

## INACTIVITY AS A SOCIAL MENACE IN THE POETRY OF HAMID KHAN

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### Abstract

*The concept of inactivity is foregrounded in most of the poems of Khan. This paper focuses on the theme of inactivity as a social menace foregrounded in Khan's poetry. For this purpose, both the collections of Khan, "Velvet of Loss" and "Pale Leaf (Three Voices)" are used for the data under study. Only those poems are selected that bear the foregrounded theme of evil. The poems that foreground inactivity as a social menace are: Winter, Duress, The Winter of 1992, Romanticism, We Are Dreamers. Khan has indirectly pinpointed that the people of Pakistan, chiefly the modern youth, shun to come out of their comfort zone and do something of repute. Most of their time is wasted. This current of reformation is running in all the poems under study.*

**Key Words:** Inactivity, social menace, foregrounding, Pakistani context, Hamid Khan

### Introduction

Pakistani Literature in English has become a separate subject of interest for young scholars. This was made attractive by the epoch-making venture of Tariq Rahman in the form of writing the *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* in 1990. It covers all the known literary works by the writers of Pakistani origin both inside and outside of Pakistan. It gives special attention to poetry, though it contains lists of dramas and novels as well. Moreover, it provides a guideline to young scholars for searching an area of exploration of their choice. Wilma Blue (first para) comments on Tariq Rehman's book, *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* that it is like an encyclopedia. One can learn a lot from it. In the same line of review, Mary Tobin (first para) states the Tariq Rehman's *History* gives you useful facts about the nature of Pakistani literature in English.

Omar Tarin, Ilyas Khan, and Majied (2015) trace Pakistani Literature in English to the 1920s. It was the time when the sense of nationalism was getting strong foothold. They discuss the notable writers of the sort, such as Chattopadhyay, M.A. Rashid, Raja Rao, Sarojini Naidu, and Mumtaz. Besides, there were a travelogue by Sake Deen Mahomet, and translations from Bengali into English of Rabindranath Tagore by himself. In this connection, Hamid Khan, too, needs proper attention, as he, like many other local writers, tries to attract our attention towards the problems of the modern man, especially those of Pakistanis.

Hamid Khan is a local poet writing in English. He did his PhD in English. Khan writes poetry in English centering both local and worldwide issues and human failings such as war, oppression, women rights, corruption, and hypocrisy, to mention a few. He does so through the tools of foregrounding, i.e., deviation and parallelism. His poetry is very terse and stenographic and, more often, grips the reader's attention through unusual usage of linguistic choices. Moreover, his poetry carries deviation on various levels, such as syntactic, semantic and graphological. As far as parallelism is concerned, he maintains it through phonemes as well as repetition of certain words that connote socio-cultural implications especially in the context of Pakistan and generally elsewhere in the world. It is needful to explore the hidden messages, in such type of poetry as Khan's, through the tools of foregrounding.

## Method

Toolan (1990) states that stylistic analysis that it can be used even for the teaching of language and of literature. He further avers that it helps in exploring the diverse reading of similar texts and

*It can be used to assist in seeing features that might not otherwise have been noticed. It can shed light on the crafted texture of the literary text, as well as offering a productive form of assistance in completing interpretations, making them more complex and richer. Stylistics can thus be used both as a descriptive tool and as a catalyst for interpretation.*  
(42)

In this connection, Fauconnier and Turner (2002) opine that despite the fact that both poetic and conventional languages integrate conceptually on the basis of certain principles, they are different at the same time. For instance, the divergence in the grammar of a poet is based on the poet's perception of the world around them.

