

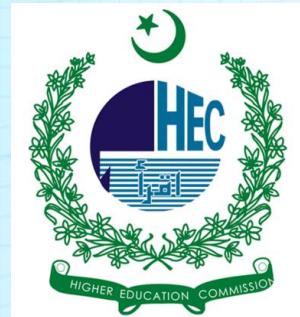
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**Analyzing the Portrayal of Indigenous Culture and Language in
Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God***



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Abstract

This research explores the indigenous culture and language in *The Geometry of God*, by Uzma Aslam Khan. The novel takes place in northern Pakistan and examines the intricate dynamics among the various communities of the region. Within the context of post-colonial theory, this research analyzes the novel's embodiment of the consequences of colonization on indigenous people's cultures and languages, and how the characters in the novel manage the conflicts of the old and the new. Based upon the in-depth analysis of the narrative, this research articulates that in *The Geometry of God*, marginalization of culture and language of the indigenous people's communities is a backlash to the prevailing hegemony of such discourse. The novel's narrative preserves and documents the cultural and linguistic heritages of the people's communities of the region, which are of great significance for the social, political, and environmental sustainability of the region. The research examines the complexities of narrative structures of the novel in representing the complexity of the indigenous communities and the resistance to oversimplified and exotic stereotypes of indigenous people. This research contribute to the use of literature as a tool of indigenous advocacy by addressing the gaps in literature and offering a more complex analysis of dominant assumptions on the indigenous communities.

Keywords: Indigenous culture, Cultural identity, Linguistic heritage, Postcolonial Pakistani fiction, Marginalized voices

Background of the Study

Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God* analyzes the relationships of various groups of people living in the northern regions of Pakistan. *The Geometry of God* examines the effects of colonialism on the diverse cultures, languages, and peoples of Pakistan, as well as the challenges of modernity and post-modernity, as globalization and modern technologies threaten traditional, indigenous cultures and languages. It is important to study the effects of literature on the traditional, indigenous cultures, and languages, especially as they face the challenges of globalization and modern technologies.

The diverse peoples of Pakistan speak more than 70 languages and cultures. These

languages, however, are fading due to various sociopolitical and economic issues. Pakistan's indigenous people, especially the indigenous people of Pakistan, have been victims of discrimination and marginalization following the British colonial partition of Pakistan in 1947. *The Geometry of God* examines the effects of colonialism on the indigenous peoples and cultures of Pakistan. With the help of Literature, the dominant narratives around the literary representations of indigenous cultures and languages can be refined and the importance of these narratives highlighted. Some literature has investigated the recognition of the presence of indigenous cultures and languages in literature. However, the intersection of these themes within the Pakistani literary context has received scant attention. This study focuses on Pakistani literature's potential in reframing narratives on the indigenous cultures and languages, and more specifically, the subcontinent's Pakistani literature. This research looks at representations of indigenous languages and cultures in the novel, *The Geometry of God*, and examines the contributions of the novel to the understanding of these themes. By employing a postcolonial lens to *The Geometry of God*, this research aims to engage with the existing discourse on the contribution of Literature towards the inclusion of multiple cultures and the diversity of diverse literature.

Increasing globalization presents an ever-growing threat to the survival of the world's diverse cultures and languages, especially those of the Indigenous Peoples. Literature studying and analyzing Indigenous Peoples' cultures and languages can offer the world new and more positive paradigms to consider. Uzma Aslam Khan's novel, *The Geometry of God*, analyzes the relationships among the various communities of northern Pakistan and the effects of colonialism on the Indigenous cultures and languages of that region. This case study addresses and analyzes how *The Geometry of God* cultivates an understanding of the Indigenous cultures and languages of the region, especially as it pertains to Pakistan.

Because of the various, and often, competing political, economic, and social structures in Pakistan, the Languages and Cultures of the Indigenous Peoples are constantly threatened with extinction. From the time of the British Colonials and then through to the time of Independence in 1947, the Indigenous Peoples of Pakistan have been subjected to overwhelming marginalization and discrimination. *The Geometry of God* illustrates the effects of colonialism on Indigenous Peoples and Languages in

Pakistan. The Pendulum swings of time in the communities and regions of Pakistan illustrate the harsh effects of a lack of preservation of Indigenous Cultures.

