation which privileges power relations as the most important context for texts of all kinds’ (6). The most celebrated proponent of this critical mode Stephen Greenblatt lays his interest in less known facts and events (termed as anecdotes) to bring a different, not necessarily oppositional, understanding of past which is knowable through all kinds of historical epistemes—textual in broader sense—including literature; nothing is sacred or authentic nor is anything profane or inauthentic. However, unlike traditional “close readings” inclined towards the written word in all its complexity, ‘new historicist readings are more often skeptical, wary, demystifying, critical, and even adversarial’ (*Practicing New Historicism* 9). Literary texts are read—without any privileging/foregrounding as such—with non-literary texts (as context/co-text) for exposing eternally adapting and omnipresent power structures which make resistance or subversion highly unsustainable. In a nutshell, new historicism is an interdisciplinary approach which foregrounds discontinuities instead of continuity in history.

The paper intends to study the selected text along with the anecdotal and historical references (co-texts) so as to understand ‘the historicity of text and the textuality of history,’ as Louis Montrose has famously dictated (“Renaissance” 8). *The Geometry of God* (2008) by Uzma Aslam Khan engages with the issues of blasphemy, science and gender in Pakistani society caught between pristine Islamic idealism and modern-global geopolitics. Khan tackles these issues in historical and spatial contexts of contemporary Pakistan instead of using sweeping universal ethos. *Geometry* straightly confronts the ideological indoctrination employed by the



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

6

theocratic state under the master narrative of exclusive and supremacist Islamic identity. “The Geometry of God” title itself is quite daring as it questions the parochial and non-rational assumptions of Islamic symbols—strictly used in the context of Zia’s rule as a historical juncture in the sociopolitical history of Pakistan. The novel discusses the tabooed subject of blasphemy in a scientist’s life (science is almost another tabooed subject in Pakistan) and simultaneously focuses on re-gendering the ordinary Pakistani woman without any urge for “liberating Muslim women” as the *jihad* launched by western feminists post 9/11 highlights. The text avoids showing any historical regime, including the highly authoritarian rule of Zia ul-Haq, irresistible and fully in control. In Pakistan, the interface of fiction and history is so uncanny that the character of Professor Zahoor anticipates the murder of Punjab governor Salman Taseer in 2011 for his being vocal against blasphemy laws. Like Zahoor, Taseer is gunned down by his own body-guard. Khan rightly mentions in an interview that ‘For a Pakistani writer, life imitates art all the time’ (Aftab 12). The novel helps understand history and vice-versa.

First Gateway to History via Religion and Science

In a country like Pakistan, which became the first country in modern times to be founded in the name of religion, Islam ideologically caters to both nation and state but without being definitive as a driving force. Islam has always remained adrift in the constitutional as well as national consciousness of Pakistan (Jalal 73-89; Haqqani 4-11; Jaffrelot 241-43). No political regime could decide with finality which form of Islam was suitable to represent the entire land carved out for “Islam” itself.⁴ Still rulers like Zia ul-Haq in collusion with religiopolitical parties like Jamaat-e-Islami have significantly tried to customize the green (metonymically used for Islamic) colour of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. In 1980s military dictator General Zia made a

⁴ See Farzana Shaikh’s *Making Sense of Pakistan* (2009); Khaled Ahmed’s *Sectarian War: Pakistan’s Sunni Shia Violence and Its Links to the Middle East* (2012); and Ashok K. Behuria’s “Sects within Sect: The Case of Deobandi-Barelvi Encounter in Pakistan” (2008)



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

7

significant move by subtly challenging *Quaid-e-Azam* Muhammad Ali Jinnah's secular stance when he openly declared Islam as the national ideology. 'The ideology of Pakistan is Islam and only Islam. There should be no misunderstanding on this score' said Zia in 1979 (qtd. in Haqqani 101). The contemporary Islamic discourse began affecting other discourses and disciplines with impunity. Even the long-established secular discipline of science could not be spared from the Islamist rage of 1980s. Under the aegis of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Zia's government advocated for a paradigm shift in the terrain of sciences which was to take birth as "Islamic Science" (not to be confused with the medieval Islamic Golden Age sometimes referred as the Islamic Science).⁵ Many Scientific Miracles Conferences were organized within and without Pakistan during Zia's reign and afterwards. His regime notoriously banned Darwin's evolutionary theory. In general Islam and science are not hostile to each other, but in Pakistan they seem to be so for ideological and political reasons. Islamists do not embrace science for the latter's being critical of every institution including religion. In fact, no religion or faith claims its core base derived from or driven by science or reason. Islamic Science is a reaction against modern (secular) science and retroactively establishes every scientific discovery in the holy book of Quran.

