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Human/Nature Dualism in Khan's *The Geometry of God: An Eco-feminist Study*

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Abstract: *This research proposes a comparative eco-feminist approach to challenge corporate narratives regarding women's associations with nature. The analysis is centred on Uzma Aslam Khan's (2008) novel, The Geometry of God, aiming to gain insights into Val Plumwood's (2002) contemporary critique of the 'human/nature dualism'. This research argues social constructivism and socialist eco-feminism to explore the differences in how language is employed to understand the eco-feminist assumptions concerning women and their relationship with nature. Eco-feminism, a movement that emerged in the 1990s, posits that the domination and degradation of women and the environment are the results of patriarchal and capitalist systems (Molyneux et al., 1995). This research argues the compelling issues concerning corporate representations and misrepresentations of women and their connections to their surrounding environment. The portrayals of the relationship between brown women and nature highlight the discursive reconfiguration of brown women's identity, examining how female novelists in Pakistani patriarchal societies redefine the narratives that deconstruct the eternal images of women imposed by the patriarchal academia (Mehmood, 2019).*

Key Words: Eco-feminism, Environment, Identity, Brown Woman, Human/Nature Dualism

Introduction

Eco-feminists argue that there is no essential, historical, or uniform understanding of women's nature but women's connections to nature that are socially constructed and biologically predisposed. In 1980, the inaugural eco-feminist conference convened in Amherst, Massachusetts, marking a significant milestone in the emergence of the eco-feminist movement. Over the ensuing decades, this movement gained momentum, driven by profit-oriented technological advancements and consequential environmental degradation on a global scale. The women activists embarked on the exploration of technological developments as they frequently encountered and got connected with these advances and the entrenched forces in favour of patriarchy (Oloka-Onyango et al., 1995). This early cohort of eco-feminists has recognised a fundamental truth of how the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are intertwined and often unfold. This understanding was a focal point during that landmark 1980 conference where feminists emphasised the interconnectedness of environmental concerns and feminist issues, asserting that the domination of women and the exploitation of nature are not isolated phenomena but mutually connected (Dobscha, 1993). As a result, these early proponents of eco-feminism began to identify themselves as part of a broader eco-feminist movement, which centres its analysis on the intricate interplay of class/ gender/ race/ caste and the environment.

This study borrows the theoretical assumptions of Australian eco-feminist Val Plumwood (2002) to explore the prevailing eco-feminist and ecriture feminist constructs concerning nature and gender, identity, and subjectivity in the Pakistani context. This study employs a discursive approach that examines various perceptions within Pakistani society, including power dynamics, hegemony, class structures, and

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gender roles, emphasising their role in driving environmental and societal transformations. Eco-feminists from diverse social backgrounds offer valuable insights into the influence of power structures and cultural norms, especially concerning the marginalisation of female perspectives across different races and communities. This research establishes an activist form of theorisation that plays a central role in examining selected subjects and their interconnectedness with politics, culture, gender dynamics, and the environment, intending to promote transformative change. It seeks to present alternative viewpoints that challenge established narratives and practices within society.

Literature Review

The emergence of eco-feminism as a significant movement can be traced back to the Women's Pentagon Action organised in 1980 by Ynestra King, which drew participation from over 2,000 feminist activists (Gaard, 2011). This event was a powerful demonstration against violence targeting both women and the environment. After this pivotal action, women's protests against violence against women and nature gained momentum and resonated across different locations. In England in 1982, New York in 1983, and Oregon in 1995, women's voices rose in response to the escalating violence against women in peace encampments, further illustrating the depth and diversity of women's activism on ecological issues (Njibwakale, 2019). These early actions introduced the term "eco-feminism," an expression of eco-feminist ethics and political stances on a global scale, becoming a recognised movement in Western contexts while fostering "non-Western links" and evolving into a network of global connections (Haraway, 1991, p. 156). Third-world eco-feminists and activists joined forces through anthologies addressing radical eco-feminist concerns.

