

# The Landscape of Vertical Wilderness: Environmentalism and a Sense of Place in Uzma Aslam Khan's Novel *Thinner than Skin*

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the novel Thinner than Skin by Anglophone Pakistani writer Uzma Aslam Khan, and especially her deployment of an alternate vision of Pakistan's Northern area and its complex geography, history and environmentalism. Set in Pakistan's vibrant, culturally diverse and magnificent landscapes described as "vertical wilderness" in the Himalayan and Karakorum regions, the author explores the relationship between culture, and the non-human nature, and explores a sense of place that is replete with regional, local and external threats that constantly thwart the local landscape and its ecosystem. In the novel, Khan raises important questions regarding the rapid degradation of the forest environment, the fate of indigenous nomadic people and issues related to the conservation of wildlife in the background of neoliberalism and development. The analysis shows that the environment and the local cultures in Pakistan's Northern areas are under threat with potentially undesirable impact and will continue further if left unaddressed.*

**Keywords:** Environmentalism, Fiction, Nature, Place, Ecocriticism

## 1. Introduction

In this era of heightened capitalism, globalization and the 'war on terror', Pakistani writers are focusing on diverse themes, perspectives and debates not undermining the role of environmentalism in Pakistani discourse as well. With the declining environmental conditions across the world, a large corpus of creative expression in fiction and arts from distinct cultures have participated in exciting discussions to represent and question challenges like environmental degradation and crisis. Within such a milieu, Pakistani ecocriticism also explores environmental concerns that might be impacting Pakistan's rapidly altering ecology. While writers like Mohsen Hamid, Kamila Shamsi and Anis Shivani have highlighted the urban landscape and its gradual decay, there are others like Khan who takes up the theme of environmental violence and injustice in the rugged and remote landscapes of Northern Pakistan. Likewise, the novel *Thinner Than Skin* written by Uzma Aslam Khan demonstrates social and ecological plight of Northern areas by drawing attention to Pakistan's growing concern about environment degradation due to the changing patterns of neoliberalism and unchecked consumption of resources that threaten thousands of those who depend upon access to natural resources for their betterment and survival. Scot Slovic observes that contemporary Pakistani discourse reflects, "the ubiquitous concerns about environmental degradation" (2015, p.9). Ahmad and Karrar have critiqued that Pakistan's escalating population, abject poverty and its impact upon nature and environment is essentially due to regional and global shifting

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scenarios of globalization that are "busy transforming once predominantly agrarian societies into urbanised repositories of surplus humanity" (2015, 59). Uzma Aslam Khan expresses a similar vision of a complex web of rapidly altering landscapes as she structures her narrative to capture representations of pristine landscape, Pakistani communities and focuses on a substantial threat to both the ecological and the indigenous social community of the region. In this paper, it is also argued that the novel *Thinner than Skin* is an emblem of what Buell terms as "mature environmental aesthetics- or ethics" (2005, p. 22) because Khan considers concerns that are both anthropocentric as well as biocentric. The novel's anthropocentric dilemma questions people's role in perpetuating ecological violence by disrupting nature's harmony. However, it is biocentric at the same time as the author simultaneously presents the nature-centred values of the indigenous communities in the Hunza valley who honour all forms of life that sustains them. Intertwining fact, fiction and history of the region<sup>iii</sup>, the author offers an environmentally oriented vision of localism and an in-depth understanding of ecologies that may help recognise various communities and their struggle for sustainability.

Khan, in her novels, not only mirrors a society of city dwellers, farm owners and displaced minorities but also foregrounds its vulnerable post-colonial ecology in a broader socio-political and environmental context and draws attention to the human violation of nature and habitats. Her keen sense of perception on social inequality towards marginalized communities underscore the post-colonial culture in Pakistan especially when she grapples with questions of class and therefore encourages her readers towards an understanding of what is termed as environmental injustice. As any serious environmentalist would do, Khan criticizes the government and corporate sectors in covering up the upper or middle classes while intensifying anguish in communities that are impoverished and marginalized. Khan's passionate plea for the social justice voices the interconnectedness of environmental and social web that disrupts human life and damaged communities of both human and the non-human world. The indigenous communities and cultures in Pakistan as the capitalist and global market constantly thwart them contextualizes the altering ecosystems. In *Thinner Than Skin* Khan portrays Kaghan and Hunza valley with its cauldron of ethnic communities, their customs and old traditions and presents a picture of Pakistan that embodies a depth of indigenous societies, and their profound complexities. Similarly, a sense of place and its connectedness is essential to explore because place sense in today's capitalistic modernity potentially becomes a site for resistance to safeguard its sovereignty and place-based regional identity. Buell writes:

