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ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN UZMA ASLAM KHAN'S NOVELS *'TRESPASSING'* AND *'THINNER THAN SKIN'*

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Abstract

This paper presents a reading of Uzma Aslam Khan's's novels Trespassing and Thinner than Skin and illustrates the process of growing urbanization and life in metropolitan cities and its deleterious impact on human habitats and communities. It attempts to critique the reshaping and remaking of Pakistani lives and culture under the influence of growing consumerism, technology, capitalism, and resultant migration of indigenous communities to urban spaces. The novels highlight numerous forms of pollution such as land, water, and air pollution and overuse of sea resources caused by the ever-growing industrial commerce and expanding urbanization and demonstrate how unequal development can impact human domination along the lines of environment, gender, and ethnicity. The novels provide an intimate understanding of the urban ecology of contemporary Pakistani society and can be regarded as emphatic voice from the Global South as they perform the much-needed task of raising environmental consciousness in the contemporary world.

Keywords: pollution, Pakistan, environmental issues, industrialization, urbanization, overpopulation, fiction, novels, story, etc.

Being the world's sixth most populous country, Pakistan is currently facing numerous environmental issues due to growing industrialization, urbanization, and overpopulation. As per the reports of the Pakistan Environment Protection Agency (PAK-EPA), Pakistan suffers from the world's highest environmental pollution rates ("A Brief of Environmental Concerns" 1). Abysmally weak environmental standards for industry have resulted in poisonous emissions and water and air pollution that have collectively become the biggest reason for multiple diseases. Pakistan's urban growth is estimated to be 4.6 percent per annum, which is a direct outcome of the influx of rural population into towns and cities. According to Saira Ronaq, "Estimates indicate that 6 million (16 percent) people are unemployed and this is expected to increase by 500,000 annually. The increase in population, unemployment, and pressure on agricultural lands means migration to urban areas" (Environmental Challenges in Pakistan). This not only contributes to the fast decay of the urban environment but also has serious implications for the poor whose living spaces are environmentally unsafe. We thus see in Pakistan

host of environmental problems ranging from polluted water supply and deforestation to the lack of basic infrastructure and the release of hazardous, man-made chemicals into the soil.

In the context of an uneven globalizing Pakistan, Ursula Heise's observation about "a sense of planet"—the understanding of how local, cultural practices are now imbricated in the larger "political, economic, technological, social, cultural, and ecological networks"—is key to the understanding of how these networks shape lives on a daily basis in the Global South (55).

Contemporary Pakistani fiction in English has a powerful presence in the global English fiction market and enjoys an increasingly wide readership. Politically engaged portrayals of Pakistani culture, sharp critiques of the impact of technology and consumption on human lives, and stark portrayals of toxicity and pollution are nurtured by what Muneeza Shamsie refers to as the "Pakistani imagination" (119). According to Shazia Rahman, theorizing the complex and contradictory realities of today's Pakistan must be located in "the intersections of a geographical and ecological frame" (277). Writers like Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, and Muhammad Hanif react to important environmental issues such as overpopulation and massive food consumption, physical and psychological health of human beings living in urban spaces, value systems of people in relation to natural surroundings, the bond between humans and other forms of life, urban built spaces, and the culture of mindless consumption. These writers hold a mirror to the horrifying environmental conditions in Pakistan, and the writers' environmental consciousness is displayed in their portrayal of growing industrialization and urbanization resulting in the degradation of natural surroundings and resources and the harmful impact on human habitats and communities.

But the novelist whose ecocritical concerns are most notable and advanced is Uzma Aslam Khan. Her works *Trespassing* (2006) and *Thinner than Skin* (2012) can be studied in the context of postcolonial Environmentalism and Ecofeminism. These novels not only criticize the built and urban spaces and the intrusion of industry into the natural landscape but also extend their concern to the marginalized communities of the postcolonial cultures such as Pakistan. The author intensely supports the cause of social justice movements and emphasizes the interconnectedness of the ecological web that binds life forms while discussing issues of environmental degradation. She displays her genuine concern for the damage done to indigenous cultures and societies on account of this forced intrusion of the globalized market into the contexts of Third World ecosystems.

Khan's *Trespassing* is set in both Karachi city as well as the coastlines of the Indus Valley. The narrative begins with a description of the human invasion of spaces