However, it is essential to recognise that while ecological activism varies from one context to another, eco-feminist strategies are not universally transferable for addressing ecological challenges across diverse contexts (Hawkins, 1998). The diversity inherent in eco-feminist contexts underscores the necessity for acknowledging eco-feminism as a network of resistance against ecological destruction and entrenched patriarchal legacies. The "incoherence" within eco-feminism suggests that the ecological future does not hinge on a shared ideological position, allowing for the coexistence of various perspectives and the expansion of egalitarian and ecological discourses. Sociologists point out that the challenge in conceptualising this terminology arises from the division of industrial labour and the fragmentation of knowledge, which is an inherent consequence (Gellner, 1975). He further argued that eco-feminists like Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, and Mary Mellor emphasise the marginalisation of individuals and their disconnection from the organic aspects of nature due to industrialisation, resulting in environmental abuse (Salleh, 2003, p. 61).

Eco-feminism, through its analysis of immanent and transcendent meanings, treads a complex path within the realm of eco-feminist politics, often aligning with socialist eco-feminism in their joint efforts to amplify their political voices and emphasise the differences in the natural world (Beder, 2001). Each phase of eco-feminism implies a distinct sense and understanding that is dependent on the context, whether it is active or latent. These linguistic and dialect-based explorations signify the anti-essentialist nature of eco-feminism, echoing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's assertion that essentialism can be strategic and pragmatic (Obiora, 1997). In this regard, Salleh (2003) argues that societies dominated by men often perceive the female body as a "natural resource," positioning the female identity between men and nature. This concept underscores the complex interplay of gender, identity, and nature. The traditional phallogocentric writings have failed to authentically represent women's experiences because they often lack the lived experience of womankind (Walker, 2019). She argues that women writers bear the responsibility of addressing complex issues and presenting contemporary challenges to reclaim identities that have been distorted, depicting women as monsters.

Research Methodology

This study adapts the methodological approach that aims to explore the nuances of eco-feminism and its challenges concerning gender hyper-separation and its critical stance on the dualistic notions of nature and culture in the context of environmental and gender issues. To understand the complexities of eco-feminist analysis, this study examines how eco-feminists object to traditional depictions of women as



inherently closer to nature and as existing outside of culture. It argues why eco-feminists question the portrayal of women as nurturers and explore how this role positions them as the new ideals of humanity. Val Plumwood (2002), a prominent eco-feminist, argues that women are not inherently closer to nature than men. Instead, she emphasises that both men and women coexist within nature and culture. This perspective challenges the notion that women are exclusively relegated to the material sphere of nature. In the critical practice of eco-feminism, women and men are encouraged to participate in caring for the earth and are not confined to predefined roles based on their gender. This perspective extends to rethinking the concepts of women and humanity within the sphere of nature. Val Plumwood (2002) introduces the term "value dualism" to critique the simplistic hierarchical view of dualistic assumptions. This dualism is not limited to the gender binary but also encompasses other forms of exclusion, including racism, ableism, ageism, classism, and naturism. Eco-feminists explore the idea of a 'master identity' that arises from the dualisms present in society. This master identity is associated with those in privileged positions and encompasses qualities tied to the dualised 'others' who are constructed as inferior. Plumwood's (2002) work sheds light on how even women can assume and perpetuate this master identity when they align with oppressive structures that subordinate other groups due to factors such as classism, racism, or naturism. Eco-feminists take a comprehensive view of dualisms and their potential to uphold oppressive and dominant ideologies. This perspective allows for an examination of how dualistic thinking can lead to the marginalisation of socially and culturally inferiorized groups (Hawkins, 1998).