Studies have assessed the literary treatment of indigenous cultures and languages in different fields, but little is known about how these two aspects have impacted Pakistani literature. The present study seeks to analyze *The Geometry of God* to examine the representation of indigenous cultures and languages within the post-colonial context, to provide a fresh perspective to the ongoing debate about the impact of literature on the promotion of cultural pluralism and inclusivity. The study will analyze the elements within the novel that provide an alternative perspective on indigenous cultures and languages in the context of Pakistan and contribute to the discourse literature that advocates cultural pluralism and acknowledges the diversity of humanity.

Thesis Statement

Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God* engages with dominant narratives excluding indigenous peoples, cultures, and languages of Pakistan, focusing instead on their pluralism and richness. This research, using a postcolonial lens, attempts to examine the representation of indigenous cultures and languages in the novel and seeks to understand them in the context of Pakistan. The research claims that *The Geometry of God* actively avoids the reduction or romanticization of the narratives of the indigenous peoples and foregrounds the value of sustaining the pluralism of indigenous cultures and languages, and their political, social, and ecological value to the region. The research demonstrates the role of literature in dismantling hegemonic narratives and promoting cultural plurality.

Research Questions

- 1) What impact did colonialism have in *The Geometry of God* and in the case of the indigenous cultures and languages of Pakistan? How is this represented in the novel?
- 2) What are the experiences of indigenous communities represented in the novel, and how are those experiences not exotic, simplified, or romanticized?
- 3) What are the dominant, yet, neglected, indigenous cultures and languages the novel articulates, and how do these cultures reinforce the need to change the dominant narratives of indigeniety?

- 4) How do the novel's characters experience and border the gaps of tradition and modernity, and what does that mean for the surviving of indigenous languages and cultures?

Significance of the Study

Research of the Geometry of God and the articulation of the indigenous culture and language is important for the following reasons.

First, the novel articulates the impacts of colonialism on indigenous cultures and languages in Pakistan with great detail and complexity, and this is a critical area for understanding the social, political, and cultural contexts of the country. The research informs us of the ways in which colonialism continues to control and determine the pathways of Pakistan and the hurdles indigenous people face in sustaining their cultures and languages.

Second, the study helps the understanding of the importance of cultural diversity and inclusivity in literature. The Geometry of God counteracts the more common narratives and provides understanding of the importance of inclusive accounts of the indigenous cultures and indigenous languages. This research helps us understand more of the several ways literature can foster social justice, human rights, and the respect for the cultural diversity of all people.

Third, the study emphasizes the importance of indigenous cultures and indigenous languages for the health and the resilience of local communities and the ecosystems. The Geometry of God illustrates the interrelationships among cultural pluralism, ecological balance, and social justice, and advocates for a more integrated approach of development that embraces and celebrates the indigenous local cultures and indigenous languages.

Lastly, the study adds to the efforts made to the recognition and the preservation of indigenous cultures and languages in Pakistan and the world. The study discusses the obstacles that indigenous people encounter while safeguarding the preservation of their cultures and languages, and advocates for the need of support policies and actions to further their efforts. The research illustrates the literature's role in these efforts by critiquing the narratives and presenting alternative narratives that embrace cultural plurality and diversity in languages, and relocating the focus to the need for cultural pluralism and diversity in languages for the societies.

Literature Review

In recent years, there has been more attention to the representation of culture, and more specifically, the culture and languages of the indigenous people in literature. While literature has been mostly accepted as a means to promote the appreciation of culture and the fighting of racism, the literature that represents indigenous people and languages has been riddled with stereotyping and the use of the culture in a superficial way (Chandra, 2021). This trend is beginning to change with literature that challenges the prevailing views and demonstrates the appreciation of indigenous cultures and languages in a more sophisticated manner.

The Geometry of God by Uzma Aslam Khan is a perfect example of celebrating the experiences of the indigenous people of Pakistan and celebrating their cultural and linguistic diversity. The novel challenges the prevailing negative and marginalizing descriptions of the indigenous people and cultures by emphasizing the need to promote and sustain the indigenous people, cultures, and languages for the social, political, and ecological sustainability of the region.

