

A Disability: A Determinist Rubric of Identity in *The Geometry of God* by Uzma Aslam Khan

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ABSTRACT: *This article undertakes a constructivist analysis of disability/visual impairment in The Geometry of God (2014) by Uzma Aslam Khan. Disability as a new epistemology has greatly revolutionized the Western understanding of the socio-cultural and political situation of people with disabilities as marginalized others. A shameful silence, however, still shrouds this category in the Pakistani literary context which calls for a critical engagement to revise the oppressive social rhetoric surrounding it. Social Constructivism as a theoretical framework has helped examine Mehwish's blindness as a deterministic rubric of identity constructed socially like race and gender. Socio-cultural and political perspectives on disability/difference configuring in Pakistani Anglophone novels offer a broader understanding of the representation of the Pakistani community and human experience. The Geometry of God foregrounds Mehwish's blindness as palpable in that being disabled entails physical and psychological discomfort, even pain experienced by her on a daily basis. Her disability is a persistent concern for care and attention. Moreover, Mehwish's self-perception and formulation of a worldview are directly influenced by the way she interacts with others. Her maturation as a visually impaired, yet positional, and progressive being is traced through multi-layered, polyphonic storytelling and dialogue. Social heteroglossia is pivotal to the constitution of her identity in a multicultural, postcolonial Pakistan depicted via diverse forms of social speech (at times even different languages) and individual voices. The dialogical perspective further elaborates how deficits of the body and mind are understood and dealt with differently in different societies. Change of locale and culture automatically changes the perception of disability.*

Keywords: disability, dependency, global South, identity, colonized, world view, heteroglossia

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For centuries people believed that disability/sickness was a punishment from God. They thought that those who became sick had either made a serious mistake or done something wrong, broken a taboo, or were guilty of disobedience. However, “in the nineteenth century, the notion that disease fits the patient’s character, as the punishment fits the sinner, was replaced by the notion that it expresses character” (Sontag 43). However, the dominant ideology around disability since the time of feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s got redefined. Disability in the present times is an identity category that is socially constructed within the cultural interface. It is positional and temporal because the “experiences of disabled people are... embedded in and conditioned by social expectations, ideology, culture, customs and beliefs” (Grech 90).

To elaborate upon the processes of self-perception and formulation of a world view which influences the way disabled people interact with one another, the example of Lakshmi, an eight-limbed girl-child born in the district of Bihar in India on 31st October 2005 is not out of place. Lakshmi had recently been discovered in India. The villagers who were mostly followers of Hinduism started venerating the child as a goddess. The (disabled) child’s integration within the dominant Hindu community depended on the personhood she acquired vis-à-vis her community and fulfillment of the role assigned to her by that very community.

To deal with disability effectively it is imperative to sensitize all about “the cultural, social and psychological structures within which it is embedded” (90). Being in a group one tends to see things from a particular vantage point that may resemble the point of view of those that are the in-group people, while the outsiders may look at things from an altogether different perspective. Disability is palpable in that the lived experience of being disabled involves physical and psychological discomfort, even pain felt almost daily. “The social burden of disability is not how we see ourselves, but how others see us” (Aramayo et al. 521).

People with visible (physical) and/or invisible disabilities are traditionally excluded from mainstream society on account of their dependency and non-productivity toward economic growth. Normalcy or

normality in a traditional setting envisions very idealized/desirable traits apropos height, strength, intelligence, and even beauty. Ableism further marginalizes the disabled/different by blocking opportunities for empowerment and employability. In such a situation the marginalized, disabled/different are obliged to construct their sense of self-worth through processes and activities that entail reshaping the concept of normalcy, social cooperation, and interdependence free from the agenda of mutual benefit. At a personal level, such a relationship might seem asymmetrical and unequal for instance the relationship between a disabled, helpless child and her parent as the care-provider who bonds with her child in such a relationship of dependency and care as a social, primary good. The state or the modern-day professionalization of care ties the care provider and her client in a reciprocal yet unequal dependency dyad.

Since most of the theoretical literature on disability studies has, so far, been produced by the disability theorists of the West (particularly from Western Europe and North America), most of the disabled/different populations of the world, living in the global South are left with no choice but to unconditionally adopt the prevalent concepts already promoted by western disability studies theorists (Grech 88). As an epistemology disability studies is dominated by a world view that represents a minority of the disabled/different population inhabiting the global North. A world view that is constituted by considering the problems of a minority is inherently lacking, therefore not suitable to deal with the problems of the majority population of the disabled/different residing in the global South with its baggage of colonization, political unrest, war, and poor economy (89). There is a dire need for understanding and analyzing the experiences of the disabled/different concerning the personal, local, and national prejudices and/or practices that have taken root over the past few decades in the South. Indigenous perspectives are significant in that they contribute positively towards understanding various nuances of disability, somatic impairment, and sickness and facilitate their inclusion in mainstream society. Disability discourse in the global South, also representative of the majority world, invariably includes the experience of having been colonized for centuries, the emergence of post-colonial

milieus and hybridization of identities, and the effects of neoliberal globalization and neocolonialism. Moreover, research produced during the previous two decades of the twenty-first century, particularly by academics and activists (see for instance Grech (p.217), Soldatic (p.407), Aramayo (p.517), McKenzie (p.423), Cutajar and Adjoe (p. 503), etc.) have wedged open ruptures in the discipline and rendered it more textured and multifaceted. Their research directly or indirectly intersects with the study of disability about serious mental or physical ailments which tantalize as well as challenge disability scholarship constantly by offering ever-increasing varieties of perspectives.