Text Analysis

Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God* (2008) is a female perspective on nature and the cultural dilemmas it grapples with. The novel, inviting scholarly discussions on the interdependence between human-nature relationships and environmental stewardship, weaves environmental concerns and their impact on our religious beliefs together and uncovers the subjugation of women and nature during the post-colonial era in Pakistan. In this context, the post-colonial era signifies not just a historical period but marks the extensive exploitation of both humans and non-humans. This research aims to illuminate the roles played by local Pakistanis in perpetuating colonisation, necessitating a global struggle to overcome this form of domination. The selected text, which remains relevant to contemporary environmental concerns and underscores the moral obligations incumbent upon people to safeguard the environment, examines the historical oppression of women and nature. A multitude of narratives in Uzma Aslam Khan portrays various political crises, using them as a lens to elucidate the environmental crisis within the country and argue the impact of these environmental crises on feminine identity. The story unfolds in the late 1990s, a period when discussions on environmental issues were notably absent from the literary and social landscapes of Pakistan (Khan, 2008).

The novel underscores the emancipating essence of religion that places value on both human and non-human species. Khan's *The Geometry of God* (2008) introduces this realm of nature into the narrative, employing a politically motivated approach that delves into the characters' profound connection with the ancient land, water, and other environmental elements. This human and non-human interdependence significantly defines Pakistan's culture and environment, wherein plants, crops, animals, soil, and water are integral components of the environment. This study delves into the eco-feminist struggle as depicted in *The Geometry of God*, examining the complex relationships between women, nature and culture within a post-colonial context in Pakistan.

Writing about the environmental concerns that Khan prioritised is a challenge to Pakistani authors. This research explores these historical, socio-cultural, and political facets of Pakistan. Khan's *The Geometry of God* acquaints readers with Pakistan's political history. Zahoor and Amal are sensitised to socio-ecological concerns by highlighting the ways imperialist forces have impacted their lives (Khan, 2008). The Zia regime, depicted in the novel, had significant effects on Pakistan's societal progress and development. Noman's case in the text explains how, during this period, endeavours to promote environmentalism, modern studies, and science were discouraged (Khan, 2008). All this serves as a reflection of the naturalised history of a specific region. The juxtaposition of Islam versus science within the narrative provides fertile ground for critical inquiries into environmental concerns. The perspectives of four distinct characters within the story offer a multifaceted exploration of the environmental sphere.

The novel navigates the intricate relationships between characters like Zahoor, a scientist; Amal, a palaeontologist; and Noman, a journalist (Khan, 2008). This study investigates this exploitation of nature and women, interconnecting with religious perspectives and their role in the exploitation and negation of women. The natural world in Pakistani ecopolitical and eco-feminist contexts is reevaluated through the character of Amal Khan. Her struggle unveils public debates on eco-political and eco-feminist issues in Pakistan, such as Science vs. Religion, and facilitates an eco-feminist dialogue that hinges on spiritual and political stances on the environmental crisis.

Amal appears as a Pakistani activist challenging the disregard of both the environment and women by political parties, religious groups, and civil services. The subsequent passage underscores her resolve to break these barriers:

As I break into the sharp and abrupt shelf above that is of two colours, pink and green, I feel exhilarated and not exhausted. Maryum takes swings with quite an easiness, but I cannot use both my hands. Mike also strikes with a hammer beside me in a violent way lovingly. Then we also tear into a rock that is some inches above my head and about a foot above him, where there I am unable to reach. I look upon the crest of these hills, and they have a sudden burst of recollection: I should have to climb over here. (Khan, 2008, p. 313)

Amal's conscientiousness extends to her immediate environment and physical surroundings, as evidenced by her choice of fossil research. Her pursuit of the "lost species" serves as a symbolic representation of the diminishing interaction that defines her struggle for coexistence between humans and other species during development. The act of excavating rocks assumes metaphorical significance, reflecting society's stance on various issues. The resistance put forth by Zahoor and Amal's resistance to corporate and neoliberal capitalist forces converges to form a unified protest. This narrative encapsulates a stance against industrialisation and the commercialisation of indigenous lands, paralleling Mike's "violent, almost loving" approach that unveils the androcentric history (Khan, 2008). Amal is disappointed with her maternal uncle, who overlooks Zahoor because he "can't tolerate that his father is at the front of the culture battle in the country. He can't stand to live" (Khan, 2008, p. 217) on the day of their wedding, offers a glimpse into Khan's eco-feminist perspective on how nature is treated, employing a patriotic motif. In her disapproval of his disregard for the land, Amal articulates her sentiments: "Motherland should be static, idealised rather than loved, traditional finery fading in familiarity, dusty ancient, mistreated in its authenticity, and begging to be revered" (Khan, 2008, p. 217). It is through this postmodern lens that readers can explore Amal's profound connection to the land, evident in her mountain studies from a feminist perspective.