The Geometry of God has been studied, and particularly, Afzal (2019) argues that the novel helps to understand the challenges indigenous people face when trying to maintain the peoples' culture and languages vis-a-vis the growing impacts of globalization and the resultant cultural homogenization. The novel depicts the contradictions of modernity and tradition and how the preservation of indigenous languages and cultures is affected by the changes brought by modernity. Afzal (2019) infers that the indigenous people's modernity and tradition struggles, in the face of rapid changes, is reflected in the novel. Thus, it may provide clues as to the methods of indigenous people in asserting themselves in a contemporary world.

Narrative Strategies and Cultural Identity

There is research on *The Geometry of God*, placing the text in the frame of late 20th century Pakistani society and exploring the individual voices negotiating cultural identity through the lens of narration and testimony. Afia Ashraf claims the novel employs several first-person narrators to encapsulate various Pakistani cultural identities and counter the politically and bureaucratically influenced monolithic national narratives (Ashraf 2022). Ashraf accounts for the protagonists' counter-personal histories as alternative literary testimonies offsetting the dominant narratives

and the ‘Pakistan’ definition, culture, language, and the variations of the ‘Pakistani’ identity.

This plurality of narratives possesses the potential for indigenous cultural representation. While Ashraf does not focus on indigenous languages, the distinct narrative voices, coupled with postcolonial cultural studies, speak to the defiance of dominant narratives through the negotiation of self, which is a theme central to the field.

Postcolonial Studies and Hybridization of Languages

Postcolonial studies highlight the hybrid nature of languages in South Asian Anglophone literature. According to Ashraf, Kabir in the Journal of Postcolonial Writing demonstrates that the cultural hybridity of a text relates to a lived multilingualism and a vernacular English, a blended English, Urdu, and local expressions. Such hybridity exemplifies complex postcolonial identities in which the use of local languages is woven within colonial and postcolonial language structures. Although Ashraf is not explicitly dealing with the theory of indigenous languages, he and reviewers, including the one for Ploughshares, note the differences that Mehwish employs, such as unique phonetic spellings and speech patterns, as a literary device to foreground differences and reclaim agency within a predominantly English text.

Blindness, Metaphor, and Understanding Cultures

Khan's work has drawn the attention of many scholars who examine The Geometry of God as employing visions and blindness metaphors related to culture and epistemology. Dr. Neelam Jabeen situates blindness as not just a physical absence of sight, but employs a metaphor of blindness which speaks to a particular concept and a functional lens, a critique toward the values and the epistemology of a society. Khan employs the figure of the blind Mehwish to subvert the dominant ways of “seeing,” including the privileging of the Western scientific gaze, in a way that critiques the cultural assumptions and the relationships that exist between knowledge, perception, and language.

In the postcolonial study of Blindness, Kharal and Zafar further argue that this metaphor decouples from Eurocentric model(s) of explaining ‘vision’, and proposes that other forms of knowing (including indigenous and other non-rational, non-empirical forms) warrant literary articulation.

While these studies do not directly engage with indigenous peoples, they suggest the novel's engagement with dominant cultural orders, and with what the novel describes as embodied and linguistic otherness, which is a constituent of the indigenous cultural paradigm when interpreted through a wider postcolonial lens.

Socio-Political Context and the Politics of Language

The literature also situates *The Geometry of God* within the socio-political context of Pakistan, especially during the Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization and the politics of science and religion. The study demonstrates how the state used educational language and cultural discourse as a vehicle to impose ideological domination. In the novel, this socio-political context shapes the functions of language, culture, and the production of knowledge, and the ways the characters operate within and through these elements.

Pascal Zinck's critique also supports this line of thought, whereby he demonstrates how the narrative critiques the dominant ideology and cultural denialism with particular reference to religion, science, and identity in Pakistan.