Ethnographers have documented disability in different countries of the world. And the documentation is evidence of the fact that disability is a relative term that is temporal in nature, located in a particular cultural context which directly impacts its constitution as a social artifact (Staples & Mehrotra 42). Other than culture, religion, and belief, several factors such as the diet consumed, the kind of work performed and childbirth practices, etc., all are responsible for the complexification of disability experienced in the global South. To deal with the rather complex disability-related issues more effectively, a broader, transdisciplinary approach is required. South Asia comprises third-world countries and their population, characteristically fashioned as a group of peoples who are deemed as under or undeveloped and inferior, in need of improvement through intervention. This stance of the dominant West validated colonization and all expansionist projects as legitimate exercises of authority and control (Grech 89). Neocolonialism continues to prevail in most of the South Asian countries specifically in Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan. The academia in these countries still looks up to the North as the norm for validation of all types of social and academic practices. An indigenized system of education has not yet evolved that is geared towards demystifying the texts/curricula imported from the West with “universalizing claims” (Cutajar & Adjoe 508).

With all that as the pre-given, *The Geometry of God* (2014) by Uzma Aslam Khan depicts 1980s Postcolonial Pakistan grappling with Mullatism and Islamization during General Zia-ul Haq’s martial law

regime. The novel, as a multi-layered, polyphonic narrative represents the embodied disablement and day-to-day life experiences of a blind, teen-aged girl; Mehwish, geographically located in Pakistan where the 'individual self' is ranked only secondary to the 'familial self' because culturally Pakistani people are not so deeply immersed in individualism -- a movement which originated in the west. Aslam Khan focuses on blindness to elaborate on how the protagonist is obliged by circumstances to reconstruct herself to constitute a distinctive identity for herself rather than acting out the stereotypical role of a visually impaired girl born in a conventional Pakistani household. Additionally, Mehwish's disability/blindness, as a differential value posits her in "a liminal...space of possibility" (Thomson 120). For the sake of proper historical perspective, the influence of the "malaise brought upon us by centuries of conquest, the Tartars from the east, Crusaders from the west, Communism, Colonialism, Oil Bonanza" is referred to (Aslam Khan, *Geometry of God* 89) which served to hybridize identities, cultures, and cuisines besides challenging the very notion of a unified life or self in a Postcolonial Pakistan.

Mehwish's visual impairment foregrounds disability as a persistent concern for care and attention. The novel begins with Amal; an able-bodied person thus: "When I was eight, I developed the habit of looking down so Mehwish, my blind sister, wouldn't trip or fly down manholes or skid in filth, leaving me to swab her wounds or plunge in after... I had become my sister's eyes" (2) Amal and Mehwish are inescapably tied together in a complex form of mutual dependency which affords them both relational agencies simultaneously through which they formulate a sense of identity. Both recognize the mutual dependency and the need for an exchange to achieve communication very early in the relationship. Both become indispensable to each other. 'Amal' means 'practice' and Amal is given this name by Nana; her maternal grandfather who advised Amal to always use her 'inner eye' to look closely: "*Nazar se Dekho*" (2). Nana notices that Amal is more like him as compared to his children. She likes to touch things to find out for herself. She is associated with *aql-i-amali*, a talent for doing things. Having spent most of her childhood (time) in the company of her maternal grandfather; Zahoor, Amal

becomes initiated into matters about science, philosophy, and Sufism at a very young age. Her Nana's words, "*The world is my Ka'ba*" (7) stay etched in her mind during the time that she is growing up. She is an evolutionist by profession and profoundly believes in natural selection. As a female evolutionist, she sets a precedent of having de-gendered a woman's vocational choices, particularly in the Pakistani context. Mehwish, on the other hand, is different in that, "She is serene, not restless" (4). Nana describes Mehwish's intelligence as "*Aql-e Nazari*. A talent for imagining" and often looks at both the sisters and thinks: "earthy Aristotle and dreamy Plato" (4). "Plato loved this world, but he loved the one that can only be imagined" even more. Amal represents the 'real' world experienced through the five senses and believes that it is "possible to find happiness within its physical borders" (345) whereas Mehwish manages to draw our attention towards the potential that an 'imagined' world may have. Both come together to make us comprehend Zahoor's theory of creation. Zahoor contends that "the nature of all creation" is "to unite the real with the imagined...or...to make the imagined real (9).

Mehwish was not born blind. She was "blinded by the sun" according to the ophthalmologist from Jhelum who explained to her parents after initial diagnosis that the "infrared light" could "permanently damage the light-sensitive tissues of the inner eyeball" (25). The relatives' response to Mehwish's blindness is embedded, typically within the interface of Pakistani culture. For instance, they come running to Amal's house to sympathize with her parents, especially 'Ama' who whimpers and blames herself for having mistakenly trusted the *ayah* who was looking after Mehwish during the time she was struck blind. Ama believes: "God is punishing me." Upon which Nana becomes angry with Ama and retorts: "Why is this poor child's deformity an excuse for *deformity*? Who was the buffoon you took her to? The sun blinded her!" Nana rejects the ophthalmologist's diagnosis as nonsensical. When "Aba sighs. 'She was not blinded by man. She was blinded by God.'...Nana glares at him 'Next you will say God was taking *your* sins out on her!'" He even considers the possibility of Mehwish having crawled into one of her

father's workshops and getting a piece of rock accidentally falling into her socket more plausible. "Chote Phoopa scowls. 'You know it is pointless looking for a cause'" (25-26). When Amal decides to ask her Aba whether Mehwish's blindness was an accident he replies "Nothing is an accident. Everything is decided by God...You cannot question His will, Amal. You need to understand that" (27). By then Amal understands only one thing fully well, that the damage is "irreversible" (26). Whereas Ama attributes Mehwish's disability/blindness to divine retribution for disobedience on the part of the child's parents, Apa Farzana understands it to be the result of an evil eye or some curse cast upon Ama by her enemies. In short everyone's explanation is to be reckoned with as a unique and personalized Pakistani perspective on disability.