A study, first of its kind, in 2006 by the OIC pronounced the 'science deficit' in Islamic countries.⁶ Despite being the second most dominant religion in the world (Islam comprises around one-fourth of the total world population), there have been just three Muslim Nobel

⁵ Renowned Pakistani Physicist Pervez Hoodbhoy has exposed such practices with highly telling examples in his paper "They Call It Islamic Science" (1987).

⁶ COMSTECH, the Ministerial Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)—57 member states—was established in 1981 at the initiatives of Pakistani President who also remains the permanent Chairperson of the organization. The purpose of establishing the venture was to promote science and technology in the member states of the OIC. The data can be accessed at the website.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

8

laureates from the field of sciences.⁷ As an alternative reaction to the extremist Islamists' militant posture, moderate Muslim scholars across the world urge for the use of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) in Islamic cultures.⁸ Pervez Musharraf in 2000s motivated such scholars in Pakistan under his policy of "enlightened moderation." In 2006, he pledged to open six state-of-art universities over the next decade to improve the national credentials in the field of science and technology.

The Geometry of God deals with the recent past of Pakistan beginning from Zia's orthodox Islamic era in late 1970s and ending with the first few years of the twenty-first century under Musharraf's rather moderate Islamic rule. *Geometry* challenges the homogeneous image of Pakistan's national history that reeks of military, extremism and political instability. According to Ananya Jahanara Kabir, the author deploys a 'complex symbolic apparatus constructed from prehistory, geography and history' which all together present a unique and hybrid tapestry of Pakistan instead of a single historical block (173). Professor and paleontologist Zahoor around whom the novel revolves relishes in multiplicity of human experience and rejects the religion bound linear definition of Pakistan and Pakistanis. Despite being a scientist, he believes in God but not in orthodox fashion. He neither performs namaz nor follows other Islamic rituals as such. His reach to God takes recourse to two means: *khayal* (a thought or an image) and *zauq* (taste or joy). He prefers the second to the first because of its physicality and nearness to the most

⁷ Abdus Salam (1979, Pakistan), Ahmed Zewail (1999, Egypt) and Aziz Sancar (2015, Turkey) are Muslim Nobel laureates in the field of science, but working outside their motherlands. Sadly, Salam (the second Muslim ever to win any Nobel Prize) is not even considered Muslim because of his Ahmadiyya sect. Pakistan officially declared Ahmadis as non-Muslims in 1974. As of 2019, out of total twelve Muslim laureates, seven are awarded for Peace, two for literature and three for science.

⁸ Scholars like Tariq Ramadan, Ziauddin Sardar, Kamal El Helbawi, Pervez Hoodbhoy, Ehsan Massod, Abdus Salam have attempted to promote secular science in their respective countries despite the propagandas being run by Islamists claiming ontological cultural clash between science and Islam.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

9

ordinary mortals (*Geometry* 181). Against Zia's Islamization drive favouring Sunni beliefs (majoritarian sect of Islam worldwide as well as in Pakistan), Zahoor tends to follow Sufic ideology for its being plural, inclusive and non-ritualistic. Like a Sufi he is ready to destruct himself to meet his Beloved (God), but without harming others. Zahoor believes that 'Sufi is the original evolutionist' because s/he has a belief in pre-existence of life (8). Professionally, his belief in prehistory of humans and their genesis ('Original idea') somewhere else, for instance in whales, which preceded Pakistan as the original idea for Indian subcontinent's Muslims by millions years, counters the cultural nationalism employed by the Zia regime. His untiring search for Pakicetus (etymologically, Pakistani whale; *Pak* for Pakistan and *cetus* in Latin for whale) to reach the original species equals the passion of the Sufis anxious to meet their creator.⁹ To begin with, both scientists and religious persons (including both Sufis/liberals and Islamists/conservatives) have their imagined/unseen goal—discovery/invention and God, respectively—to pursue, *religiously*.