Neither the imagination of environmental endangerment nor, for that matter, of environmental well-being, can be adequately understood without a closer look at how the imagination of place-connectedness itself works: its multiple dimensions, its cultural significances, its capacity to serve by turns as either an insulating or a galvanizing force. (2009, p.24)

For instance, the author takes up important environmental perspectives on the rampant deforestation in northern Pakistan and native resistance towards this growing violence. The gradual increase in the rate of deforestation in the valleys of the north owes much to the cutting down of trees by timber mafia and corrupt forest officers' complicity in perpetuating the crime. With Pakistan in an outright state of unease within the country as

violence disrupts human life, there are various other social processes taking place that give rise to ecological and human suffering. Khan uses fiction as a vehicle to describe the lives of displaced migrants like the Gujjar tribe who represent the downgraded underclass. It is also an insight into the lives of subaltern communities that cannot be ignored because they serve the affluent class domestically. This is a distinctive feature of the narrative as the author casts light on the ecological and physical traumas confronted by these lower classes of Pakistani society who are nestled deep in the "Karakorum's womb" (Khan, p.194). Ironically, the "womb" of the mighty Karakorum is unable to shelter the indigenous community of the Northern areas who suffer constant displacement, and ecological setbacks and in so doing serves as a metonym for the unstable nation-state in general. Furthermore, the metaphor of "womb" also serves to denote biological diversity (Ashford, 74) and more than being just an imaginary construct, the gendering of the landscapes throughout the novel generates a binary vision.

On the one hand, the author represents through a series of images, metaphors and similes the nurturing tender presence of the mother nature and on the other hand the gentle warmth of land (womb) being betrayed and subdued by human aggression, thus explaining the fundamental conflict between culture and nature. In the Pakistani context, ecocritical investigation to probe into these epistemologies serves as an essential tool to raise consciousness against the changing dynamics of the mountain forest environment. The novel is also an explicit narrativization of the rapid extinction of ancient cultures, animal species as well as deforestation. However, central to all these visions is the sense of place as part of what Lawrence Buell terms as "environmental imagination" that is replete with serious concerns for ecological protection and sustainability. Therefore, complex metaphoric expressions like "vertical wilderness" can be taken as a symbol of unexplored territories of the mountains and becomes an emblem of an endangered piece of earth visibly degraded and polluted by human agency. Considering all these factors in view, the purpose of this article is to examine the different impacts of various factors such as free-market policies and human intervention on the environment and local inhabitants to understand how Khan exposes the exploitation and abuse of both the human and the natural environment in the Pakistani context.

## **2. Methodology and Theoretical Considerations**

The research methodology is qualitative and primarily based on the textual analysis of the novel *Thinner than Skin*. The analysis draws on ecocriticism as a theoretical framework to analyze the environmental issues in the text. Ecocriticism explores an interdependent relationship between ecology, human and non-human world. Since the text under discussion raises specific environmental issues which are essential from an epistemological point of view, the article explores ecological concerns and human-nature relationship. According to Lawrence Buell, in the arena of literary studies, "the impetus to engage environmental issues has mainly come from the ecocritical movement, which has concerned itself especially with creative and critical recuperation of the natural world, although lately it has begun to engage a wide range of text and positions" (2001, p.31). Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* has outlined four basic ingredients that can be considered to comprise an environmentally oriented text (1995, p.7-8). Buell further asserts that in an environmentalist discourse we should also focus on our collective state of mind such as attitudes, images, feelings and narratives along with other

forms and expression of toxic discourse (2009, p.1-2). Likewise, Glotfelty claims that ecocriticism "takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature " (xix). With "one foot in literature and the other on land" ecocriticism is a study of "relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii) as a response to understand our relationship with the physical natural world in an age of environmental destruction and apocalypse. Oppermann observes "ecocriticism focuses on this conditioned of interfaced reality that points to how culture and nature are closely entwined" (2016,412). Writers around the world have addressed environmental crisis and problems and what can be done to contribute to accomplishing environmental restoration (Buell, 2009; Carson, 2002; McKibben, B. 1989).