Visual impairment, within the narrative, introduces a model for dependency on several other forms of intermediation through touch and sound. Khan explores quite exhaustively the dynamic dialectic between the blind Mehwish and her surroundings which might seem invisible and therefore unimaginable to her sister; Amal or the reader alike. But which is, nevertheless very much there to be imagined by both. As a child Mehwish loves bathing and Amal bathes her almost ritualistically, making her enjoy her baths thoroughly. Mehwish learns to experiment with temperature differences (hot or cold water), colors of the scent (of shampoo), and the roughness or smoothness of her skin's texture while Amal bathes her. Mehwish asks Amal to "draw on my back" while taking a bath in response to which Amal writes "words on her spine. She tries to call the letters out. She can call separate letters, but she can't put them into words herself" (33, 34). The dependency dyad, especially between both sisters develops into the dialectic of appreciation and care. It lends social, material, and physical significance to their relationship. The dependency further gets gelled in the very concept of 'self' for both. Amal becomes "Mehwish's eyes. The little doll in her eyes...her guardian angel. So she won't have any more accidents" (29). Her "focus is only the designs of a rapidly changing Mehwish." She is Mehwish's "pupilla" (43-44). Amal becomes Mehwish's teacher too. She teaches her to read by writing alphabets out on paper, pressing her pencil hard enough so Mehwish would find the creases. Later she would reverse the

page to enable Mehwish to feel the bumps. Mutual dependency makes both realize that everyone lives in one state of dependency or another. The exchange (of ideas/experiences) between the two also helps both the sisters understand each other and construct a sense of ‘self’ for themselves which is constantly renegotiated through a series of interconnected stories about being loved and cared for.

Amal recounts her own story of learning the Urdu alphabet, particularly the first Urdu alphabet ‘*alif*’ which stands for Allah. She tells that learning to speak Urdu was important for becoming a *real* Pakistani according to the Islamist norms prevalent in the country during the 1980s’ Zia regime just as praying five times a day and studying whales was whereas speaking English would leave her just “half as Pakistani.” However, Nana openly ridicules the idea of “a *real* Pakistan” as “*not real*” (5) and ultimately gets killed for his non-conformist, liberal ideas during the course of the novel.

Pakistan had its share of the colonial legacy at the time of independence. India became a colony of the British Empire after the 1857 War of Independence, also referred to as ‘*mutiny*’ by the British. India’s subsequent partition in 1947 as Bharat and Pakistan made united India attain the status of two independent states. Bharat was meant to accommodate the Hindu majority (population) whereas Pakistan was to become home to the Muslims of divided India. Muslims (of India) started migrating to Pakistan with the hope that they would live their lives according to the injunctions of the holy Quran in this new homeland. *Quaid-e-Azam* Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan was, however, known for his secular bent of mind. The *Quaid* earnestly wanted to create a secular, sovereign state. His famous speech, in this regard, divulges his vision:

We are starting in the days when there is no discrimination, no distinction between one community and another, no discrimination between one caste...creed, and another. We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state (36).

Mohammad Ali Jinnah's Western education, lifestyle, and secular bent of mind, nevertheless, failed to occlude the influence of his *real* source of inspiration, Islam. In another speech, the Quaid clarified that the salvation of the whole nation lies in abiding by the "golden rules of conduct set for us by our great lawgiver, the prophet of Islam" (37). Quaid wanted to lay the foundation of democracy in Pakistan based on "truly Islamic ideals and principles" (37). Notwithstanding, the Quaid also envisioned a just society based on the principles of equity, integrity, and tolerance. A society that was pluralistic and accommodating about differences in religions, races, ethnicities, and cultures.

However, during General Zia's martial law regime during the 1980s' Pakistan took up Quaid's desire for laying the foundation of the country because of Islamic ideals and injunctions as a political agenda to be carried out through Islamization and strict observance of the Muslim laws or 'Shariat'. This paved the way for Mullaism, bigotry, and lack of interfaith harmony in the country. Noman's father (Aba) is an ardent supporter of the Party of Creation. Aba advises Noman to learn "to stop imagining the unimportant" by pretending that Jinnah's speech about "no discrimination, no distinction between one community and another" did not exist. Rather he should focus only on the "*Truly Islamic ideals and principles*" (37 the emphasis in original) in the wake of the Islamization of Pakistan. And this is the kind of Pakistan where both Amal and Mehwish are growing up.

Pakistan is officially written as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan despite its culturally diverse history and a landscape that is studded with a variety of architectural monuments that signify the inclusivity of its glorious past and heritage. Lahore in particular where Amal and Mehwish come to live, is famous for its gardens, especially the Shalimar Garden and the Lawrence Garden, colleges such as Aitchison, and the Government College, "the Lahore fort, the British-built red-brick Gothic-style buildings on Mall Road---the GPO, High Court, Provincial Assembly, the museum" etc. (42). Even the road that leads to the Provincial Assembly where the "Islamic laws are passed" takes you to the "Victorian Street" (42).

Pakistani academia is represented mostly by Zahoor (Nana) in the novel under discussion. Zahoor is termed “Western” by his peers and friends (39) because of his interest in scientific discoveries. It annoys Zahoor a great deal to realize however, that the majority of the people seem to be ignorant of the contributions made by Muslim scientists such as Al Zahrawi, Al Khawarizmi, Al Raazi, Ibn ul Rushd and Omar Khayyam and the list goes on. The dilemma faced by educational institutions, as to the medium of instructions to be adopted to impart education at the primary or beginners level and the mode of communication amongst various state structures is owing to a gratuitous reliance of the academia on the education system introduced by the British in all their colonies. And the subcontinent of Asia, situated in the global South is no exception. The colonial system of education attached importance to the dissemination of knowledge and information via English as the medium of instruction. Besides, the stock of books available in the library, the educational background of the teaching faculty, the courses offered, and the institutional environment all had to be deeply imbued in Western/English cultural practices.

The Education System which claims to be superior because it is a mirror image of the system set up by the colonial masters tends to divide the Pakistani society into those that consider themselves superior because of being comfortable with it while excluding others who feel handicapped because of being unable to speak English (language) which shapes their perceptions and the world view (Cutajar & Adjoe 507). It is a common enough practice that in most ex-colonies academia, researchers, activists, government officials, and professionals mostly borrow ideas, models, and practices from the West without caring to adapt them to fit their local contexts.