The Sufi-scientist (Zahoor) challenges the intellectual impasse of an almost evergreen coercive order of Pakistani state which is as much political as intellectual. Zahoor's neo-Darwinian approach to Pakistan's prehistory confronts Zia's ban on the evolution theory for its being anti-Islamic, however his government had paradoxically allowed paleontologists (mostly from western nations) to continue the digging of fossils (156). This ambiguous position of the Islamist regime towards science shows both incompetency and ignorance at the state level while involuntarily yielding a space for subversion to scientists and intelligentsia against its own anti-science and ultra-religious attitude. However, every act of subversion is containable in modern political system. Academy of Moral Policy (AMP)—a wing of the conservative Jamaat-e-Pedaish Party—is a government sponsored vigilante group that runs its propaganda against Pakistani paleontologists. Official ban and unofficial vigilantism join forces to propagate Islamist

⁹Zahoor's granddaughter Amal—another major character of the novel—coincidentally finds the most basal whale (Pakicetus—named after Pakistan) at the tender age of eight when she had gone to the digs along with her Nana.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

10

discourse. Undoubtedly, discourse creates power and power relations among subjects. As Michel Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish* (1979) that surveillance in discourse is different from traditional notion of surveillance due to the former's multiple and shifting centers scattered across the society. This multifarious surveillance helps state maintain the Islamist discourse in Pakistan on the account of its omnipresent and omniscient gaze. In Foucauldian terms, each gaze forms 'a part of the overall functioning of power' (171). Here the surveillance gaze functions through subjects within the society who are fortified in hierarchy according to their being or not being in tandem with statist ideology. AMP chairman Mirza Anwar employs his son Noman, one of the three narrators of the text, for surveilling upon Zahoor for his being 'undisciplined' regarding the national discourse at the time. This type of power relations (or discipline) through the surveillance, however never fully impregnable, results in the constitution of docile subjects.

As a university professor and ardent paleontologist, Zahoor loves to lecture on philosophy, religion and science in the university class room as well as seminars. Zahoor seems to be an evolutionist conversant with theological nuances, but there are not many in Pakistan to listen to him. Noman makes a false report of his lecture at a seminar which keeps reverberating throughout the novel. He is accused of 'defil[ing] our Prophet,' 'burn[ing] pages of the Holy Quran,' being 'an Ahmadi...Who calls himself a Muslim,' and 'a kafir' who prays 'To many gods [and] animals' (*Geometry* 172). Later he is retroactively charged with calling himself a prophet and writing the names of all four caliphs on the soles of his feet. A student of his, hired by the Jamaat-e-Pedaish, becomes witness to all these blasphemous acts which extra-fictionally match with Dr. Younus Sheikh's case occurred in 2001. He is arrested and given life imprisonment by a trial court. In his solitary confinement Zahoor is compelled to obey the state discourse by showing his allegiance to the homogenized God (*Allah*; other names—around 99—were already banned by the Zia government), but he does not bow to the pressure: 'They grill me to ignite the very physics of my faith! My faith is what they bury when they force me to expose



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

11

it!’ (184). He is eventually acquitted on the recommendation of Amal’s friend Zara whose father is a commander in Pakistani military. Both his prosecution and acquittal also show the nexus of military and Islamists under the aegis of the theocratic state. Zahoor as a metaphor for the state of science in Pakistan is conquered with the weapon of religious dogma. His death at the end of the novel implies the tragedy science has faced in the politically unstable state. The rationality of science loses battle to the parochialism of blasphemy law.

