

## The portrayal of Political Violence in Harris Khalique's *No Fortunes to Tell*

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### Abstract

*This paper studies political violence and the acts of terror in the Pakistani society as presented in Harris Khalique's No Fortunes to Tell. Khalique resists religious extremism, violence and terrorist attacks and focuses on the socio-political crisis in Pakistan. Greenblatt's philosophy of new historicism and his concepts of resonance and wonder are the guiding threads for the study of the selected text. Following the new historicists' concept that a literary text is the product of time, place and circumstances, and social constructions shape the artistic representations which have power to alter and resist them as well. This study explores violence and terrorist attacks, particularly in Waziristan, Swat and other parts of Pakistan during the previous two decades and highlights Khalique's portrayal of the violation of basic human rights by the Talibans' use of force on the one hand and the conflicts between state and non-state actors on the other.*

**Key Words:** Political Violence, Terror, New Historicism, Resonance, Extremism, Non-state Actors

### Introduction

Harris Khalique is "one of the finest voices of contemporary Pakistan" (Tanweer, 2007) and a poet of "myriad sensibilities," whose poems incorporate both "tradition and modernity" and his "humanism reminds one of Saadat Hasan Manto and Nazir Akbarabadi" (Rumi, 2013). According to Mahmood, Khalique has "emerged as a strong voice" after Taufiq Rafat, Daud Kamal and Maki Khureshi, which the contemporary literary circle was lacking (Mahmood, 2019) whereas Rehman says that Khalique's poetry is "daring and candid," and deals with present-day social and political questions (Rehman, 2019) He is conscious of the tapestry of political and historical changes over the years in Pakistan. Like the Urdu language poets Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Habib Jalib, Khalique writes poetry

of commitment which is reflected by his deep political, cultural and historical awareness. In fact, he has raised his voice against injustice, oppression, religious intolerance and identity issues and his poetic consciousness have gained such a purposeful direction from "Czeslaw Milosz, Nizam Hikmet, Anna Akmatova and Pablo Neruda" (Tanweer, 2012). According to Tariq Rehman: "Khalique's *No Fortunes to Tell* is more than a milestone in Pakistan's literary journey" (2019). This collection of twenty-six poems has registered his resistance to human suffering and has exposed the political issues related to different conflict-hit geographical locations in the context of 9/11 and the consequences of the war on terror in Pakistan. Khalique particularly focuses on the historical,

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cultural, religious and political issues related to Sufi culture in Pakistan, Talibanisation in Swat, Waziristan, and Baluchistan. Basically, three historical and political changes are his focus: firstly, military rule and the rise of sectarianism during the Zia era in the 1970s; secondly, the consequences of American involvement in the Soviet-Afghan issue; and thirdly, the changing political scenario after 9/11. Particularly, the war on terror pushed Pakistan into a perpetual state of crisis and even after two decades, the Taliban and the extremist groups kept ruining the social, cultural and political fabric of Pakistani society.

Though Pakistani Anglophone poetry is "a body of works, created by a myriad of influences" (Shamsie, 2007, p.257) yet Rahman (2018) claims that the Pakistani poets, just like Pakistani writers of fiction and drama, did not react in any notable way to political and historical ups and downs in Pakistan. Kumar (2007) criticizes the literary sensibility of the Pakistani Anglophone poets who, to him, are neither modern nor Pakistani in the true sense because "Pakistani poetry does not operate within the measurable calendar time ...and the poets lapse into the pre-national cosmic time or the pre-geological time (p. 94). He argues that Pakistani poets reveal a unique sense of "historylessness" (p.93) which is not such an "absence of history." Rather, it is a "lack of an exclusive and autonomous nationalist past" (p.93). He has referred to Salman Tariq Qureshi and Zulfiqar Ghose, who seem to search "beyond official histories" and look "beyond apolitical geography ."He refers to Rafat's preference to write about Mohenjo-Daro and Buddhism instead of his own Pakistani historical, political and religious issues. The occasional references to the "ground realities of present-day Pakistan" (p.106) in the writings of Alamgir Hashmi and Maki Qureshi counter this observation. This article echoes Pakistani poets' indifference to and lack of interest in socio-political and historical issues of this Land of the Pure. On the one hand, "poetry remains primarily ahistorical in nature and scope" (p. 117), and on the other hand, the cultural impact of Sufism is not pronounced. Neither history nor culture has emerged strongly in the Anglophone verses written in Pakistan. Kumar argues that Pakistanis are victims of "multiple historical