Mehwish’s experiences as a disabled/different person are located within such intricate networks of identities and production of social relations as are an upshot of a postcolonial setup. *The Geometry of God* (2014) offers a nuanced interpretation of Mehwish’s disability/difference which incorporates details about gender, age, class, ethnicity, etc. as well. Aslam Khan; the author of the novel demonstrates successfully how, if

represented aesthetically, a bodily alterity/deficit which is often stigmatizing, may add ethical and political value to the marginalized 'other'/disabled or the disabled/other as marginalized by making them accessible for critical appraisal or inspection. Thus, the reader is challenged to "imagine conditions of physical otherness and social marginality" (Hall 2 & 22) through the representation of characters such as Mehwish. We are informed at the outset that Mehwish belongs to a Muslim family that is given to fasting and sacrificing goats or sheep on "Bakra Eid" (Aslam Khan *Geometry of God* 49). At the same time, she works hard to keep up her pace of learning the English language at par with Amal's instructions and/or expectations. The silent letters in English (language) confuse her a lot. Conversely, there are "no silent letters in Urdu if you cannot hear them you are deaf. But English is sneaky. There are hidden letters you have to dig up the way Nana digs wail" (53). So Amal teaches Mehwish to dig letters or store all silent letters in her memory. "Amal says I can spell some big words like intelligence and courage exact but not some small ones...Amal is interrupting me more and more" (54). The compulsion to narrate her story is rooted in Mehwish's fear of becoming voiceless. She clings to whatever narrative agency she can afford. The competition between Amal and Mehwish to browbeat the other does not come to any resolution. Rather they remain engaged in an ongoing (verbal) battle for narrative control. The visit to Lahore Zoo is remembered as an important lesson by Mehwish since Nana explains the similarity between one's response to the wild animals and how one relates to God during this visit thus:

There is a connection between how we relate to wild animals and God. When we see the lion, what is experienced is fear or awe. It is the desire to conquer. The romance of taming the beast. If we could just open the lock, slide the chain, walk into the pen, and smooth the snarling with our touch! It is the same as wanting to be chosen by God. To know Him, person Ali. It is a surrender but also a conquest (54).

Mehwish is in the habit of splitting words. Splitting words signifies her attempt to cognize the diverse reality that a (blind) Pakistani's life is faced

with besides bringing out the sheer linguistic collapse experienced in having to describe it in a foreign language. Social fragmentation is experienced at various levels and is best illustrated with an example thus: “One man asked if Nana thinks we are distended from monkeys what about the special creation of man as the Quran says and Nana got angry, and they called each other names” (60). Mehwish becomes cognizant of the split/divide that exists within the Pakistani society because of orthodoxy vis-à-vis the religion (Islam) as interpreted by the ‘Mullah’ and the academia, such as Zahoor who are immersed in Western education and are knowledgeable about the scientific discoveries.

Mehwish manages to compensate for the loss of her (sense of) sight with the remaining four senses. The way she makes use of her sense of smell and touch brings sensuality to her experiences. Amal’s physical closeness is remembered, “like the smell of sin men on my pillow case. When it is hot like now, she is in men in hot ghee. She sweats more than me big cause of her big chest and thick curls” (59). Mehwish knows that she likes to indulge in the “‘pleasures of the senses’ which is wrong it stops me from feeling the pain of the world.” Miss Fauzia has been telling her time and again that the drawings that she makes or the questions that she asks to serve no “purpose” at all (163). While explaining the difference between “calling and singing” Miss Fauzia emphasizes that the mozzan’s call is meant to be obeyed rather than enjoyed. Further that “the doctor does not exist except to cure the teacher does not exist except to correct all of us must be the Voice of Rem dee” (163). Nevertheless, Miss Fauzia’s moralizing is not registered by Mehwish because of the latter’s strong dislike for the former.

Physical and verbal intimacy between the sisters decreases gradually during the teenage years because of the ideological and cultural dimensions which ensue from the Islamic injunctions prevalent in Pakistani society. Mehwish recalls that by the time she was almost fourteen, Amal “did not wash me as much I stopped touching her big boobs and hairy thighs that were smooth underneath” (147). Furthermore, Amal would now refuse to explain herself to Mehwish, especially about her “late night ‘experiments’” through parties with Zara.

Mehwish slowly learns how putting words in inverted commas gives them secret meanings. Besides, it was at this time that Mehwish learned that most people “say or do what they do not want to have to explain” (146-147). She learns to respect others’ privacy. She also learns the importance of personal space and boundaries that one ought to erect between even one’s most intimate relations. So, when Amal asks Mehwish whether her period has finally arrived, Mehwish replies by saying: “I do not want to have to explain” (147). Mehwish soon realizes that she depends on Amal for things that she cannot do herself. She does not like this much because she is worried that soon Amal will start sounding like “Miss Fauzia at school who says God has punished us with things we cannot do by ourselves like eat or read” etc. (147). Miss Fauzia interprets Mehwish’s blindness as burdensome and tragic. She thinks Mehwish has no future because blindness has rendered her dependent on others for life. Miss Fauzia’s response to Mehwish’s disability is the result of a mindset that perceives disability as a dependency and a major (disabling) obstacle for the disabled/different in a world that is intended for the able-bodied. She is usually very condescending towards Mehwish. Miss Fauzia seems to be against women's sports also because she says that the blind captain; Urooj should stop playing cricket now that she is thirteen. One day Mehwish gets caught red-handed by Miss Fauzia while drawing Miss Amna by “feeling front and back making sure she was neat” (161). Miss Fauzia slaps her hand and says “Drawing and writing for fun is not allowed the Prophet said those who are punished most by God are the makers of figures” (161). Mehwish is disgusted with Miss Fauzia’s moralizing. She compares Miss Fauzia’s footsteps to “target shooting” and her presence to “toilet smell” (161). She talks about her aversion to Miss Fauzia’s views passionately and categorically refuses to present the flowers that Amal has brought to Miss Fauzia. Mehwish’s response is mostly the outcome of highly charged emotions entrenched in others’ response to her blindness/disability which is characterized by “contradictory social dimensions of admiration, support, respect, and acceptance” as far as her family and close allies are concerned and “rejection and maltreatment” at the hands of the likes of Miss Fauzia that represent the society at large (Aramayo et al 521).