The clash between modernity (‘geometry’) and religion (‘God’) evolves in the novel between evolutionists (Dr. Zahoor and his granddaughter Amal) and creationists (Mirza Anwar and his son Noman, who would change sides during the clash). Noman torn between fundamentalist and progressive ideals used to say, ‘I bat for both sides! I edit the Word of God and the Word of Science!’, but eventually releases himself from editing either subject for his true love for mathematics (222). He was a “reluctant fundamentalist” (title of Mohsin Hamid’s highly popular novel written in post-9/11 context) working under his father’s pressure. By the middle of the novel, Noman says, ‘Zahoor and his granddaughters have become my family. We’re a triangle with four points’ (171). Zahoor’s wisdom, knowledge and amicable behavior compel ambivalent Noman to change his side. This reversal of Foucauldian surveillance through superior episteme (power/knowledge dialectics) presents the vulnerability of power centers which can be manipulated by good or evil both. Noman’s metamorphosis after General Zia’s death in the novel also refers to Pakistan’s transition to democracy because religious vigilantism finds, for political reasons, easier environment to function under a military regime than an elected civilian government. Zahoor would be eventually killed immediately after another military coup (that of Musharraf’s) has taken place in country. The sub-text of the novel thus prefers elected governments to military regimes which do not check the mullahs’ vigilantism for their political expediencies.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

12

The state-sponsored hegemony succumbs to individual agency informed by secular and rational behavior of science. Zahoor's individuality is certainly not his own; it is the sum product of his experience as a thinking Muslim, an evolutionary biologist/paleontologist and a responsible elder. Zahoor forgives Noman on the latter's pleading guilty of his conspiratorial act in framing the former. He also makes Amal and Mehwish forgive Noman even though Nana (maternal grandfather) was the center of their lives. He brings the point home to his granddaughters that Noman was just a tool to blame him on the charges of blasphemy. If not Noman, somebody else would have charged him or somebody else would have been charged at his place. The problem lay in the process of Islamized radicalism instead of the end result of a particular individual. Zahoor de-Islamizes Noman by letting him add a new point into their triangle. The geometry of their relations gets reshaped with this 'angle'. Right here, the novel (fiction) surpasses history in its leap of faith for forgiveness. The counter history emerges in the *fictional* space of forgiveness vis-à-vis the orthodox limbs—discipline and punishment—of orthodox history. The violence of history is replaced by the non-violence of fiction so that a new gateway can erect itself in Pakistan.

Amidst the perpetual fight between the “embodied Islam” (attitude and actions of people) and “textual/scriptural Islam” (a literalist or programmed discourse), the novel intermittently disperses the dissent of Mutazilites (dissenters or rationalists) through the ambivalent evolvment of Noman. He keeps visiting the book *Moment of Mutazilites* time and again; the intertextual act augments both the aesthetic and political significance of the novel. Unlike the literalists, Mutazila school of thought believed in freely using free will given by God. They were denigrated as heretics and apostates by the literalists who would interpret the Quran and the Hadith literally, in an ahistoric fashion. Alongside the Mutazulites' repudiation in the past and *their* suppression in the present, the novel gazes into itself as a possible target by the neo-conservative Islamists. Seeing the regular attacks on the intelligentsia in Pakistan, it is not a far-



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

13

fetches proposition that *The Geometry of God* can be targeted as a profane text. It subtly pits itself against the suppressed texts of the past. For the alleged irreverent texts, the Mutazila moment still continues in Pakistan. Al-Kindi and Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi (9th century), Ibn Rushd (12th century) and Ibn Khaldun (14th century) represented the Islamic Golden Age with par excellence in various and eclectic disciplines such as mathematics, physics, medicine, law, philosophy and theology. In *Geometry*, Mutazilites are simultaneously acknowledged and parodied depending on who appropriates them. Discourses counter one another within the same organization and the novel's heteroglossic narrative space punctures the singularization of history as a finished discourse. Islam is both Islamist and secular contingent to individuals. *Geometry* thematically seems to "secularize Islamists" as Humeira Iqtidar has recently proposed in her book with the same title.¹⁰ Noman leaves his Islamist father's house for his real love of secular discipline mathematics inspired by the Sufi (secular) Zahoor.