betrayals," and that is why the poets find "refuge in the pre-historical and the trans-national" themes (p.117). A contemporary Pakistani poet and critic, Yusuf (2012) gives a historical and critical account of Pakistani poetry and highlights Rafat's contribution to the literature that intentionally resisted the western canon by shifting his focus on the Pakistani metaphors and imagery. Yusuf (2019) sheds light on the themes of Zeest Hashmi's poetry as embedded in Pakistani history and reflects the cultural and socio-political aspects of Peshawar, whereas Ahsan (2019) points out the "association of culture and environment" (p.414) with particular focus on postmodern ecological concerns in Zeest Hashmi's *Kohl and Chalk* (2013). Hashmi's poetry is eco-centered. Her work celebrates the beauty of nature and the culture of Peshawar and mourns human indifference, moral degradation and destruction of the natural environment. Sajjad and Anjum (2019) worked on the elements of Endonostalgia in the poems by Kaleem Omar and have found multiple references to childhood memories which made Omer's poetry an amalgamation of pleasure and sorrow. Shamsie (2017, p. xii) discussed the Pakistani literary scenario in detail with "2011 as the cut-off date" for her book. Regarding Pakistani literary progress Ilona Yusuf (as cited in Aslam, 2016) endorses that even though Pakistani poets writing in English are unnoticeable and marginalized yet, "isolation did not deter them from writing ."The above articles have revealed that previously Pakistani Anglophone poets' were, to some extent, indifferent to political and social issues.

### Theoretical Framework/Research Methodology

For this study, new historicism has been selected as a theoretical framework. The selected verses from *No Fortunes to Tell* (2019) have been placed in their socio-historical framework in order to study Khalique's response to grave issues in Pakistan. The central claim of New Historicism is that "literature doesn't exist in a privileged realm of its own but is fundamentally connected to the political world outside of it" (Hopkins, 2016, p. 72). It is regarded as a product of time, place, and circumstances of its composition. The proponents of the new historicism have challenged the concept of

"Literature as an autonomous aesthetic form... detached from other kinds of cultural practices" (Rice & Waugh, 2001). They have rejected "the anti-historical precepts of New Criticism, Structuralism and Deconstruction," and their followers "seek to study literature as a part of a wider cultural history" and endorse the "relationship... between literature and society" (Gray, 1992, p.137). As [Bertens \(2002\)](#) says that the new historicists "reject both the autonomy and the individual genius of the author and the autonomy of the literary work" (p. 176). Though they "see literary texts as absolutely inseparable from their historical context" (p.176), the role of the author, "determined by the historical circumstances" (p.176), is not ignored. [Greenblatt \(1988\)](#) argues that literature is written in cultural background and it is a social practice with its negotiations and contests. "Social constructions, such as social inequality, shape artistic representation and, in return, have power to shape, alter and resist it" (p. viii). Greenblatt (1989) does not reject the role of the author: "The work of art is the product of negotiation between a creator...equipped with a communally shared repertoire of conventions, institutions and practices of society" (p. 12). Therefore, both text and author are ingrained in society, its culture and history. That is why [Greenblatt \(1985\)](#) has suggested that in order to comprehend literature, one has to take recourse to both culture and society that gave birth to a literary text (p. 118).

For [Greenblatt \(1990\)](#), "resonance" is the capacity of a literary text to reflect the complex features of a society, its culture and history. It is also regarded as the "power of the literary text to reach beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world" (1990, p.19). It evokes in the reader the "complex dynamic cultural forces from which the literary text has emerged. Hence, resonance draws the reader's attention to the "relationships between the (literary) text and the society" (p. 20). "Wonder" is "the power of the literary text" which conveys an arresting sense of uniqueness and evokes exalted attention" (p. 20). A reader's attention is attracted by the use of striking references and he finds the culture and history throbbing through the literary text. This throbbing of socio-political and historico-cultural issues is the resonance of a literary text.

As the new historicism is socio-historical and it deals with ideological products shaped in a specific era, this makes it an appropriate framework to study the changing cultural, political and social life patterns in the selected text. New historicism is significant as it has introduced the method of "parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts" and "the literary text is placed within the frame of a non-literary text" ([Barry, 2009](#), pp.166-167). It is an appropriate theory for the analysis of the selected text as it places the text in the respective period and hence authenticates the findings by referring to other sources including newspapers and history. Following this approach, the non-literary references are integrated into the discussion for the sake of comprehension. [Belsey \(2013\)](#) observes that "text analysis involves a close encounter with a text and there is no such thing as pure reading" (p. 162) and "interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge," including personal interests, biographical elements, cultural specifications and other secondary sources" (pp. 163-164).