Similarly, activist and ecocritic Joni Adamson write in "Environmental Justice" that the word "environment" has been redefined and includes all places where we "live, work, play, worship, and learn" (Adamson et al. 2002, cited in Adamson, 2016). According to her, this definition provides a broader and inclusive comprehension of human relationship with the physical world and therefore explores ecological issues by emphasizing that discourse on "nature" extends beyond the general understanding of the term "wilderness" in order to expose anthropocentric activities that puts the natural environment and all living species at risk (Adamson, p. 1-3). Today, worldwide environmental justice movements are playing a significant role to raise awareness in promoting a healthier environment for human and non-human survival. Drawing upon the concept of environmental justice, it also argued that Khan uses fiction to call attention to multiple burdens; environmental violence and social inequities that are responsible for marginalizing and displacing local inhabitants (Barry, 2012). Environmental justice seeks to address not only the problems like environmental racism, politics, ideology and representation, but it also questions the conventional definition of what constitutes nature and environment by foregrounding labour and race. It realigns the marginalized communities and places them in the centre of what may constitute nature and environment (Sze, p.163). Khan offers in her novels (for example, *Trespassing*, and *Thinner Than Skin*), an alternative way of communicating the concept of environmental justice by employing various tropes, metaphors and images. The use of such linguistics strategies by Khan consequently directs the reader's attention towards the "real" issues and problems of communities who are fighting against various oppressions and violence thereby broadens the field of environmentalism in academic spheres.

Moreover, ecocritics interpret and analyze various representations of place and regions in human culture (Buell, 1995). While ecocritical discourse might identify one approach, the unidirectional way of perception, however, what it provides is a path in which to focus (Mendelson, 1999, p. 81). A vast variety of environmental arena provides approaches that interpret texts as a product of culture and its ecological values, for instance, the development of ecofeminism from feminist perspectives. Similarly, many ecocritics have attempted to connect literary studies with other competing perspectives and academic fields which makes ecocriticism interdisciplinary in nature and scope. The works of Kent Rhyden and Kathleen Wallace stand out as instances of where they have attempted to connect ecocriticism with geography and a sense of place. Writers like these discover relationships between a region and story which gives it full meaning.

Similarly, scholars like Peter Berg, Kirkpate Sale and Daniel Coleman situate bioregions in many diverse perspectives. They view bioregions in a planetary context, bioregions as fluid boundaries and bioregions as geopolitical bodies. Features such as local history, religious beliefs, myths and archaeology are considered when determining the limits of bioregions (Wahl, 2017).<sup>iv</sup> *Thinner Than Skin's* conceptual foundation for resistance in the persona of Ghafoor towards the forest protection is related to an imagining of a bioregion quite favourite in ecocriticism, generally termed as "bioregionalism", but it also carries the concept forward by making it flexible and acceptable to a vision that is also "cosmopolitan".

Consequently, Khan's novel is beneficial in the pursuit of two greater emerging critical perspectives. Firstly, the narrative emerges as an effort to revise and foreground a sense of place-and particularly bioregionalism at the junction of ecocriticism and postcolonialism. Secondly, the novel provides instances to explore how environmental criticism and Pakistani fiction might be read alongside each other. Although ecocriticism has become much global in scope, however, it began primarily as an American movement that associated the principles of ecology with the literary studies. Ecocriticism is becoming more diverse and transnational including narratives from third world nations with the emergence of more silent voices on an ecocritical platform. *Thinner than Skin* is an original voice from the Global South and communicates connections which are ecological and represent in depth the relationship between both human and the nonhuman world. Therefore, in its exploration of the symbiotic relationship between ecocriticism and a sense of place in *Thinner than Skin*, this article aims to contribute to this critical frame of work.