The selected text endeavours to modernise environmental concepts, reshaping our connection with non-human animals. In this regard, religious perspectives often serve as a vehicle for the systematic mistreatment of the more vulnerable individuals. Khan's work scrutinises societal notions about these gaps and silences that exist between the powerful and the marginalised, along with the exploitation of the bond between humans and other living entities, all within the context of this violence-prone environment. The novel's plot is intricately woven through debates on political, scientific, religious, and spiritual issues while also probing the natural world. Amal's journey leads to a deeper understanding of religion and culture. She finds contentment in her distance from human settlements, having witnessed men's involvement in the practices of globalisation. Amal and her grandfather find themselves amidst "hilly areas, fields, grassy expanses, as well as the presence of stinging ants and noisy squirrels" (Khan, 2008, p. 244). Much of Amal's formative years were spent in the company of her scientist and historian grandfather. Consequently, a discourse around oppressive ideologies and the victimisation of less privileged members of Pakistani society, whether human or not, tends to evolve within the literature of this nation.

Themes of oppression, decay, and negligence are woven into the fabric of this selected novel, which underscores the importance of a harmonious collaboration between faith and science to address the marginalisation of the environment. Whether it is observing "the sun slipping behind the rock of an extinct sea [or] the butterfly folding its wings and her toes dipping back" (Khan, 2008, p. 21), Amal finds joy in exploring an ecosystem where she feels deeply connected to nature. "The sun bows toward the trees" (Khan, 2008, p. 40), symbolising a profound harmony between the elements of the natural world:



Chocolate Sunset showed me the beauty that is never enough for me. The birds circle us in flocks with green wings that are trimmed in salmon pink before landing on rocks that are the same shade of pink-green. Their long, delicate tails and breaks are aligned flawlessly, and I have to taste it ... As a result of their upside-down roots, the trees transform into an unruly upside-down residence. They yawn while looking about their gravity-free environment with their big, limpid eyes. Few of them go to the air to go hunting. Some people lick the dirt in Lahore to get a better perspective of stillness. And, like whales, they echolocate. (Khan, 2008, pp. 305, 264)

The novel opens with the aftermath of a rainy night, leaving the air refreshed and the ground damp, as described on the first page. Amal fondly recalls a childhood memory of a butterfly perching on her Nana's head when she was eight years old. She notes, "I spent a lot of time in Nana's company, and he took me for a walk in the Margalla Hills" (Khan, 2008, p. 4). It is during one of these walks in the oak tree-ringed hills that she hears the bleating of deer, the rustling of leaves, and perhaps even the call of a paradise flycatcher. Zahoor, her grandfather, laments the loss of their walks and conversations but reassures her, saying, "Yet, since they are already inside of you, there is no need to remove them" (Khan, p. 40).

Amal's unique perspective, cultivated since childhood, involves seeing the world through an inner eye. She emphasises this when her grandfather presents her with small rocks he has retrieved from his pocket. Her response reflects her deep connection to nature: "I was hoping for a baya nest, carefully sewn with a few soiled eggshells" (Khan, 2008, p. 4). This connection to nature and her inner eye guides her perceptions and experiences throughout the novel.

Use your inner eye to look intently. This animal once swam in the Tethys when it was alive. See how the two rocks have split. Look at how this portion protrudes just a little bit, like the name on a rubber stamp. She reads rocks and has an undeniably spiritual sensitivity to environmental occurrences (Khan, 2008, p. 149).