### Analysis/ Discussion

*No Fortunes to Tell* is, in many ways, a "documentary of human sufferings" (Ali, 2019) and has given a multifaceted description of the human concerns. The study focuses on the portrayal of political violence and traces the embedment of the text in the socio-political issue of Talibans' involvement in violence against the believers of Sufism and shrine practices, terrorist attacks on educational institutions and lastly, the use of force in Swat, Waziristan and adjoining areas in the backdrop of America's involvement in Afghanistan. Pakistan has been in an unending state of emergency and therefore meeting open existential dangers since 9/11 and the American attack on Afghanistan. These dangers have incorporated violence due to radicalism and illegal coercion. Pakistan has confronted more internal dangers and difficulties than the external ones, and chaotic circumstances are basically created because of political instability in Afghanistan. The 9/11 terrorist attacks impelled considerable changes in global power relations and in this regard, the US drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal regions have led to the terrorist attacks in the country by the Taliban-inspired militant groups. Consequently,

these cultural and religious clashes among the various sections of the society have badly affected the socio-political life, internal security and economic conditions of Pakistan. "War on Terror" reshaped the belief systems of the individuals in Pakistan. Therefore, political violence due to the terrorists' attacks on the educational institutions and public places and the conflicts between the state and the non-state actors distorted the peaceful fabric of the Pakistani society.

Regarding terrorists' activities against shrines and Sufi culture, *Sehwan Sharif* (Khalique, 2019, pp.21-36) is quite significant. It consists of twelve sections and each section delineates a specific individual with a particular focus on class, creed and color. In this way, the poem portrays people from all walks of Pakistani society, irrespective of religion and social class, who have been visiting this place for centuries. The poem highlights the poor and the underprivileged with "scared faces, charred souls tramps and knaves" (p.25) who visit the shrine on a regular basis for "seeking forgiveness" (p.25) and "solace" (p. 31). The shrine has been presented as a home for the homeless where mostly orphans and handicapped are left: a child whose "Left eye / was gouged out" (p.33) and his family was "carried away / by waves / of the Indus," (p.33) and under such circumstances when no one was willing to own him, an "uncle / left him / at the shrine" (p.33). In Pakistan, the majority of the population has been living in poor conditions and they never get enough to eat and have no access to medical facilities. Hence they try to seek refuge at the shrines. Mostly, they are disowned by their families due to poverty and disease. So, the description of the visitors has exposed the plight of the downtrodden and, the deep-rootedness of the peoples' belief in Sufi saints. The pluralistic culture of the shrines is depicted with reference to a Christian who "sits in a corner/reads hymns /from the Psalms / Holds on to his cross" (2019, p.28). This reveals that the Muslim saint has been venerated by the non-Muslims, and minorities are also welcomed by the Muslims. The verses reveal the peace-loving nature of the local people, while the deadly blast highlights the political activities of the power-seekers who are spoiling the peaceful fabric of the society to achieve their political goals.

Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine was targeted in 2017 by the Taliban, the religious fundamentalists, causing the death of a large number of women and children. It was just one of a series of such incidents in Pakistan. Taliban and other extremist groups take the shrine practices or culture as heresy and against the teachings of Islam. Particularly selling and buying of "threads, talismans / for feeble wrists / slender collarbones" (p. 24) to gain spiritual power, the performance of spiritual dance "dhamaal" (p.23) and Qawwali etc. Significantly, the devotees' unbending belief in the mystic saint has been revealed in the last part of this poem; while a crowd of devotees was engaged in dhamaal and "the bomb rips through / rows of godforsaken" (p.35), and the "column on which / the dome of the tomb/ rests / observes/ a moment of silence" (p.35) and "the dancers return/ chanting names /of the twelve infallible men..." while "thumping the floor" (p. 35). Dhamaal is particularly associated with Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine situated in Sehwan, Sindh. In fact, this terrorist attack is an expression of hatred for dhamaal and an act of violence to terrorize the people. At the same time, it is an act of resistance against the military actions taken by the state in the northern part of the country. Khalique wants to expose those religious factions and extremist groups who are an "abomination for Sufism". Khalique stresses that such bomb blasts and attacks on shrines are, in fact, not a "battle of ideas." Rather, it is a battle between "kindness and humanity on the one hand and ferocity and oppression on the other" (Khalique, 2017). Previously, in 2009 Rahman Baba's tomb was attacked by the Taliban who was a mystic poet and Khalique strongly condemned it as an attack on the civilization, culture and traditions of Pakistan (2009). Basically, Sufi shrines have been targeted by the Taliban because they regard shrine-based religious practices such as grave marking, devotional dance, Qawwali, ta'widh, etc., against the teachings of Islam. According to Akhter, these extremist forces want to implement and impose their ideas on free human beings by force (2017). Though the violence has been inflicted to gain political and ideological hold in this region, it fails to terrorize the devotees. The text reveals that the devotees return, "chanting names /of the twelve infallible men..." (p.35). In this way,

besides highlighting the unbending belief of the people in the centuries-old Sufi culture, it has hinted at violence directed towards Shias.