Likewise, Leech (1969) states that without going back to linguistic notions and concepts much of the terms of literary criticism cannot possibly be explained such as metaphor and irony, etc. Stylistic analysis can be carried out through various levels, such as at the level of: graphology, phonology, morphology, and lexico-syntax. About lexico-syntax level of analysis Tallerman (1998) quoted in Imran Hussain & Sana Mansoor (2017) states that "Lexico-Syntactic choices are obtained through devices such as piling of usual collocates, unusual collocates, archaic words, particular parts of speech, metaphor, simile, oxymoron etc" (P. 1) It depends upon the choice of the researcher whether they choose one, two or more levels to look through a piece of literature. In this connection, Leech and Short (1981) states that there are four ways to analyze texts: syntax, phonology, semantics and graphology. Alabi (2008) explains that graphological features include the foregrounded punctuation marks, italics, spacing, and size of print, etc.

Again, I. A. Richards (1929) points out four types of textual functions and meanings that are, sense, feelings, tone, and intention. In addition, Jakobson's (1961) six functions are more elaborate in this connection. They are: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, poetic, and meta-linguistic. Among them the poetic function stands out which according to Jakobson (1960: 358) "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination". On the other hand, Halliday's (1967) describes three major functions viz., "ideational, interpersonal and textual" (Leech & Short, 1981, p. 30), though Fairclough (1995, p 4) explains that written texts are "multi semiotic" and exploit various forms of graphic designs apart from sound effects, diagrams and photographs.

In this paper, the poems are analyzed on the basis of foregrounding. The main tools of foregrounding are deviation and parallelism. This categorization is mentioned by Martindale (2007), quoted in Lesley Moss (2014) which is also supported by Van Peer and Hakemulder (2006), and Shen (2007).

## Analysis

Apart from the poem, *We are Dreamers* that occurs in Khan's collaborated work, *Three Voices*, in which Khan's portion of poems is titled as *Pale Leaf*, the rest of the poems understudy are part of Khan's collection, *Velvet of Loss*. Following is their detailed analysis.

### Winter

Winter brings with it sadness and boredom to the speaker of the poem. It is purely subjective, though the situation of the butterfly can be generalized – *numbed/ and/ colourless* because of the *chilly wind/ and the thickening mist*. Pathetic fallacy through the phrases *sad sky/ and the graying sun* adds to the severity of the situation. The sounds of /s/, /n/, /g/, /d/, /l/ makes an anagram of *singled* that corresponds to the numbed butterfly which is in misery and bears the brunt of the chilly night single-handedly. The assonance of /i/ suggests the shivering of the butterfly. The very word *butterfly* can be taken as a symbol of innocent young mountainous ladies that live a harsh life in the snow-clad hills. This symbolic representation is furthered through the foregrounded dash after the word, *butterfly* where a verb is needed, though it is left out. The leaving out of the verb takes one to suggest that in such a bad weather it is difficult to move. Hence, life in such a situation gets worse for the ladies as normally ladies of the mountains take part in most of the indoor and outdoor chores.

### Duress

The shadow of the lighthouse is striking against *the cliff*. The sea is screaming; the lips are parted and humans are busy in *piercing/ the rusty pleasure dome*. The whole poem violates the rules of syntax by missing out the proper verb phrase, hence foregrounds the sense of inactivity which in turn stands for diseases and death. This is further aggravated through the foregrounded lack of repetition of the phonemes that often find place in the collection understudy. The dictionary meanings of duress, is *threats, violence, constraints, or other action used to coerce someone into doing something against their will or better judgment*. (First para, <https://www.google.com>), hence the title is aptly connected to the subject matter of the poem that foregrounds such threats and violence through personifications and strange collections in the form of the phrases *trembling shadows, screams of a purple sea, and parted lips*. The pleasure dome is rusty thereby foregrounding the idea of leaving something aside due to its irrelevance but now when it is needed then the search gets alarmingly quick as is clear from the word *piercing*. The lighthouse is there for guidance but the lips are parted with awe as there are screams heard all around in life. The idea of life is foregrounded through the metaphor of sea which is taken normally as a symbol of life (and sometimes of death depending on the context it is used in).