Amal's unique perspective and connection to the natural world continue to evolve throughout the novel. She engages in the practice of comparing bones from different eras, referring to this as a "correlation." She emphasises the role of human memory in understanding the world, stating that "humans see with their memories as well as their eyes, ears, and hands" (Khan, 2008, p. 158). She delves into the concept of "internal supporting structure" in the context of palaeontology (Khan, 2008, p. 228).

Despite her dedication to her career and her passion for palaeontology, Amal faces criticism from both her and Noman's family. They question her choice to participate in digs with male colleagues. Over time, she grapples with the challenge of balancing her family and professional life. Her commitment to her work remains steadfast, and she declares: "Since there are closed doors, I will learn to be a locksmith" (Khan, 2008, p. 128). She reiterates her connection to nature and her commitment to animals, emphasising that she follows this path because Nana is their "parent entity." In a conversation with her friend Zara, she reflects on the significance of her studies and the importance of understanding life in the context of species and non-humans (Khan, 2008, p. 228). When criticised by friends for her focus on the past and her excavation of ancient materials, Amal defends her perspective, asserting that her interest in life, past and present, is not morbid but healthy (Khan, 2008, p. 131).

She possesses a deep spiritual awareness of non-human elements in the natural world and has a significant encounter with Sufi music. This music becomes a vital component of the narrative, emotionally charged and deeply connected to the subcontinent's culture. As she prepares to leave Islamabad for Lahore, she reflects on the hills and landscapes she is known for, describing them as her "late-night visitors" (Khan, 2008, p. 39). She cannot imagine marking any other location without these hills in her consciousness. Her approach to nature is intimate and experiential, in contrast to the detached objectivity often associated with scientists. This perspective allows Amal to contribute to grassroots resistance within the political context of the environment. The novel weaves environmental themes and debates into its narrative, and Amal's growing environmental consciousness is apparent as she explores and observes the natural world with increasing depth and sensitivity. She describes her observations, such as touching a rough rock and noting its triangular shape, with a sense of wonder and connection (Khan, 2008, p. 4).

Then she says after,

I'm not a creature of stale preservatives but of an open air. Every rustle and its colours are life-reinforcing: fingers of this air slide between the temperature; sun-bleached water of the river bed oozes crimson salt, sparkling like a ruby under the sun. That's the place of my belonging, and this is the place where I was balanced: at the bank of that remnant sea. (Khan, 2008, p. 306)

Amal's childhood experiences are deeply intertwined with her connection to nature. On one occasion, she becomes entranced by a couple sitting beneath an acacia tree. Her observations led her to consider the tree's role in preventing soil erosion, and she noted that it bears small white flowers that could not thrive in the ancient Tethys (Khan, 2008). Her love for nature is evident in her fascination with the underground connections that Nana explains to her. He tells her that the hills are underground, and everything she sees—the fields, cliffs, prickly grass, stinging ants, and noisy squirrels—is merely on the surface (Khan, 2008). As she matures, Amal's perception of rocks evolves from initially seeing them as ugly material to recognising their significance. She observes that many people around her show no concern for the preservation or degradation of the environment. Amal's keen interest and emotional attachment to nature draw attention to the factors that shape such attitudes. For her, environmental ignorance is a barbaric and brutal act. Uzma Aslam Khan suggests alternative perspectives for understanding a region by involving Amal with non-human elements, which aligns with Val Plumwood's (2002) idea of breaking down human/nature dualism. Khan challenges the boundaries between human and non-human nature, encouraging readers to experience the world in open and non-reductive ways.