Khalique has depicted political violence in northern Waziristan and Swat through his verses. In fact, *No Fortunes to Tell* is related to the aftermaths of the external and internal political issues of General Musharraf's era, known as "the return of democracy and the rise of the Taliban in Pakistan." "The two poems included in this collection, "The Magician and the Boy-Waziristan" and "In the Heart of Darkness," are embedded in the era of violence in the Taliban- held Swat and Waziristan. With the arrival of Taliban in 2006, a shift occurred in the social, political and cultural life of people in Swat. In pursuance of their political goals, the Taliban killed civilians, journalists, and political activists and tortured all those who flouted their prescribed rules. Educational institutions and mainly girls' schools were blown up and women were forced to stay within the four walls of their houses (Khalique, 2017). Moreover, basic women's rights such as the right to education and work, freedom from torture and freedom of opinion and expression were violated in those areas: "men lynched / women stoned to death... /boys shot in head... (p. 42). The Islamic extremists had adopted brutal policies against all the individuals suspected of un-Islamic behaviour. The Green Square in Mingora was known as a bloody intersection due to the beheadings and killings (p.41) of men and women. Khalique (2009, 2017) refers to a woman who was shot in the head on religious grounds in the same square in Mingora because she earned her living by singing and dancing. Such brutal incidents have been happening on daily basis in other parts of the country as well. Gender-based violence like rape and honour killings are a regular feature of society. Likewise, "bodies are dug out / from graves/corpse hang dry /on lamp post" (Khalique, 2019, p.42): in Swat, religious leaders and their followers were killed and the extremists even exhumed the dead bodies hung by poles for some days to terrorize the local people (Khalique, 2009). In fact, during the last two decades, uncountable tragic incidents and suicide blasts have killed a large number of people and tattered the peaceful and multicultural fabric of Pakistani society. Similarly, "The Magician and the

Boy – Waziristan" is about a boy whose mother was killed in a bomb blast. He brought the dead body to the magician and says: "Only my mother's body / is not charred. / I bring her to you / She is only cut in half (2019, p. 20). He asked him to join the body parts of his mother with his magic spell. The poet deftly tells the story of senseless violence inflicted upon innocent people.

Khalique has not only raised his voice against intolerance among various political and religious groups whose activities have given birth to a culture of violence towards the centuries-old Sufi culture in Pakistan but he has registered his resistance against the terrorist attack on the State institutions. He has written about the terrorist attack on the army school which is a direct hit on the State, the Pakistani Army and the well-off section of the society as well. So, *Gulsher* (Khalique, 2019, 48-49) exposes the Taliban's terrorist activities which were not confined to shrines, mosques and religious places of minorities and the northern regions. They had initially targeted girls' schools in Swat and adjoining areas and demolished the buildings. Later on, they expanded their activities to other major cities and attacked educational institutions, government buildings and public places. Besides terrorizing the common people, their major concern was to destabilize the state. "Gulsher" is ingrained in the vibration of violence in the country. In 2014, a gang of Taliban-trained terrorists attacked Army Public School, Peshawar, and opened fire on the school children (Mahesar, Bhatti, & Zardari, 2018) and "[t]he school was squashed/ in terror's embrace/ massacre of innocent" (p. 48). Almost 150 students and teachers, mostly from the families of the Pakistani military were killed. The non-state actors like the Taliban and other militant groups wanted to deter the state from launching military operations in Waziristan and Swat. Despite the military operations in the conflict-hit northern areas, the underlying causes are still unresolved.

## Conclusion

The above discussion reveals that *No Fortunes to Tell* is a shift in the thematic pattern of Pakistani English poetry. Khalique's poetry is not an autonomous creation; it is ingrained in socio-political and cultural issues of Pakistan and the

selected verses respond to the conditions of history, politics and social dynamics. The social embedment and cultural specificities of the selected verses have exposed a complex network of violence that has become a regular feature of Pakistani society. Violence was a part of Pakistani society in every era but during the previous two decades, it reached its peak due to the 9/11 attacks and the growing intolerance among various social and religious groups. Americanization, Talibanisation and Islamization tattered the peaceful and pluralistic fabric of the society. The findings reveal that the shrines of Sufi saints and mystic poets were targeted by the Taliban-inspired militant groups and, later on, educational and state institutions were attacked not only in Waziristan and Taliban-held Swat but also the people across the

country faced extreme violence in the guise of Islamisation as highlighted in "Sehwan Sharif" and "Gulsher". Therefore, political violence was aggravated due to the proliferation of the militants and Taliban-inspired gangs on the one hand and the tension between the state and the Taliban on the other. Khalique's poetry exposes the bitter realities related to suffering humanity and the way political violence brought a shift in the social, political and religious order. Therefore, *No Fortunes to Tell* cannot be read as an autonomous document alienated from indigenous culture, local history, global politics and contemporary Pakistani society. A complete understanding of Pakistan's political history and global politics are required for the comprehension of the selected text.

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