owned by non-human species. Humans are seen as a menace to non-human habitations and the narrative also leads the reader's attention to the infringement of the habitats of indigenous groups (Indus Valley fishermen) by industrial corporates, resulting in polluted and fissured landscapes. Khan weaves into the narrative the nostalgic lament of the turtle who is digging her nest alongside industrial encroachment: "how much safer it had been when the coastline belonged to the fishermen" (1). The turtle, which is frightened by the coastline lights and the intruding crowd of human species, is unable to carry out her natural lifestyle. The turtle's trajectory is reflected in the displacement and forced migration of the indigenous people, who are forced to leave their traditional way of life as a result of which they are alienated from their habitat and means of livelihood. In the first chapter, humans who torture the sea turtle and destroy its eggs allegorize the corporate giants who overuse natural resources and displace the poor, indigenous communities. *Trespassing* provides a number of references to highlight how multinational companies are depleting natural resources. The coastline and sea resources no longer belong to the fishermen who are the indigenous inhabitants of the Indus Valley. The novel provides important insight into how the corporations, with their power of technology and capital, have trespassed the boundaries of business and come to control the sea, the fishes, and even the lives and finances of the fishermen. The author mourns the lost beauty and grandeur of the Indus Valley which has diminished into a deserted and "parched" landscape (101) and the loss of wealth of natural resources, which in earlier times had provided daily sustenance to the inhabitants (124). The novel describes how the massive business activity generated toxic smoke, and the use of granite and other chemicals for fishing contributed to making the environment hazardous for the human living (126). Foreign companies were also issued licenses by the state to carry on their business without making any arrangements for the local inhabitants (236). These, for the author, are the harsh conditions brought about by the international business that have driven the regional inhabitants out of the valley into the plains, where they are viewed as intruders.

Trespassing also tells the story of the Chinese princess who discovered the silk produced by silkworms and prepared a robe for the emperor by experimenting with technology. The author through this story also traces the history of silk production and refers to Persian smugglers and traders who sacrificed their lives to obtain the silk and worms in order to build their silk industry (11). Here the author attempts to draw the attention of her readers to the history of human killing and wars for regulating and collecting natural resources. This also tells us the story of human greed and desire to control nature for the money-making business. There are many such references to the exploitation and manipulation of natural resources by the man in *Trespassing*. Uzma Aslam Khan voices her criticism of the human greed for the possession and control of natural resources through Dia, one of the characters in the novel. Dia, while watching

silkworms in her mother's factory comments about how the Empress's actions mold the destiny of others: "If she had known that a thousand years later, several dozen Persians would pay with their lives for trying to smuggle silkworm out of China, would she have made that robe? If she hadn't, perhaps one of the many innocent daughters of those murdered men might have one day stood the chance of discovering something else (11). However, the author seems to approve industrial projects undertaken by the native Pakistanis, since she believes that natives who are raised on the land are more ecologically responsible than foreign investors and industrialists. The novel weaves into its narrative, tidbits about ecological sensitivity, like Riffat's successful experiment of planting a mulberry forest in Thatha, which avoids the use of chemical pesticides, and her silk industry, which employs indigenous methods of organic dyeing.

The narrative of *Trespassing* both recognizes and privileges the presence of nature and non-human life in human settings. Nature does not only serve as the background or as the provider of symbols and images to illustrate human affairs, but nature and non-human creatures form a consistent part of the text. The presence of silkworms and their growth process, constitute a very important dimension of the novel. Khan describes in detail how industry and technology have thwarted natural processes and disturbed biotic integrity. Khan informs her readers that silkworms kept in factory breeding cells have forgotten how to eat. Some workers had to "chop up their food in tiny slivers and change the supply nine times daily or the fussy creatures would starve" (105) We have an account of nature that is out of step with its own rhythms and is dependent on support from technology and man-made apparatus in order to survive in the harsh environment of commercialized projects. The novel also brings out the contrast between traditional farming and commercial corporate farming supported by technology and the use of pesticides.

Khan also draws attention to the all-pervading lack of hygiene in urban spaces by using terms like "the grubby halls of the hospital," "dust-opaque windows," smoke of "burned litter," and "the noxious fumes"(69). Despite claims to modernization and an apparent rise in the standard of living, the novel depicts Karachi as a degenerating city since sickness, drugs, crimes, and perverted sexual relations form an integral part of the metropolitan lifestyle. The urban spaces especially metropolitan cities like Karachi are overpopulated due to huge migration from Indus Valley and other places in the countries, and all are concrete with hardly any greenery around (56). The metropolis becomes subject to all types of pollution such as noise, smoke, filth, heat, and dust. This pollution is caused by vehicles, shanty towns, open gutters, garbage and trash piles, industrial waste, and chemical smoke. It has an acute shortage of resources such as water and electricity (327).

The study of *Trespassing* in the context of social ecology draws our attention to the details about the displacement and dispossession of indigenous communities of Indus Valley during the process of extension of Karachi. Salaamat, the displaced fisher boy, observes that the native modes of existence in his village were replaced by urban methods introduced by corporate industry eventually leading to the loss of their freedom. Salaamat is representative of the people belonging to the rural, natural environment who are compelled to leave their indigenous lands and in the process lose their identity and become non-entities in the urban settings. For instance, Salaamat is called an "ajnabi," "alien," and "outsider" (131). It comes to him as a painful realization that his people the "original inhabitants" of Karachi have been "pushed to the periphery, and the native populations forced to work under outsiders who claimed the city belonged to them"(132). Khan condemns this intrusion and powerfully pleads the case of the local masses, which become victims of this invasion by foreign businesses and industrialists and are denied their essential human rights to identity and freedom.