Khan's broader body of work, including this novel, is seen as contributing to ecocritical literature by incorporating cultural practices. She provides readers with a vast experiential framework that encourages thinking beyond established boundaries, paying attention to silenced voices, particularly the Earth, often deemed lifeless and inconvenient (Plumwood, 2002). The selected novel aims to foster a cultural shift in Pakistan and communicate the value of nature to readers. Khan's de-centering approach prompts readers to reflect on the benefits nature bestows upon humanity. It broadens their acute perception and sensitivity, moving them beyond preconceived limitations rooted in human-centric perspectives. This perspective shift allows readers to connect with the components of nature (Plumwood, 2002). Khan's narrative emphasises the rocks as a physical embodiment of the mysteries they hold (Khan, 2008). Her message underscores the importance and necessity of nature and the physical world. Like Plumwood's (2002) belief, this story also presents "respectful ways on the earth, for other elements," harmoniously blending readers' efforts to nurture and value the Earth's ecological body (Plumwood, 2002).

Through this lens, Amal's exploration of socio-political issues in society leads her to observe the hilly rocks with greater curiosity and depth, reflecting her evolving understanding of the interconnectedness of nature and human existence.

These rocks look colourful when I step on them. In a few seconds, we've seen what takes millions of years to evolve. I have lost myself in picking up the rocks, turning over the mover to rubbing. I began to see more shapes of the rocks. (Khan, 2008, pp. 18-19)

In this narrative, Amal observes the distinct colours of the rocks, describing the chocolate mudstone and limestone as resembling mint powder, while the sandstone appears pinker than before. She recalls her Nana's explanation that these shades help trace the transformation of the Tethy's low shelter from an estuary mid-ocean to its current state as terrestrial rocks. Amal emphasises how these rapid changes can be witnessed in just moments despite the lengthy process of evolution they represent. The scorching heat envelops her, casting a yellowish hue over everything. The communication between Amal and Zahoor underscores the roles that Pakistanis play concerning nature. Khan emphasises the essential interconnections between human beings and their environment. The narrative portrays a society in which political parties vehemently discourage discussions about science and theoretical evolution. Zahoor and Amal use the concept of 'Nature' to describe this process of evolution, reflecting their profound spiritual connection to the natural world (Khan, 2008).

Khan (2008) vividly portrays the delicate ecology of Islamabad, her favourite city, which faces threats due to rapid construction and urbanisation. She underscores the characters' relationships with other species and their ethical responsibilities in preserving nature against the interests of profit-driven companies and political elites, which have become obstacles to environmental protection. Khan (2008)



also sheds light on the consequences of insufficient preservation and the exploitation of other species in various regions of Pakistan. The narrative highlights the detrimental impact of ecosystem exploitation in an ever-changing environment in Islamabad. Khan mourns the loss of areas of natural beauty that once had a positive influence on both the biological and spiritual aspects of Pakistanis. Amal vividly describes her experience during her mountain visit to Islamabad, where she encounters snow-covered high peaks and the crisp, sweet air as she inhales deeply (Khan, 2008).

Conclusion

This research project seeks to uncover oppressive frameworks rooted in patriarchy, drawing comparisons between the subjugation of women and non-human entities. The selected text serves as compelling evidence of male-dominated ideologies of oppression. This research delves into the roles played by men in oppressing women and the roles played by dominant entities in subjugating nature. It also explores the actions of higher social groups and institutions in their oppression of marginalised social groups. The conceptual underpinning of dualistic thinking serves as a backdrop for the textual analyses in a comparative manner. Plumwood's (2002) concept of 'value dualisms' is woven into the analysis and interpretation to uncover their presence in the oppression of marginalised entities based on factors such as classism, sexism, and naturism. In essence, this research draws heavily from the eco-feminist perspectives advocated by eco-feminists. In some instances, the theoretical positions of scholars like Plumwood (2002) are aligned with each other. The research adopts a stance deeply rooted in the eco-feminist perspective, highlighting the interconnectedness between the domination of women, nature, and Others within the Pakistani community, and hence, identifies five key features related to the domination of women and nature within the cultural landscape – 'value-hierarchical thinking,' 'oppositional value dualism,' 'power-over power,' 'privilege,' and the 'logic of domination' – to understand the environmental crises in Pakistani context.

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