Second Gateway to History via Gender

UA Khan's itinerary career enables her to critically analyze the sociopolitical history of women in Pakistan that remains multifaceted across time and space. It should be futile to reiterate that there is no singular and ahistorical Pakistani woman. The position of women in Pakistan has been informed by discourses such as traditional Islam, Islamist feminism, secular feminism and postsecular/postfeminist politics. Traditional Islam is dictated by men leaving virtually nil space for women themselves. Afiya S. Zia has classified the "Woman Question" in Pakistan along three "waves" which follow as: first, 1980s secular feminist movements informed by western feminism which challenged General Zia's Islamist regime (especially regressive laws for women like Hudood Ordinance); second, inspired by Subaltern Studies, modernist feminist

¹⁰ See Humeira Iqtidar's *Secularizing Islamists?: Jama'at-e-Islami and Jama'at-ud-Da'wa in Urban Pakistan* (2011). Also, see M. Qasim Zaman's *Islam in Pakistan: A History* (2018). Prof. Zaman attempts to explain modernist Islam in a nuanced way and Pakistan's espousal of it in changing contexts.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

14

movements that were both Islamic as well as indigenous-secular; and third, 9/11-stimulated postsecularist-postfeminist scholarship and activism which in the guise of anthropological recovery of the Islamist Woman showcase the interplay of faith and feminism (1-10). Western feminists and, especially, Muslim diasporic women living in the West began representing women in Asian and African countries as victims of Islamic patriarchal system. Like the ‘civilizing’ mission of colonial masters launched for ‘uncivilized’ colonized people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the so-called liberal-secular feminist coterie post-9/11 felt the urgent need to ‘liberate’ Muslim women all around the world. The plight and unfreedom of oppressed Muslim women was uncritically ascribed to Islamic cultures. The flood of such writings in all literary forms was a kind of tool for the justification of the War on Terror. Veil (as a singular alternative for different coverings like burka, niqab, hijab or chador) became the symbol for the discourse of ‘oppressed Muslim women.’ It took time before critics like Martha Nussbaum and Lila Abu-Lughod began critiquing such discourses. In late 2002 Abu-Lughod wrote a poignant article ‘Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?’ questioning the rhetoric of salvation as such. Sherene Razack also attacked the imperialist feminists’ desire to emancipate Muslim women based on their colonial notions of west’s racial superiority.¹¹

However, in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), Saba Mahmood critiques role of Islam in post-9/11 context as the genuine emergence of religious awakening within contemporary Muslim societies similar to 1970s’ Mosque Movement in Egypt and 1979 Iranian Revolution (3). Women activists in Pakistan do have to engage with dimensions of both religion and secularism. One demands for the conservative strand of feminist space more inclined towards Islamic scriptures that can also be interpreted as national in character in case of Pakistan which Ayaz Naseem has termed as “religiopoly discourse” (119-

¹¹See Sherene Razack’s essay “Geopolitics, Culture Clash, and Gender after September 11” (2005), pp. 11-31



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

15

128).¹² Another dimension traverses along the transnational and secular route. Although Pakistani feminist scholar Amina Jamal does not see secular feminists' demands for equal rights for Muslim women as against Islamic traditions or as anti-Pakistani, she takes note of 'their tendency to universalize, essentialize, or construct abstract subjects' and so emphasizes to rectify their methodological practices accordingly ("Transnational Feminism" 58).

It can now be safely argued that both Islam and modernity represent Pakistani "woman" at the same time. In *Geometry*, Khan subverts one with the other and despite having settled for the second in the end (in the sociocultural mobility of Amal), she does not belittle the enablement and agency of the former which remains a force to be reckoned with in spite of Musharraf's efforts to tame it under his method of "enlightened moderation." Amal, the fulcrum of the novel, challenges the discourses of both nation and female in Pakistan. She neither unproblematically associates with the Pakistani nation nor succumbs to the rather prevalent definition of a Pakistani woman. State had begun painting both the discourses in Islamic colour encouraged by Zia's Islamic mission: nationalism was turning into chauvinism and woman into a fetish of honour. Patriarchal Islam subsumed all the variants of religion and gender in the favour of a homogeneous nation-state. Amal is a secular feminist/activist with a Muslim name. She stretches the nationalistic imagination of Pakistan to the (pre-historical) times when there was no trace of human beings, let alone human beings-created religions. She invests her life like her *Nana* (Zahoor) in tracing the evolution of whales, predecessors of humans by millions of years. Her scientific attitude takes her away and safe from the narrow understanding of being a Pakistani. Amal's interest in the "theory of evolution"—which asserts the gradual evolution of life in the world instead of seeing it as a gift of God that is a common thread among all religions—upsets

¹²M. Ayaz Naseem has defined religiopolity discourse as 'symbolic interdiscursivity between the politico-religious discourse and that of the modernizing/nationalist state' (69). Please see his *Education and Gendered Citizenship in Pakistan* (2010).