Mehwish goes to an ordinary school where she does not do much writing. Neither is there a Braille bookshop. Amal teaches her at home. Mehwish's inability to write in the conventional style is a major stumbling block to her participation and any significant achievement in the field of education. Her inability to make it big in the field of education is, however more because of the failure of an education system that is unable to make special provisions for a disabled/blind person like Mehwish "to take part ...through appropriate technology and personal support" (518). Considering that the right to education is one of the basic rights of a citizen of any modern state in the wake of Millennial Development Goals (MDG), regardless of (her) color, gender, class, or creed, even visual impairment, Mehwish's body is a befitting example of the site of "denied or suppressed citizenship" in Pakistan (Cutajar & Adjo 511).

Thus, *The Geometry of God* (2014) by Aslam Khan demonstrates quite explicitly how vulnerable the disabled/different were vis-a-vis their basic rights in 80s Pakistan. The author's success lies in providing authentic information about the violation of a disabled person's rights through Mehwish, who is herself a visually impaired young girl. There is an oblique hint that the adoption and implementation of an inclusive education policy and system which are geared towards full citizenship and participation of people with disabilities might be the only solution.

Mehwish is happy that at least "Amal uses normal expressions with me like see you or have a look or dekho" (Aslam Khan *Geometry of God* 149). She likes it when Omar talks to her "in a normal voice not sugary or salty" (155). English language learned at home plays a vital role in Mehwish's education and formulation of a worldview. Despite her difficulty with "trophy" (apostrophes) and commas which, to quote Amal: "are a blind spot" (149) English language profoundly influences Mehwish's cognition and conceptualization of the realities of life that constitute her individuality/identity. She asks Amal if Omar was "an experiment inverted commas" (155) and remembers her first encounter with Omar as "some ghondaywoo" between him and her sister; Amal (156). Mehwish has heard the word; 'rendezvous' from Zara. She knows

it is a French word. She reflects moodily:

A language is like a person...it comes from something else it is mixed not pure but not ... harm full ... more like double roti which has lots of things mixed in it like flowers and sugar ... Nana says my school is not like Amal's which is private ...but a comment school where we do not learn English or Urdu ... I am lucky to be learning both languages well at home thanks to Amal (156-157).

Adolescence brings new challenges for Mehwish. She fails to understand why Amal hit her when they got back home from the cricket match. She is too naïve to understand the sense of insecurity or even jealousy that Amal experienced that day when she observed how relaxed Omar looked when Mehwish touched him. She is confused to reckon that everybody "trusts me big cause I am a child I am blind I can do anything it is always in oh cent" (162). Mehwish is very sensitive. She gives serious consideration to the fact that why everyone makes the mistake of considering her asexual just because she is visually impaired. She proves to be quite a romantic. She likes "the smell of wet grass" and enjoys "the song of a bulbul." She knows that a "sunbird can squeak but usually only shakes like a moth" and that "its wings are rainbow" (164- 165). She senses Ama's (mother's) disapproval of Amal's freedom and reckless behavior that she likes to a boy's. She knows that Ama thinks it is because of the parents' overindulgence towards her. However, Aba blames it on Nana's "in flew ants" (influence) on Amal (165). Mehwish becomes Amal's confidante and guards her most loyally. She does not spill the beans about Amal's love affair with Omar to Nana or her parents. She is vigilant about Amal's "tapping" on her window in "the middle of the night" and opens the door for her so Amal won't "get into trouble the way I would have if she had not saved me from manholes and thorns for so long." She is sensible enough to make sure that no one hears her "*Shor* in Urdu meaning noise" (164).

Mehwish is considerate towards Aba and gives a patient hearing to his claims about being.

... a liberal man who does not need to go around giving speeches about how liberal I am. I just am! I do not marry my daughter off! Let her study and use fewer things if she wants! I do not force her too fast. Let her sleep if she wants! She thinks like Dubai Airport she is Duty Free...She does not know how lucky she is to have *me!* (166)

Mehwish becomes cognizant of the subtle ruptures that have wedged open vis-a-vis the faith of Pakistani academia, represented by Nana because of an unwarranted exposure to the Western knowledge/epistemologies, particularly Darwin's theory of evolution. Mostly found within the audible range of Ama and Aba's conversations, she has often heard Aba complain about how Nana goes about scaring the young children by telling them that they have descended from the monkeys. Parents of some of Nana's students are outraged and think that he worships the monkey god like the Hindus. Mehwish has heard Aba saying that her Nana would not accept any "a thirty blindly" (authority) (166). His skepticism earns him the title of "her tick" (heretic) (167) because he gave his students a multiple-choice test comprising "a trick question" which is confusing even for Aba. When Ama asks Aba what the question was. The question comes down to the reader thus: "If God is perfect why did He make us? The choices are a. There is no God b. He is also flawed c. We are also perfect" (166).

1980s' Pakistan was subjected to a few conflicting influences and ideologies that polarized and even demonized the society and the Pakistanis alike. The nation witnessed a countrywide movement for the supremacy of "Muslim laws" and "*Shariat*" (168) in Pakistan and "with the religious parties...in civilian gowments, they're in flew ants spread." Zia's regime banned "the teaching of evolution but allowed the digging of fossils" (169). People's response to the teaching of the theory of evolution surprises Mehwish a great deal. Their indifference to the digging of fossils (paleontology) disturbs her too. Nana's observation about the "abstract" being "more real than the conk reet...big cause our religion is so abstract" reaches us through Mehwish. She overhears Aba saying that Islam does not talk about "*extinction*" only the Day of

Judgement and the hereafter (169). Life on earth should be understood as a brief sojourn. The focus should be the life in the hereafter which is eternal.