However, the novel which can be truly labeled as an "environmentalist text" in Uzma Aslam Khan's oeuvre is *Thinner than Skin* (2012). Khan explains some of the core issues of postcolonial environmental concerns in this novel. Like much postmodern and postcolonial fiction, *Thinner than Skin* blends "fictional and factual histories and geographies" (Fletcher 4). The main focus of the novel is on the role of politics of war, state and state institutions, transnational tourism, and commerce in bringing about the ecological crisis. The novel tries to bring "Leopold's Land Ethics" to public consciousness (Mallory 67) and becomes a strong voice for the conservation of the valleys in the northern region of Pakistan. Khan's own land ethics, as presented in the novel, foreground ecological values like living in harmony with nature and other non-human actors.

The novel presents two stories which run parallel; one story revolves around transnational human figures, American and Pakistani-American tourists who travel to the northern regions of Pakistan to photograph the beauty of the northern area, and the second parallel story is of nomads of the northern region who are the indigenous inhabitants of the region. The setting of the narrative is the northern region of Pakistan, which is known for its mythical natural beauty and nomadic lifestyle. Through this parallel design, the novelist juxtaposes the lives of urban people and the indigenous community in order to compare and contrast the mechanical and artificial lifestyle of urban people with the holistic and sustainable lifestyle of native people. Through the character of Nadir, the photography enthusiast, Khan points to the attitude of pervasive instrumentalization, whether regarding the woman's body or the earth-body of mountains, glaciers, and grasslands. To Nadir, these objects are beautiful and meaningful as long as he can perceive them through his camera lens and thus remains a slave to an image rather than to reality. Similarly, he finds happiness, not in the true

relationship of love, but sex. In contrast to this nomad, Maryam, her children, and others live their lives connected to other human beings, animals, and the moods of the seasons and the valley.

The life of these nomads is marked by the absence of technical gadgets and artificial pleasures associated with them. The novel incorporates an important discussion on international war politics and state-oriented business plans, which put the lives of nomads and their natural surroundings into a crisis. For the indigenous Gujjar tribes of Pakistan, man-made maps are of little importance as they recognize only the bioregional markers of mountains, steppes, deserts, and oases. Since the Gujjars do not adhere to state-defined borders they are seen as 'outsiders' by the government.

The novel offers striking examples of the shrinking of the commons. Dispossession and deepening poverty levels follow as a result of the blatant negligence of commons stewardship which manifests as fines imposed by the government on pasturelands that have been the traditional grazing grounds of tribals, and in the practices of intimidation employed by forestry inspectors to exploit the tribals. The novel also holds up for scrutiny the misleading fictions of grand narratives of democratic capitalism that promise to endless growth and the well-being of all. It critiques the new development schemes that play havoc by replacing local animals with foreign species in order to increase international trade and earn a profit. This unthinking intervention by the state places strict restrictions on the freedom of nomad tribes, which severely cripples their "wandering lifestyle" (189). The author explains how the decisions of the government to replace the Kaghan and Kilan goats and "desi," or local sheep, with Australian, resulted in an economic crisis for the family. The Australian sheep alien to the land could not survive sudden "snow drifts" and "icy winds" (190) and "ate all the food and left the indigenous goats bleating in hunger" (191).

The author moves on and broadens the canvas of her narrative to include incidents related to drone attacks, military training camps and vehicles, terrorist groups, and bombing in the valleys along with the beautiful descriptions of giant glaciers, fast flowing rivers, snow peaked mountains of Nanga Parbat and the myths of the valleys. The narrative thus highlights how military and terrorist groups have put in jeopardy the beauty of the valleys and traditional lifestyles rooted in the ancient history and ecological balance. The author informs us about the militants who have devoted themselves to holy war against Sunnis in the valley (254) and the police and military who are engaged in search of these militants. For both of these groups, the valleys and forests have no importance except for using them for setting up training camps. The author points to Mariam and her tribe as those whose lives have been "taken over" (299) by these groups and who could feel that the peace was disappearing from the

valley. Thus Khan highlights the tragic condition of the northern landscapes of Pakistan on account of increasing militant encroachments.

To conclude, these two novels not only illustrate the process of growing urbanization and life in metropolitan cities but also reflect on and critique the reshaping and remaking of Pakistani lives and culture under the influence of growing consumerism, technology, capitalism, and resultant migration of indigenous communities to urban spaces. The metropolitan centers as depicted in these novels display the growing impact of industrial development in the form of deterioration of the natural environment and mark the decline and degeneration of human society and culture. The environmental concerns of the author pose a challenge to the grand narrative of technology-fueled progress since her fiction engages in the global movement for the preservation of nature. The manner in which the writer has responded to social challenges has made a constructive contribution to society and can be best described using Toynbee's term: "creative minorities" (259). These novels have become a site of resistance against imperialistic policies of globalized commerce and industry as the author has forged a strong link between the agenda of social justice in postcolonial societies and ecological justice. Her voice is genuine and powerful and her role is pivotal in raising environmental consciousness for sustainable development in a developing country.

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