### 3. Analysis and Discussion

In *Thinner than Skin*, Khan sets her recent novel on identity and belonging set in the magnificent Pakistani landscape of mountains, mighty glaciers, valleys and rivers that represent Northern Pakistan. It is cosmopolitan as Khan envisions and interweaves the local with the global trade and travels across borders and geographical landscapes of the neighbouring borders that are politically complex as well as culturally intertwined. Nadir-a Pakistani photographer, trying to make his career in the United States –travels to the northern areas of Pakistan and provides a comprehensive scenario of Pakistan's less explored territories in the north through the lens of his camera. He captures the natural beauty of Pakistan which is mysterious as well mythical. The reader moves with the characters as they move from place to place in the Kaghan valley. The native Gujjar tribes in Northern Pakistan provide a glimpse into a world of mountain nomads, as well as the challenges these rustic people face on a day to day bases. In *Thinner Than Skin*, Himalayan mountains described as "mating glaciers" and "mating-ice" depicts the unique splendour of Northern mountains, north-western queen of the mountains, "*Malka Parbat*", and "banks of Lake Saiful Maluk, resulting from the snow-melted ice are symbolic of unmatched wild beauty on earth. Description of the majestic power of the most feared and photographed peak in the Himalayan ranges: "The Nanga Parbat, Naked Mountain" is also reminiscent of the first wave of ecocriticism that entails it as "nature writing", a phrase with its rich ambiguities indicates writing which evokes nature and a purifying relationship of living and nonliving world within pristine wilderness.

Contrary to this exotic setting in Pakistan's north is also visible the impact of politics of war, trade and tourism which plays a crucial role in disrupting the ecology of Pakistan's immaculate beauty located in the valleys of Himalayas. The native nomads and their traditional mode of life which is rooted in the earliest of history are shown in contrast to the complexities of the modern culture. The Karakorum and the Himalayas have long been considered to form protection against contaminants of all sorts ranging from atmospheric pollutants to forest degradation. However, the barriers have become permeable, leaky and unsafe which are threatening the livelihood and sustainability of many who have been inhabiting that magnificent landscape for decades. Khan's craftsmanship in the novel provides a dual image; one witnesses the beauty and untamed nature through the eyes of Nadir and Maryam, who throughout the narrative unveil factors such as mountain beauty vs fear and death, indigenous culture vs sedentary lifestyle, geography vs environmental history of the region and ecosystem vs its destroyers. In the following discussion, an attempt is made to explore how Khan negotiates this dual vision and unlocks mysteries and truths about the environmental apocalypse that is beginning to take place in once considered to be the pristine alpine in the world. However, Khan authors her ability to contrast this splendour with grief, bereavement, and conflict, and her unwavering review of the atrocities faced by nomads, herders and indigenous communities as they seek for belonging, identity, and justice are brought into play. While Khan probes into the Indus valley of Thatta and the Arabian coastline, land and human-animal relationship in *Trespassing*, however, in *Thinner than Skin* she takes us to the breathtaking lush forests of Pakistan in the valleys of Gilgit Baltistan unraveling the remote and yet the most fascinating geographical location wrapped in pagan myths, stories of fairies and jinn's and local cultures that dates back to the pre-Islamic cultures of Pakistan.

The plot of the story revolves around a young Pakistani landscape photographer Nadir who is attempting to pursue his career in the US and his American Pakistani girlfriend Farhana who visits Pakistan for the first time to study and compare the growth of Pakistani Glaciers in the western Himalayas with the glaciers of Mount Shasta in northern California. A group of four people Farhana, Nadir his best friend Farhan and an American colleague Wes make their way through the mountains of Pakistan. While they journey along the rugged terrains, the theme of the novel splits into various layers of meaning. The purpose and project that transports Farhana and her team of friends to Northern Pakistan to study glaciers unfold many harsh realities that the northern area confronts today concerning security, environmental degradation, and rights of indigenous people and their land. Nadir Sheikh who is expected to give his American audience a glimpse into Pakistan that represents "the dirt, the misery" (p. 10) something more authentic with "the beggars and bazaars or anything that resembles "his culture" (p.12) ventures into a world of uncertainties. The foreign media looked forward to images on "war" presumed more "authentic" representation of "The Wild East" and Nadir Sheikh must wow the world, with the assurance of horror" (p.13). With these expectations in mind, he makes a journey into a world of northern Pakistan along the river Kunhur and snow-capped mountains of Karakorum. Khan's novel is remarkable because it does not focus on the Pakistani nationalism rather specific components of her novel amalgamate a sense of cosmopolitanism simultaneously giving it a broader and complex canvas to draw on. Therefore, one can read the novel as a reflection of Pakistani sense of place with a cosmopolitan vision that captures the local and the global simultaneously. That is

why perhaps the Northern Pakistan is not portrayed merely as a landscape. Instead, it becomes a pathway that unlocks secrets and mysteries that it harbours, the stories about the global world that influences the local. The novel is so descriptive in its depiction of the non-human physical world in the images of mountains, rivers, forest and animal world of north Pakistan that Khan positions a sense of place within a broader, planetary context. Hence, a complex web of cosmopolitanism unfolds borders that merge with Afghanistan, Tajikistan, China, and connects with the century-old silk route. Further to that, the influx of terrorism in the northern mountains, constant references to the American drone attacks and ill-legal trade across the borders gives the novel a political perspective at the same time. Although there are diverse themes in the novel, the following discussion primarily focuses on the types of ecological threats posed by anthropocentric activities.