### The Winter of 1992

The poem opens with interrogation, moves on with exclamation and culminates with statements showing the changing mood of the speaker. This movement of the moods correspond to one's life on earth as at first man is curious about the world around them, but once they start assimilation, they are wonder-stuck by their surroundings and at the end they simply accept the reality. Inactivity is compared with death that is why the winter is *gloomier*. Only crows come here *in flocks*, though the surroundings have lost their *aesthetic look*, yet a few of the *snowmen* can still be observed – they may be busy with their work.

The speaker further holds on to some hope of playing with the snow but then realizes that it is good that time changes things, hence there will be newer matters to ponder over while listening to the *night wind*. The adjectival deviation from *newer* to *new* suggest that there is little hope for innovation but a repetition of the same happenings. The noun phrase *hearsay* is followed by *swallow* that suggests this repetition as what they say shall be accepted. The severity of the winter is foregrounded through the repetition of assonances and consonances which in turn

can be put into word forms and can be anagrammatized as *tuff toast* thereby giving the symbolic meaning that life in winter is very harsh to live. The motionlessness during winter is foregrounded through the parallel syntactic structure in the second strophe of the poem. Again, the specification of the winter of 1992 is generalized through *there are now/ new metaphors/ in the night wind* as the phrase *new metaphors* suggests that though it is the story of the winter of 1992, yet life will go on and new things will happen.

The severity of cold is foregrounded through the repetition of the phonemes, /t/, /t/, /t/, /f/, /f/, /s/, /ð/, /əʊ/. These sounds are suggestive of the shivering during winter which in turn gives the idea of inactivity. Moreover, these sounds occur in the word and phrases that are thematic to the main scheme of the poem. These words and phrases are: snow, night, snowball, snowman, thanks to transience, no activity, no meaningful event, but for the fun, but not for long, of a few, and then the hearsay.

### **Romanticism**

The speaker thinks that *Romanticism is dead* because the breeze is *faithless*, though there are *swaying lilies* and *sonorous songs of a sky lark*. Truth is kept hidden. Agony of love overwhelms the speaker that is why he feels *helpless* that his words (suggested by the word *rhetoric*) will not be heard. It is romantic though the movement *Romanticism* is dead indeed! The idea of the death of Romanticism corresponds to the deviant lack of verb in the first strophe. Moreover, the personification of Romanticism foregrounds the factor of liberalism in art or life as a whole. The romantic characteristics of hopelessness and lack of interest in activity is foregrounded through *faithless* and lack of verb in the second and third strophes respectively. The alliteration and consonance coupled with assonance (/s/, /l/, /i/, /d/, /ə/) can be converted into the word *slide* which in turn foregrounds the idea of movement from one direction to the other thereby stressing that the romantic ideals were once active, though now are diminished or altogether abandoned.

### **We are Dreamers**

The poem opens with the routine of an unnamed girl. She is walking alone with sweet memories in her mind. The poet likes her for indifference to mundane life. Moreover, she is a dreamer like the poet.

Through the pronoun *we* in the title of the poem, the inactivity on part of the modern man is foregrounded. The statements in the poem are taken ironically which is supported by the deviant and irrelevant inclusion of the noun phrase *Eclipsed Moons* in the first strophe, and the quoted phrase '*no life*' in the second strophe.

The speaker of the poem identifies himself with a girl who is directly addressed as *she* thereby making her familiar to the readers which in turn generalizes her as every woman. The attachment of the dreamer with a female also foregrounds that it is womanish to think only – man should take action – hence, inactivity and just dreaming only is indirectly condemned. The same idea is foregrounded further through the repetitive sounds of /g/ and /l/ which can be anagrammatized as *girl*.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Inactivity and empty-mindedness are the current social problems of, especially, the youth of Pakistan. They waste their precious time by what is not necessary for them, such as needless interference in the political propagandas, useless use of modern technology and endless use of social media. Khan has given voice to such themes in *Winter*, *Duress*, *We are Dreamers*, *The Winter of 1992*, and *Romanticism*.