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

16

the swift evolution of theocratic bent of Zia's Pakistan. The Darwinian Theory was the centre of attacks in Zia's regime and seen as a "foreign influence" on pious and "real Pakistan" (*Geometry* 23, 6; emphasis in original). Amal challenges the definition of a "real" Pakistani by taking this "un-Pakistani" stance as a woman evolutionist—a feat of "double de-colonization," adapting the term "double colonization" given by Peterson and Rutherford. She consciously partakes in de-gendering of Pakistani woman's vocational choices.

Khawateen Mahaz-e-Amal (Women Action Forum), an urban feminist group with secular leanings established in 1981, dared to challenge Islamization in streets and courts. They popularized the slogan "Men, Money, Mullahs and the Military" as enemies of women. The mere existence of a secular forum could be rendered as a direct challenge to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Being a woman and scientist pursuing a banned theory, Amal—the name is a reference to the celebrated organization—"acts" more than enough to challenge the establishment. At personal level, she challenges her father and male colleagues for marital and career choices respectively; earns her own money; ignores the message of the mullahs by her liberal activities like partying, wearing jeans and driving. Like her *Nana* who says, "Pray five times a day and be a *real* Pakistani! Speak Urdu and be a *real* Pakistani, or Punjabi not Urdu and twice as Pakistani, or English and half as Pakistani! Well, here's my answer: study whales and be Pakistani!" Amal studies whale and becomes more than real Pakistani (6).

Amal's fieldwork in the Salt Range Mountains generates another "scape". She had serendipitously stumbled upon an immensely vital whale-fossil at the tender age of eight which was later named *Pakicetus*. Now having become adult, she reinvigorates her true love for whales and evolution. For digging the fossils, she has to spend many nights under the open sky among male colleagues; many of them prejudiced Muslim men. She ventures into this unprecedented profession against the wishes of her parents, but gets the full support from her husband and grandfather. Like her name, Amal practices (Amal means practice or action in Urdu) what



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

17

remains unpracticed in Pakistan, and does not “perform,” as Judith Butler critically suggests, her stereotypical gender role within a society regularly experimented by a ‘lethal military-state-religion combo’ (Shaheed 857). Like Benazir Bhutto, who had become the first Muslim woman to ascend the most powerful position in an Islamic country, Amal becomes the ‘*first woman in the country to do* [overnight digs as a woman paleontologist]’ (*Geometry* 308; italics in original). It though takes long time before Amal secures a place for herself as a lab assistant in a university. She was allowed to be one only after a fierce debate among the faculty members. Coincidentally, the new Department Head opened the door for her selection: ‘If we can have a woman Prime Minister, we can have a woman senior lab assistant! We gave the PM a chance and we will even give a second! Many western countries do neither!’ (225). For Amal, her fieldwork-site is the place from where she can challenge the history of her gender. She bears the dangers and travails of working at a distant and inhospitable place without any grievance. Her solicited agency triumphs in re-gendering the role assigned to her in the beginning of the novel. By the end of this field visit (and the novel), she has achieved double success as she ‘can work beside men *and* enter the sacred zananah, the space consigned to women’ (309; italics in original). Metaphorically speaking, her agency as an “actor” helps her in replacing history—of passive and subjugated woman in the Islamist society—with her story.