Zia regime had left no stone unturned to ensure the prevalence of Islamic laws in Pakistan until 17th August 1988 when the C130 plane crashed bringing eleven years of martial law to an end. Islamization of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan was put on hold. “Pakistan flickers back to life” (185) in the late 80s’ when it witnesses the revival of democracy. Benazir Bhutto becomes the first-ever female Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. She has the huge responsibility of redeeming Pakistan’s ‘foreign image’ on her shoulders. She tries to portray Pakistan as a moderate and liberal state. It was during this time that Amal chooses to break the stereotypes regarding female choices of profession and decides to become a paleontologist. Amal’s friend Zara too represents an empowered and liberated young woman who enjoys modeling for fashion magazines. She is a thrill-seeker who “talks in millions” (202). She is fond of smoking cigarettes and cracking jokes which have sexual innuendoes. She is a “promise kiss” (promiscuous) (204). She does not hesitate to talk about her amorous adventures with Amal even when Mehwish is within earshot and demands that Amal should also share “the week’s Omar Nama” with her (202). Encountering Zara initiates Mehwish into the adult stuff when the latter is hardly fifteen years of age. Zara tells Mehwish that she is “thin and leggy” like her and that she could also try modeling. Zara’s long finger that rubs Mehwish’s neck awakens her to the long-forgotten pleasures of the senses. Mehwish realizes that Zara’s massages and rubs are even better than Amal’s when she would bathe her.

Amid the confusion and the pangs of growing up Mehwish manages to organize her “thoughts, the way I do shampoos and soaps along the edge of the bathtub. The lines of my drawings are more even I can link them, without pins or chips” (189). Miss Fauzia however doesn’t appreciate the progress that Mehwish is making while learning to read and draw. If caught reading, drawing, or humming she would not only ask Mehwish to stop, she would hit her and even pull her ears, and her hair and shout:

“Who do you think you are why do you think you are different why can’t you be like others sit quietly pray someone marries you use less?” (191) Mehwish registers Miss Fauzia’s words as hurtful. The latter responds to Mehwish’s blindness/disability in a typically conventional way which is the basis for systemic discrimination against people with disabilities in Pakistan. Nonetheless, Miss Fauzia has importance as a speaking person/character within the narrative because her dialogues are not “a mere aimless verbal play” they are “*ideologemes*” which represent the conventional ideologue vis-à-vis blindness/disability, contesting to maintain its social significance in a fast changing Pakistani society (Bakhtin 333).

On the other hand, Uzma Aslam Khan envisions a promising future for Mehwish rather than marginalizing her as useless through a peripheral existence. Despite her visual impairment and considerable age difference, Mehwish succeeds in getting Noman romantically involved with her during the narrative. He fondly reminisces the “scents of her many shampoos—seaweed for blue, wood for purple. Her little finger between my teeth. Her intimate chatter. The sweet low ring of her voice” (Khan *Geometry of God* 305). Noman does not think of Mehwish as blind. Sometimes he even assumes that she knows so much. Mehwish makes him the way he wants to be. He considers her his peace.

Representation of Mehwish’s disability entails tremendous aesthetic value. It highlights the challenge taken up by Khan to depict processes and incidents/experiences which contributed towards the formulation of Mehwish’s identity as an individualized yet blind Pakistani Muslim girl growing up in 1980s Pakistan through the diversity of ideologues assigned to different (speaking) characters continuously contesting amongst themselves to gain social significance.

Learning to read by linking dots is known as Braille because of Louis Braille who wasn’t born blind but became one by an accident like Mehwish. She knows about Louis Braille and by co-relation identifies with him. Amal has taught her the principle of co-relation. Amal can read a rock with her hand and then co-relate it with another bone from a

different time by comparison. The total of Mehwish's learning is also acquired by following the principle of co-relation. She is aware that "lots of seeing people" such as Miss Fauzia "did not like that reading made the blind who loved Louis" like herself "see" (190). Besides, she has come to believe that "people do not only see with their eyes ears, and hands but also with their memories" (171). Nana told Mehwish that Aristotle's premise about the eye being a sort of torch that created light was proven wrong by Ibn Haitham. The latter proved through several experiments that the eye does not create light, it only reflects it. Ibn Haitham's experiments lead to the invention of "a pinhole camera.... The eye is also a pinhole camera." Nana takes pride in such historical developments/innovations as were made by Muslim scientists in the field of science and owns them as his heritage. Mehwish in turn inherits his legacy by being his granddaughter. Nana explains to Mehwish that "the eye is not the *only* pinhole camera.... Your nose, ears...*inner* eye. Memory" (173). In short, life perceived through such diverse means contributes to formulating a worldview and determining her identity. Mehwish even considers identifying herself with "girls specially...born with crooked necks" and thinks that "it is partly fearing partly sir will big cause we depend on others for everything even roti" (177).

Social constructivism stresses the significance of culture and context in appreciating what may happen in each society at a given time to construct knowledge and/or a worldview based on those very occurrences. This perspective closely overlaps with the notable contemporary developmental theories of Vygotsky and Bruner and even the social cognitive theory propounded by Bandura (Shunk, 2000). Social constructivists believe that since all knowledge is humanly produced it is constructed socially and culturally. Human beings as individuals create meaning through interaction with one another and the environment that they live in. These theorists opine that learning is a social process and meaningful learning takes place when individuals engage in social activities.