In *The Winter of 1992*, Khan's choices of words and parallel sounds foreground the listlessness and inactivity caused by the severity of cold. Snowfall hinders the smooth running of life. People, especially, the mountainous ones live a very hard life during winter. The repetition of phonemes is anagrammed into *tuff toast* which projects tough life in winter. The restriction on movement is foregrounded through the parallel syntactic structure in the second strophe of the poem. Though the winter is specified through the time adverbial, yet it is also generalized through *new metaphors* thereby suggesting that it is not only the winter of 1992 but every winter will also be as severe as this one as is projected through the phonemic repetition that sounds like shivering from cold. These phonemes are: /t/, /t/, /t/, /f/, /f/, /s/, /ð/, /əʊ/.

The generalization of the severity of winter is stretched to the poem, *Winter*, in which Khan foregrounds the miserable condition of the women folk of the snowy hilly areas through the metaphor of *butterfly*. Khan gives human attributes to the sky (*sad sky*) and sun (*graying sun*) thereby adding to the severity of the situation. The leaving out of the verb foregrounds inactivity during winter.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Khan stretches the theme of listlessness and inactivity to the poem, *Duress*. There is no verb phrase in the whole poem that foregrounds inactivity. Moreover the lack of repetitive phonemes that are there in all the poems of Khan further stresses the idea of lying idle. This is further strengthened through the *rusty pleasure dome* which foregrounds that man has brought on themselves misery and poverty by not succumbing to the will of Nature and lying idle during difficult circumstances. Hence, Khan wants to spread his message of hard work no matter what constraints are put in their way by bad weather, disease, or any other difficult circumstances.

Likewise, in the poem, *We are Dreamers*, Khan comes up with his choice of words and phonemic repetition that foreground the theme of inactivity. This time, he does so with the message that one should not think like a woman all the time rather muster up courage to embark upon any ordeal that would take them to better life. Through the personal pronoun *we* the lack of doing something good on part of the modern youth is foregrounded. Moreover, through the repetition of the sounds that gives the anagram of *girl*, Khan projects the idea that males, in Pakistani context, are supposed to face the harsh realities of life and instead of losing hope they should do errands to eradicate what is bad in the society.<sup>2</sup> This also gives us the idea that if to think is womanish then why not men do everything on their own; why are women being used to carry out domestic chores and, in most of the hilly areas, they are giving the task of bring wood on back an even grow in the fields too.

That *Romanticism is dead* is the idea that connects the poem the theme of inactivity as we know that the romantics were lazier than active. Khan, in his poem, *Romanticism*, avoids verbs in the second and third strophes thereby stressing the idea that it is no time to lie idly rather in this past progressive world, the youth of a nation must girdle up their loins to face the challenges of the modern world. The sentence *Romanticism is dead* sounds with the idiomatic expression *The queen is dead*, that suggests that bygones are bygones; let's do something to uplift the

<sup>1</sup> When I was teaching at Government Degree College, Satta, Kurram Agency back in 2006, we had a local cook at the hostel mess. One day I was discussing with him as to what was their routine during winter. His answer was that they collect wood and do hard work to earn enough money so that they could sustain their life during winters because they could not go out to do anything during those chilly months.

<sup>2</sup> This takes us to the typical traditional patriarchal societies where males are supposed to work outside their homes and earn money for a living. The women are considered as inferior who cannot do something of value.

society. The very repetition of the phonemes gives the anagram that reads *slide* which foregrounds the idea of putting the past aside and starting life afresh.

The overall effect in all the above poems is that of inactivity on part of the modern man. Though it is a fact that those who live in the severest mountainous winters can move a little, yet man will have to do hard work in order to bring about change in his already poor condition of living chiefly in the context of Pakistan. If women can cut wood and grow vegetables facing and bearing the brunt of the hard weather in the hilly areas, then why on earth compels men to shun hard work. This is the message that Khan has highlighted through his linguistic choices and parallel phonemes.

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