The most interesting thing about the tool—that is, science—used by Khan to situate and empower her female protagonist is the subversion of the fact of *actual* discovery in paleontology. The novelist deliberately alters the fact that the fossil of an ear bone of Pakicetus, an around-fifty-million-year-old land-roving whale which would gradually evolve into modern whale, was discovered by an American paleontologist Philip D. Gingerich in 1979 in the Salt Range mountain area of Pakistan. The author replaces history with fiction—both textual(ised) media—by making Amal the discoverer of Pakicetus instead of the original claimer Gingerich. By doing so she not only changes the national identity of discoverer but his gender identity also. This self-



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

18

reflexive act of textualising history helps Khan in creating myth for the future out of the ‘myth’ of the past. She presents a different role model in Amal for Pakistani women. Puncturing post-9/11 imperialist feminism which only knows to dehumanize Muslim man, the novelist foregrounds the men who support as well as inspire women for making their own female space. Thus Khan’s critical feminist stance rewrites the history of gender for Pakistani women (and men too) with a more realistic approach. She exploits anecdotal evidence (of the discovery of whale-fossil) to suit her story, but nowhere does she allow her story’s protagonist become an anecdote, not even by the most beloved person in her life. Amal is aware of her anecdotal presence in her Nana’s speeches and this very awareness equips her with an ironic, yet powerful, recognition of her existence: ‘The girl who slipped the diamond key into his hands has become the girl that’s talked about. She’s the anecdote. She spices his speeches to give them a human touch. *Sweet*. She’s the audience. Not the player. She’s *she*’ (90; emphasis in original).

Conclusion

The Geometry of God calls for the reconciliation between the binaries—like science and faith, Islamist feminism and secular feminism—which have bedeviled Pakistan, especially since 1980s. Read with other co-texts, the literary text represents its time and space while remaining self-reflexive, incomplete and digressive in its approach to treating history. The novel has an expository writing style which thwarts any kind of interpretative closure. Pakistan does not have to have one History; it has many histories some of which *Geometry* deals with through the gateways of science and woman.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

19

Works Cited

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard UP, 2013.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, U of Texas P, 1981.
- Brannigan, John. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. Macmillan, 1998.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519-531. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.2307/3207893.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed., Vintage-Random House, 1995.
- Gallagher, Cathleen and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing New Historicism*. U of Chicago P, 2000.
- Gingerich, Philip D. "Evolution of Whales from Land to Sea." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 156, no. 3, Sept. 2012, pp. 309-323. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23558092.
- Haqqani, Hussain. *Reimagining Pakistan: Transforming a Dysfunctional Nuclear State*. HarperCollins, 2018.
- Hoodbhoy, Pervez. *Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality*. Zed Books, 1991.
- . "They Call It Islamic Science." 1987, pp. 1-16. *Google*, eacpe.org/content/uploads/2014/02/They-Call-It-Islamic-Science.pdf.



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

20

Ispahani, Farahnaz. *Purifying the Land of the Pure: Pakistan's Religious Minorities?* HarperCollins, 2015.

Jaffrelot, Christophe. *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience*. Translated by Cynthia Schoch, Penguin, 2015.

Jalal, Ayesha. "Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, Feb. 1995, pp. 73-89. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/176188.

Jamal, Amina. "Transnational Feminism as Critical Practice: A Reading of Feminist Discourses in Pakistan." *Meridians*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2005, pp. 57-82. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40338666.

Kabir, Ananya Jahanara. "Deep Topographies in the Fiction of Uzma Aslam Khan." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2011, pp. 173-185. Project Muse, doi: 10.1080/17449855.2011.557191.

Khan, Uzma Aslam. "If this Were a Civilized Land, Faith Would Be Private." Interview by Awais Aftab. *New Age Islam*, 26 Oct. 2012, <https://www.newageislam.com/interview/-if-this-were-a-civilized-land-faith-would-be-private---uzma-aslam-khan/d/9128>.

---. *The Geometry of God*. Rupa, 2008.

Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton UP, 2005.

Montrose, Louis. "Renaissance: Literary Study and the Subject of History." *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 5-12. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43447341.

Musharraf, Pervez. *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir*. Simon and Schuster, 2006.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

21

Naseem, Ayaz M. *Education and Gendered Citizenship in Pakistan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Robson, Mark. *Stephen Greenblatt*. Routledge, 2008.

Shaheed, Farida. "Contested Identities: Gendered Politics, Gendered Religion in Pakistan." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 31, no.6, 2010, pp. 851-867. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27896585.

Zia, Afiya S. *Faith and Feminism: Religious Agency or Secular Autonomy?* Sussex Academic Press, 2018.