Often the day-to-day life experiences appear confusing to Mehwish at the outset. She gets "stuck on many words Braille is more difficult for me

than the raised curly letters of a seeing person...” because she learned those first (Khan *Geometry of God* 193). Learning two different languages simultaneously is another challenge that she has to cope with. She often hears different alphabets of both English and Urdu language, even the Braille ones that Miss Amna is teaching her at school. Each of these languages occupies a place in her mind that is “fixed and indisputable, the movement from one to the other is predetermined and not a thought process; it is as if these languages were in different chambers”. They do not “collide with each other” in Mehwish’s consciousness (Bakhtin 295). Similarly, she manages to bring some semblance of clarity in her life by devising a gradation system through boxes, hand-drawn on paper, and putting details about people that she comes across and feelings/emotions that she goes through in them (boxes). Mehwish tells the Braille story which has been passed on to her by Miss Amna in detail thus:

In the 1700s which is before I was born a French man Valentin on a ghondaywoo saw clowns pretending to be blind though they *were* blind reading books upside down wearing ugly glasses and pretending to be deaf going ee aw like Don Keys the crowd cheered. This made Valentin sad. So, he built a school for the blind clowns. His first student was a beggar who could see a coin by rubbing it. He was twelve years old he was younger than me. He learned to read with coins and then wood blocks the way Amal taught me with matches and stones. His fingers could feel letters at the back of a page so can mine. When Amal and Miss Amna write or draw I read the creases Amal calls negatives then I flip the paper and read the bumps called positives (160).

She talks about degrees of blindness very confidently and admits without any shame that she is completely blind like two other girls in the cricket team whose match she goes to enjoy with her sister; Amal and her boyfriend; Omar. She knows that the first-ever blind cricket match was played by people hailing from a far-off city called Melbourne in Australia in 1922. She has a few acquaintances in the blind cricket team with whom she can empathize. She tells Amal and Omar about Urooj; the captain

who, according to Mehwish, is five feet five inches tall with seventy percent vision in her left eye. She tells them that Urooj had a car accident in which her sister died, leaving the former scarred on the neck and both knees (156-158). Mehwish is empathetic. She is sensitive to the pain experienced by disabled/blind people in the tragic realities of their lives.

Mehwish learns about the structure of a love poem from Nana who explains it through an Urdu ghazal: “*Tum ai ho na shub in tizar guzri he*” by Faiz Ahmed Faiz. She gets initiated into love poetry “through the images of love like the bulbul and the rose or the hunted bird or eyelashes like daggers” (178). Nana thinks that a ghazal in English would be “illegal” to which Mehwish responds thoughtfully by repeating what Amal had said once that a language is like a whale that comes from something else for example Urdu is a mixture of Persian, Sanskrit, and Arabic. She deliberates upon questions like “What is or isn’t God-like” (196). Nana had once explained to Amal that there were two ways of knowing God: 1. Khayal 2. Zauq.

Knowing God through Khayal, according to Nana meant knowing Him through a thought, or an image. For instance, God has many names, and each name portrays Him in a different image. God is also explained through metaphors such as the “jugular vein”. Amal uses this metaphor to make Mehwish understand an abstract idea such as the Divine in a concrete form. She says: “You don’t *see* the vein but you can say God is like a built-in pulse, reminder or warning” (196). Zauq, on the other hand, is ‘taste’ and hence linked with ‘joy’. Zauq is physical, not abstract. It can be understood or experienced only mortally.

Apa Farzana is a staunch believer who frequently visits the girls’ Ama (mother). She emphasizes the importance of practicing Islam (as a religion) in a Muslim’s life. She openly condemns the likes of Amal and Zara as “slaves of the senses” (206) and warns that “God will unleash his most severe penance” against such people. She recites verses from the holy Quran and translates that “every time their skins are burnt off, we shall rip lace them with new skins, so that they may taste suffering in full” (207). She warns Ama to be careful with Mehwish because she is

on the threshold of womanhood otherwise “she will go the way of your other daughter and your father” (208). She however assures Ama that there is still hope for Mehwish. Apa Farzana has “helped many women find forgiveness through Quran and Sunnah (206). Mehwish who is curious by nature, asks Apa Farzana too many questions to quench her thirst for knowledge about Islam. She asks Apa, “How come you did not begin Alif Lam Mim?” (207) Ama becomes extremely annoyed and forbids Mehwish from putting too many questions to Apa Farzana. She even slaps her on the cheek when the latter leaves. Later that night when Mehwish goes to sleep in the room that she shares with Amal she asks too many questions from Amal and annoys her as well. She fights with Amal and tells her: “I hate you” to which Amal retorts by calling her “BITCH!” Mehwish replies: “BITCH YOURSELF!” Amal loses control and slaps her while abusing her at the same time: “BLOODY MEHWISH” Mehwish retorts by abusing Amal and slaps her in return but she dodges her easily. This makes Mehwish extremely angry and frustrated. She flies the lid by expressing her anger for the first time: “YOU KNOW I CANNOT SEE YOU CAN HIT ME I CANNOT HIT YOU BACK WHAT EVERY ONE DOES YOU MISS FAUZIA AMA I HATE YOU ALL I HATE YOU I HATE YOU BLOODY AMAL!...YOU ARE ALL THE SAME” (209).

Amal has been towing Mehwish since the latter was a child. Their physical proximity and interdependence have afforded both the vantage point of monitoring each other closely and “monitoring is, by design an empowering process through which marginalized...can document violations and abuses and provide their description of reality” (Rioux et al, 535).

Fighting with Amal empowers Mehwish in the sense that for a while she breaks free from Amal’s influence and stops behaving like her confidante or accomplice. Anger transforms her into an independent young woman with a voice of her own. For once Mehwish asserts herself by throwing her loyalty to Amal to the winds. So when Amal breaks the news of wanting to go and live with Nana in Islamabad because she is too tired of putting up with Mehwish, Mehwish is profoundly hurt. Wounded to

the core, she divulges to Aba that which he doesn't yet know about Amal's rendezvous with Omar and all about her "thrill-seeking" in Lahore's Hira Mandi. Aba is genuinely shocked. He becomes extremely angry with Amal. He shakes her violently, even hits her which makes Amal cry. After the fight, Mehwish notices a change in Amal's behavior. Even though both the sisters still share the same bedroom, Mehwish feels that Amal "...is in bed beside me but a part of her has left" (212) whereas Amal thinks that Mehwish's betrayal has caused their hearts to "rust", leaving behind a "unity corroded". After the rift, Mehwish keeps "her to herself" (291).