### **3.1 Environmental violence**

Equally relevant and significant to the depiction of geography and a sense of place with the legends of the glaciers, their gifts, surprises and their dangers, theme of environmentalism runs parallel and thereby constitutes an integral part of the novel. Khan focuses on a critical form of environmental violence: deforestation and human insecurity in Northern Pakistan. Desertification and deforestation are a global ecological concern. However, the fundamental processes differ across territories and countries. In Pakistan today, the risk to biodiversity and forests are in threat and Khan recognising this problem makes it a part of her discourse. Forests in Pakistan cover only five per cent of the entire land area (Government of Pakistan, 1991) and is believed to be quickly deteriorating, especially in the Northern areas (The World Conservation Union, 2002). Mariam and Ghafoor in the novel are two important tribal nomads who voice this critical concern, and it is through them that one realises the intensity of environmental challenges in Northern Pakistan. Therefore, deforestation and loss of biodiversity can be analyzed as two essential markers of environmental violence in the novel.

With Pakistan in an outright state of unease within the country as ethnic violence disrupts human life, there are various other social processes taking place that gives rise to ecological and human suffering. Khan uses fiction as a vehicle to describe the lives of displaced migrant like the Gujjar tribe who represents the underclass in a third world country like Pakistan. It is also an insight into the lives of subaltern communities that cannot be ignored because they serve the affluent class domestically. This is a distinctive feature of the narrative as the author sheds light on the ecological and psychological traumas confronted by the stratum of indigenous society. They suffer displacement and more ecological setbacks, and ecocritical investigation to probe into these epistemologies serves as an essential tool to raise consciousness against the changing dynamics of the socio-ecological patterns. These indigenous tribes also suffer as they are invaded continuously looted and threatened by:

The ones who tore down the old, old trees and poisoned the Gujjar dogs and fenced off the land and charged the moon for two stems of ginger and claimed a killer was hiding in their midst. (Khan, p. 195)

This aspect of environmental violence is a critical economic setback for the native tribes in the valley which is a result of massive scale cutting of trees for lumbering. The forest

officer himself is complicit in the crime who "did not allow the timber mafia to fell the trees near his home, only those further away" (p.206). Deforestation in the valleys of the Himalayas bare severe economic consequences on the one hand, and on the other, the reduction of the forest is responsible for reducing water retention thereby increasing soil erosion, which as a result leads to flooding of the lowlands. Ghafoor one of the crucial characters in the novel and a native tribesman ponders over this frustrating scenario of his valleys dwindling habitat and the conditions of the herders. Khan further writes:

If there was one thing, he had learned in his years away; it was that nomads everywhere were treated much the same. What the Uyghurs were to the Chinese, the Kazakh cattle- breeders were to Kazakhstan and, in the past, to the USSR. Moreover, the Uzbek herders of Afghanistan-how badly they fared, both under Russia and the Taliban. No less pitiful was the condition of the shepherds all over Pakistan. (p.206)

The shepherds are the minorities in the mountains and Khan is explicit in exposing how the seasonal cycle of shepherd population all over Pakistan is threatened especially in the north. Narrator's comparison to the suppressed communities like Uyghur in China, Kazakh cattle breeders and Uzbek in Afghanistan and Russia tell a sad tale of oppression and extreme marginalisation to highlight the plight of all shepherds in Pakistan. The pastoral bliss and life are subsidiary to these cultures, and so is the economy around them which in return is vulnerable to processes of environmental deterioration. According to Tucker (1986) who observes that throughout the Himalayan region, survival is rooted in the fragile and insubstantial resources of the mountain's valleys and pastures. Herdsmen and shepherds, dependent on the pastoral grazing of goats and sheep, make use of the mountain zone, linking it with the trade system and agriculture of the lower mountain hills. However, under rapidly altering economic, ecological and political conditions in the past and present, they are coping with a lot of cultural loss and pain under new pressures and face an extreme danger of traditional and cultural isolation. Hence, the same predicament is highlighted by Khan as she exposes how and why the shepherds in the valleys of the mountains are in the worst situation. They are socioeconomically at the brinks of collapse. In this region before the British Raj, the Rajas and princes who controlled the hilly territories did not regulate admission to grazing lands and forests that were used (Tucker, 1988).<sup>v</sup>It is a legacy of land exploitation, and capitalisation that was inherited from the British colonial administration tells Mariam's mother to her daughter as she carried her on her back:

Timber and thatching grass had once been free. The forest department would take away the materials each spring. When the families dismantled their huts and headed for the mountains and give back the same timber each autumn when they returned. She told Mariam it was the Angrez who invented the whole business, the whole revenue generating forest policy that bound the herders forcing them to pay a grazing fee and tree-cutting fee. Before the Angrez, they had been free to graze and chop. Moreover, the sedentary folk had been friendly. They let the nomads camp in their fields during the migration., knowing that when the cattle moved on, they left piles of fresh, steaming dung. Free manure; what else did anyone want? The change had begun in Maryam's Mother's Day., and over the year's herders had become no better than the upal that lived in the buffalo dung. "Everyone is welcome but us", her mother would grieve. (p. 251)



There is a historical background for the abuse of forest resources and the land which has placed immense pressure on herdsmen generating a debate over who is accountable for overgrazing in the alpine pastures. However, Khan holds multiple factors responsible for such a complexity where governments role is foremost apart from the grazing cycles as an essential exploiter of the mountain resources. The forest department fines them if their sheep are caught grazing on lands that are no longer available to these free people of the valleys. The forest ministry lies and blames the sheep and the cattle responsible for rotting the land. Their livestock on which these herders depend throughout the treacherous winters cannot get enough grass to sustain their flock. The fields of the valleys are beginning to deteriorate not due to the cattle but:

Because the land was easily destroyed in the floods the previous year. The land was easily destroyed because it had no trees. It had no trees because the same inspector grew fat each time the forest was torn down. There was always a beginning, hard as it was to keep track of sometimes. As punishment, the herders were told to pay four thousand rupees, as well as the weekly supply of milk, curd, butter, and ghee for an indefinite period. Sugar on demand. (p. 212)

The situation of resource depletion in Pakistan's North is bleak. According to Nazir et al., (2018) the state of forest change in Pakistan is a matter of concern. Their research also shows that the loss of trees and forest is so immense that it cannot be recovered over time. This scenario requires a higher level of action by the Government, the public as well as the private organisations. If we look at the definition of sustainable development, it states that "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987:8). However, on the contrary, some episodes emphasize a lack of economic development and neither is it complementary to society and the environment. The herdsmen and the native tribes of the highlands are living under deplorable standards which jeopardise their current situation and undermines the future living conditions of those who will follow.

Similarly, the nomads of the Gujjar tribe also face another setback in the form of new government policy that introduced Australian sheep to replace the indigenous sheep that are acclimatised to live on the mountains of Himalayan pastures. In Pakistan in the name of efficiency, stabilisation and productivity, the state introduced a developmental program that is massively backed by market-oriented policies, including deregulation, privatisation, under neo-liberal regimes which are creating havoc for the general public (Babai, 1988; Smith, 1991). The indigenous sheep yielded twenty kg of meat and two kg of wool as compared to the foreign Australian sheep that yielded twice the amount that native sheep provided (p. 190). However, Khan draws attention to the fact that the foreign sheep, on the contrary, were weaker and were unfit to survive the cold climate of Hindu Kush Himalayan valley's icy winds and sudden snow drifts, hence perished much sooner than the "desi sheep" which was a severe economic setback for the indigenous communities who relied on livestock for sustenance (p. 190). The "foreign burdens"<sup>vi</sup> like these impact Pakistani ecosystem; whether they are in the form of foreign trawlers in the Pakistani seas overfishing and depleting natural resources as exposed in Khan's novel *Trespassing* or the foreign Australian sheep in *Thinner Than Skin* who are unfit to survive on mountains thereby forcing the herders to take grazing pastures that were closer and