Kadir (2017) argues that *The Geometry of God* goes against the dominant perception of relegating and undervaluing indigenous cultures and languages to the perceivable and exotic. The novel is against the perception of indigenous cultures and languages lacking value and offers a complex representation of indigenous cultures and languages. Kadir (2017) argues that the diverse and complex representation of the cultures and languages in the novel contributes to the discourse on the value of culture and inclusion.

The portrayal of indigenous cultures and languages in *The Geometry of God* demonstrates how literature can disrupt dominant narratives and offer a more complex and respectful understanding of such cultures and practices. Indigenous literature demonstrates the importance of preserving culture and language in the face of global market forces and cultural homogenization. It also demonstrates that the preservation of culture and language is central to the social and ecological health of communities. Robinson (2017) notes that Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* depicts Native American communities and successfully counters the dominant narratives that silence and marginalize the voices of indigenous people and their cultures. Ghosh (2019) analyzes Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and defends the view that the novel depicts the social and ecological value of cultural and linguistic diversity in a

community.

Afzal (2019) examines *The Geometry of God* by Uzma Aslam Khan and investigates how the novel balances the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, in relation to the other 'native' people of Pakistan. The study suggests that there is more to the novel in relation to the complexity of the struggle of the 'native' people in Pakistan, particularly the 'native' people's struggle to maintain their cultural and linguistic identity in the era of globalization and linguistic and cultural imperialism.

Some other work has focused on the more abstract level, such as the politics of representation of the (Chandra, 2021) scope of the fusion of the (of) indigenous cultures and languages). The study underscores the politics of the bottom and top of the indigenous cultures and languages and the lack of representation of them in the literature. Previous work has brought to the fore the need for the representation of the indigenous cultures and languages in fiction and the advocacy of cultural diversity and linguistic pluralism for the survival and sustainability of the marginal societies. In this context, the present study will examine the representation of the indigenous culture and languages in *The Geometry of God* and propose the advocacy of cultural pluralism and linguistic diversity in literature.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The research is qualitative in nature and utilizes textual analysis of *The Geometry of God* which is examined through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Post-Colonial Theory. The primary concern of CRT is the intersection of race and racism with other social identities, roles, and the hierarchy of power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Conversely, Post-Colonial Theory deals with the persistence of Colonization and Imperialism and their influence on the socio-cultural and political architecture of a society (Said, 1994).

Utilizing the aforementioned frameworks, this study intends to analyze what specific elements of the depiction of Indigenous culture and language in *The Geometry of God* reflects representation and power relations. Moreover, this study intends to demonstrate how the novel addresses the place and role of culture within a community, particularly in terms of cultural identity and community resilience, and the complexities of a community's cultural system, especially within the parameters of language revitalization, cultural identity, and community resilience.

Data Analysis

The novel demonstrates the effects of colonialism on the cultures and languages of the colonized people of Pakistan by showing how colonialism also affected cultural practices and the diversity of languages of the people. One example of this is the main character, Rafiullah, who experiences internal conflict with his Western education and modern lifestyle and attempts to balance this with his Pashtun heritage and culture. Additionally, he observes the fading of the Kalasha people and their culture and language in the face of an overpowering amalgamation of dominant cultures and languages. This work of literature expresses the colonialist systems in Pakistan and their ongoing effects on the indigenous cultures and languages of the people.

The novel expresses the rich and varied experiences of the indigenous people and the ways in which they have been impacted in their numerous cultural expressions, beliefs, social systems, and community organization. It also reflects on the indigenous peoples' experiences in the process of colonization and the modern waves of globalization, with cultural and linguistic erosion and the added complexities of social and political marginalization.

The novel pays focus to the rich and complex experiences of indigenous people, without attempting to simplify or further complicate the processes at work. It presents authentic multifaceted and dynamic characterizations of indigenous peoples, without integrating stereotypical and reductionist descriptions of indigenous peoples' portrayals. The focus is to exemplify indigenous peoples along with their internal and intricate systems, enduring cultures, histories, and identities.

The novel goes against stereotypes and portrayals of native people shamelessly romanticizing and fetishizing the cultures of native people and focuses instead on the culture and the integration into the daily lives of indigenous people. The book shows the culture and the variety of cultures and languages of the native people and the community that they serve. The book shows that the preservation of the community and the culture of the people is vital in maintaining the community of the dominating populations and languages.