By the time Aba agrees to let Amal marry Omar, the first female Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan is sacked by the President and Miss Amna has been replaced by Miss Raheela at school. Miss Raheela with her foreign degree pulls some unknown string and the much-desired bookshop is set up by converting a storage shed at school into a shop. All the books in the shop are for the seeing people. The shop is run by an old and illiterate man referred to as 'Baba'. Mehwish visits the bookshop during the lunch break routinely. The shopkeeper is, however not much of a help to her due to his ignorance. One day Mehwish says to Baba: "We would be better off if you were blind and I could see." To which he replies laughingly, "Well we are both blind!"(225)

Uzma Aslam Khan uses blindness as a metaphor for ignorance. Despite being able to see, baba is blind vis-à-vis the treasure of knowledge contained within the tomes because all of it is unexpressed and unknown to him. Blindness, on the other hand also hints at the possibilities of alternate sensory and extra-sensory perceptions as reliable "potential means of accessing unspeakable experiences" the way Hall indicates in her seminal work titled: *Disability and Modern Fiction* (168). Many a time corporeal blindness within the narrative becomes eclipsed by metaphorical blindness.

The bookshop, which had become Mehwish's "alternate space", is where she experiences corporeal molestation for the first time at the hands of

Baba's son. The ugliness of the incident is brought out by co-relating Mehwish's response to the "stench of fish slime cartilage", something greasy and slimy like the cooked onions which she does not relish at all. Disgusted by the uninvited strokes of Baba's son, she tells him frankly: "I do not *want* to touch you" to which he replies contemptuously: "You will never get a second chance. Have you *seen* yourself?" (229)

While trying to escape from being taken advantage of by her blindness, Mehwish bangs into a wall and gets physically hurt above one eye which starts bleeding. Traumatized by the unpleasantness of the episode to an extent she does not open up about it to anybody, not even Amal who "keeps asking did you fall or was it something else...?" (231) Mehwish does not attend her graduation party at school. Her parents do not force her to do so. However, what bothers her most is the fact that "No one mentions the 'son' no one knows what happened in the bookshop probably not even Baba..." (232)

The essence of what Dowse et al write in their article titled: "Violence Against Disabled Women in the Global South" is that socially constructed, stereotypical gender roles of women with disabilities often determine how physical and/or emotional violence is perpetrated against them in countries of the global South where the worth of a woman depends, largely upon her exterior/physical beauty, her abilities as a homemaker and her willingness to look after her husband, and children. Several factors such as history, religion, ideology, ethnicity, economics, and culture usually define these gender roles, and women who are unable to fit into their roles are devalued and rejected by society (328).

Mehwish's visual impairment places her at a heightened risk of sexual violence. She is more susceptible to rape, or sexual molestation as compared to a normal able-bodied girl of her

age. To sum up the argument suffice it to say that Mehwish comes into being as a character through story-telling and dialogue. Social heteroglossia, a significant feature of *The Geometry of God* (2014), plays a pivotal role in constituting Mehwish's identity. The multicultural,

Postcolonial Pakistan has been depicted through diverse forms of social speech (at times even different languages) and individual voices. Diverse “speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speeches of characters are...fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia” enters the novel to make it a dialogical masterpiece (Bakhtin 263). The diversity of perspectives serves to add dimensions to the visually impaired Mehwish’s worldview via her discourse with professional and other varieties of social languages spoken by Nana, Aba, Ama, Amal, Zara, Miss Fauzia, Omar, and even Noman; persons/characters that she interacts with in her life. Social languages of the late 80s’and 90s Pakistan, thus used abundantly by Uzma Aslam Khan also help bring out the significance of English as a language in a post-independence Pakistan, making it (English) enter “with them into one single heteroglot unity of societal becoming” (Bakhtin 411). Thus, Mehwish acquires selfhood and agency through numerous, synchronized yet mutually conflicting perspectives which get constituted through social interaction using speech as a tool. Dialogized transmissions of Amal’s, Aba’s, Ama’s, Nana’s, and Appa Farzana’s words at home, Miss Amna’s and Miss Fauzia’s (words) at school both in everyday life and ideological or professional communications contribute noticeably towards Mehwish’s mental development and help her formulate a worldview in the 90s’ Pakistan.

The Geometry of God as a Disability memoir is a non-linear, biographical depiction of Mehwish’s visual impairment. Hermeneutic analysis of the novel in the preceding paragraphs adequately brings out the social participation and support of Mehwish’s family towards her development and growth as an individualized, gendered, yet disabled/visually impaired citizen of an independent (nation) state. Through the foregoing analysis, it has also transpired that independence as a goal for people with disabilities inhabiting the global South is inappropriate because South Asians mostly survive on mutuality and supportive familial networks that bond them closely as interdependent human beings. Independence and self-reliance, on the other hand, have been imported from the global North as ideal philosophies of existence. They are generally linked with manners of perceiving things about life which incidentally trivialize

several indigenous, cultural practices. Independence, as a way of life, responds quite differently to people with disabilities who are forced to live their lives in poverty and suffering (Swartz & Bantjes 29). In the wake of globalization and the neoliberal philosophy of the West, ideals such as independence and self-reliance are threatening to soon replace the social practices characteristic of most domestic spaces in South Asian countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan. Given that the knowledge that has been successful in making inroads from the global North down to the global South mostly fails to reckon with the multi-faceted, inextricable nature of the moral problems tackled by the disabled/different in Pakistan (Cutajar & Adjoë, “Whose Knowledge, Whose Voice? 509).

Uzma Aslam Khan has successfully incorporated some important thematic concerns about disability studies such as basic human rights and citizenship in *The Geometry of God* (2014) through an ontological representation of Mehwish’s visual impairment as an embodied form of disability in the Pakistani cultural context. An in-depth analysis of the novel under consideration from a dialogical perspective further elaborates how deficits of the body and mind are understood and dealt with differently in different societies. Moreover, that disability affects an individual’s identity which is culturally defined. Change of locale and culture automatically change the perceptions of disability. The social model of disability understands it as a collective rather than a personal problem and as a collective issue the disabled need to be well integrated into the society that they belong to.

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