would lead them into paying huge fines constitute a significant concern for herders and the environment. As a result, the government in the valley was responsible for closing off the freedom of cattle to wander the pastures the way Maryam did when she was growing up, and this restriction also killed the foreign Australian sheep that the villagers were forced to buy. The goats were used to grazing the high summer pastures but due to Government restrictions imposed they were forced in the low land. As a result, the lowland forests were overgrazed with no time to regenerate even with the plentiful rain (p. 207). Khan writes, “even their goats were meddled with. The government replaced the sturdy Kaghani goats and the fierce Kilan goat with those that yielded more mutton but ate all the feed and left the indigenous goats bleating in hunger” (p.191). Ghafoor’s constant plea is noteworthy when he laments at the injustice levelled against his community, look what they do to us here, killing our sheep, fencing the land, looting our forests, insulting our women, they know nothing of *us*, the way *we* work the land. The way *you* do (221, emphasis original) and provides valuable insight into the non-regulation of any environmental policy. The stories of livestock and their violence at the hands of the government, the restriction imposed upon the herders and its association with environmental sustainability are relevant for understanding how the environment can be visualized differently by the organizations in the Himalayan hemisphere from the way they are setting out to change local human-environment relations in the territory. While the local inhabitants are jeopardized with the sheep exchange program of the government, the Chitral valley also saw the loss of fine horse breed become extinct. Horse breed like Nukra, Bharsi and Kaliani, Yarknad which came to the Fergana valley centuries ago, were now lost forever they were now “extinct” (Khan, 207). For mountain villagers, sheep and goats have a strong symbolic significance. Apart from being a source of sustenance, milk, protein, butter and meat, these animals are a symbol of life, fertility in the animist system of belief. Khan through Maryam provides a glimpse in to “animism” that still exist in Pakistan’s remote areas like Baltistan region. Animism is the world’s oldest form of worship of many indigenous tribes in Northern areas who are struggling to survive under cover of apparently Islamic community (MacDonald, 2004). Thus, the concept of “nature” personified in these animals cannot be separated from their use and value regarding symbolic as well as physical connection.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The novel *Thinner Than Skin* brings in many perceptions, new topics and environmental perspectives that contribute to a diversity of concepts offered by Uzma Aslam Khan. The author revisits indigenous and nomadic cultures of Himalayas and reflects upon a complex entanglement between grazing rights, concern over vanishing forest and articulates a sense of place which is conscious of environmental sensitivity. Furthermore, she identifies the problems faced by mountain pastoralists in Northern Pakistan. A geographical space known for its magnificent landscape, world’s most massive glaciers, one of the highest mountain peaks, rivers and valleys are in threat. Along with them, the indigenous people “Gujjar” who came down from the Central Asian Steppe thousands of years ago (Khan, p. 233) their centuries-old culture and their livestock on which they depend is at risk. The gradually “dying indigenous breeds” and “restrictions of grazing in a diminishing forest” (Khan, p.215) and “felled trees hidden in water wells” p.216) degenerating trends in the quality of forests and alpine pastures are crucial and underlines the fact that the centuries-old local traditions that understand their local

environment, the real inhabitants who are closer to land, and rely on forces of nature for their sustenance will be unable to survive if forces such as the political-religious intervention, tourist intrusion, unchecked economic and capital expansion unscrupulously continues.

## Notes

Khan's extensive knowledge on northern Pakistan and its history that she alludes to throughout the novel is drawn from historical resources that the author has acknowledged provides a comprehensive scenario of socio-political as well as historical reality of Modern-day Pakistan. (See *Thinner Than Skin* p. 346)

<sup>1</sup>Daniel.C.Wahl (2017, Aug 15).Bioregionalism—Living with a Sense of Place at the Appropriate Scale for Self-reliance An excerpt from 'Exploring Participation'(D.C.Wahl, 2002). <https://medium.com/age-of-awareness>

<sup>1</sup>Richard Ticker writes that 1878 Forest Law by the British Raj created a system to impose restrictions on tribes living in mountains and all villagers on collection of timber, fuel wood, and fodder for livestock. Despite resistance by the local villagers, the Forest Department spent half a century setting up Reserved Forests. These departments worked with contractors to hoard timber for international markets. A similar situation is described by Khan. See "Mountain Minorities and Ecological Change in The Himalayas".

<sup>1</sup>It's a term used by Rob Nixon to suggest how foreign countries import their burdens like waste and contaminated materials to the underdeveloped countries in the world. See *Environmentalism of the Poor*

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<sup>i</sup> Ania Loomba quotes Aime' Cesaire's 'stark equation: colonization= "thingification" in Ania Loomba, "Situating Colonial and Postcolonial Studies," *Colonialism/Post colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 22.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://144.214.21.63/CCS/core/postcolonialism/frameSet/Glossary.htm>