The novel does not show the people of the community in a simplistic or romantic light, as savage and primitive. Instead, the book shows that they are complex and unique and that the romanticization and simplification of the cultures and

languages of the communities come from a place of ignorance. The narrative brings to light the importance of dominant cultures and the understanding of the value of native people and their communities. The book goes against the common belief that cultures and populations that dominate the native people and communities have a higher value than the native people and communities. The novel portrays the Kalasha community as a mixed and colorful community with its own culture, language, and traditions. Also, Rafiullah's character, who is Majid's Pashtun friend (and Rafiullah is also a Kalasha community member), reinforces the notion that culture is not a singular monolith but a heterogeneous system that can be diversified.

The novel also illustrates the Kalasha community's efforts to rebuild and strengthen their culture through the process of language reclamation and the obstacles they face to achieve their goals. The story centers on the significance, essence, and the multiple layers of the indigenous cultures and the (often disregarded and overlooked) indigenous languages, which texts often portray as marginal. It creates a more diverse and pluralistic view of the cultures and the languages and presents the significance that a culture-preserving mechanism like the reclamation or revitalization of the culture's indigenous language can serve.

The Geometry of God has an empathetic depiction of Indigenous Cultures and Languages of Pakistan which helps fosters a growing appreciation of literature's ability to enhance cultural and literary diversity and promote inclusivity. Its exploration of the Kalasha Community and specifically the character Rafiullah helps to understand literature's advocacy for cultural diversity and pluralism in Pakistan. The novel also seeks to counter the central storylines which overshadow the importance of Indigenous Cultures and Languages. In Pakistan, where the majority's cultural and linguistic oppression of the indigenous peoples has left a legacy of devastating consequences, the marginalization of literature is especially needed. In Pakistan, the advocacy of the novel underscores the importance and value of Indigenous Cultures and Languages, and fosters an appreciation of cultural diversity and inclusivity.

The novel also demonstrates literature's ability to encourage empathy and understanding across cultural and linguistic divides. The complex and diverse experiences of the Indigenous Peoples, which the novel portrays, promote inter

cultural engagement of the readership and the appreciation of the diversity of the society in Pakistan. *The characters in The Geometry of God* grapple with the preservation of indigenous cultures and languages the most with respect to their different approaches to the negotiation of the tension of modernity and tradition. Here are the characters of the novel and how they balance the tension of modernity and tradition:

- The character that predominantly embodies the modernity and tradition, and, in particular, the conflict in the novel, is Rafiullah, the protagonist. He is a Kalasha graduate and engineer, and thus in a unique position to traverse the two. He is committed and passionate in the preservation of cultural heritage and the Kalasha language, but advocates preservation of cultural practices and the Kalasha language and advocates the need to modernize practices.
- In the same manner, The Kalasha community also balances conflict in tradition and modernity. The Kalasha community in the book is portrayed as a strong believer of traditional practices and a flexible and adaptive believer of modern practices. For instance, the community understands the modern practice of tourism and how it can be used as a source of revenue but is equally committed to the practice of preserving their rich cultural practices.
- The Kalasha youth are able to manage the tension between the two ends of the spectrum - the two extremes of embracing modernity and the total rejection of the past. Most of the youth Kalasha are opting to fully embrace modernity and are pushing away all forms of the past. Alternatively, some youth have decided to hold onto all forms of the past, even the language and practices, and continue to advocate for cultural preservation.

The preservation of the past, indigenous practices, and languages are all tied to modernity and the future. In the process of 'losing' the past, the practices and languages tied to the cultural identity will be 'lost' if a society fully modernizes. The key to the preservation of indigenous cultures and languages will always be found in the tension between the two extremes and the continuous state of negotiation.

The Geometry of God presents an intricate and thoughtful examination of the indigenous cultures and languages of Pakistan. However, it also presents some shortcomings that should be corrected in future representations of the literature.

Although the novel revolves around the Kalasha people and community, it does not reflect the richness and variety of the other indigenous people, cultures, and languages in the country. In future literary endeavors, this can be rectified by encompassing a broader selection of indigenous groups and their languages. The novel can also be viewed as outlining the cultures of the people by depicting them as stagnant and mono-dimensional. In future literature the other representations should be dynamic. Even though the author is from Pakistan, the literature is still predominantly based on the outsider views in regard to the Kalasha community. In future literature, this can be resolved by having a greater amount of literature based on indigenous people and community views, and allowing them to express themselves.

Discussion

To mitigate future representations of indigenous literature, the primary focus should be on the authentic, balanced, and holistic depiction of cultural and linguistic diversity of the indigenous peoples, which can be fostered through collaboration with indigenous peoples and the literary inclusion of their voices. Furthermore, the avoidance of reductive and monolithic portrayals of the cultures and languages of the indigenous peoples should be placed clearly in the foreground. Through literature, the authentic and holistic representation of peripheral cultures and languages, especially those of indigenous peoples, can foster multiculturalism and the integration of peripheral and smaller voices of disparate cultures and their languages which is found in indigenous peoples literature.

Analyzing *The Geometry of God* in contrast with other literary representations of indigenous peoples' languages and cultures in Pakistan can help understand literature's representation of indigenous peoples and their cultures.

The Geometry of God engages in pertinent discourse with respect to postcolonial theory, cultural identity, and social justice. It shows the effect of colonialism on the indigenous people's cultures and languages, and emphasizes the struggles of the people to reclaim their rightful place and preserve their cultural identity and heritage in the face of systemic oppression and marginalization.

The novel examines cultural identity vis-a-vis social justice and equity. It demonstrates the need to acknowledge and preserve the cultural, social, and ecological heritage of various communities, and the extent to which this unequal

heritage contributes to social justice and ecological sustainability.

Moreover, the novel addresses oppressive narratives that neglect and marginalize indigenous cultures and languages, and promote homogenization and assimilation. It provides a corrective account that shows the need to and value of inter civilizational contact and the cultural inter ^ interchange of diverse world cultures and civilizations.

The Geometry of God adds to the ongoing discussion of the necessity of the promotion of cultural diversity and inclusivity, and the importance of confronting dominant and oppressive power structures that drive social and environmental injustice, as well as inequity. It outlines the importance of acknowledging and appreciating the different cultural practices and traditions as means of creating just and equitable societies.

Conclusion

This study investigates Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God* as a literary engagement which foregrounds indigenous culture and languages as central mode of resistance against epistemic erasure and the cultural homogenization. The polyphonic narrative, multi-lingualism and multiple landscape and memory metaphors and belief systems of the novel retrieve the indigenous ways of knowing that are systematically and structurally ignored by colonial and postcolonial power. The author's conscious use of indigenous lexicon and oral tradition, culturally bound metaphors and narrative strategies, renders the monolithic use of English a literary means of oppression and slows the dominant Anglo-American colonial and postcolonial hegemony of literature. Khan also exemplifies that language, particularly indigenous language, is an archive of lived experiences, consciousness, and identity, and also of a collective memory.

This study also showcases that the indigenous culture of the novel is not presented as stagnant or primitive folklore, rather as a living, dynamic culture that can negotiate with modernity, science, and religion. *The Geometry of God* reconciles the Western rationalism and Indigenous knowledge systems. This novel breaks down the boundaries of tradition and modernity and unveils their interdependence, contrary to the prevailing perception of them being oppositional. The novel's use of multiple codes, un-translated phrases and hybrid forms serve as a narrative mechanism and a means to challenge and confront cultural difference.

The Geometry of God engages with postcolonial literary discourse, re-envisioning

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indigenous culture and languages as intellectual asset rather than marginal sites of discourse. The novel demonstrates the importance of ethically engaging with the subaltern and the need to ‘save’ the endangered languages and cultural practices within the scope of contemporary literature. By placing indigenous voices at the forefront, Khan contests dominant histories, but more importantly, creates a space whereby multiple, and at times, conflicting identities and forms of knowledge are represented. It is, therefore, an important text in discussions on the cultural preservation, the pluralism of languages, and the postcolonial representation of the other.

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