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THESIS:
COGNITIVE ESTRANGEMENT IN SPECULATIVE FICTION: A SOCIAL COMMENTARY ON USMAN T. MALIK'S *MIDNIGHT DOORWAYS*

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, whose hard work and compassion have shaped many of my successes. Thank you for keeping up with me all these years. Once I graduate, I am going to start behaving. No promises, though.

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ABSTRACT

Through a close reading of three stories from Usman T. Malik's *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan*, the study analyzes how Darko Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement functions within the Pakistani anglophone speculative fiction. Cognitive estrangement is supplemented by defamiliarization theory, affect studies, myth criticism, and South Asian literary scholarship, giving direction to the thesis's main argument that Malik's world-building estranges the reader from everyday cultural realities while laying bare the deep-seated social tensions. In lieu of being decorative fantasies, the study dissects that Malik's supernatural novums are cognitive instruments by applying Suvin's pendulum analogy, and finds that they incite perception through the selected short fictions, *Ishq, The Wandering City,* and *In the Ruins of Mohenjodaro.* Exposing gendered violence, historical trauma, and institutional failures, Malik thus proves that these elements are better told in mythic and horror novums, whereas realist modes cannot fully express them. His fiction mobilizes such estrangements to reimagine Pakistani social realities and open new imaginative pathways for understanding violence, memory, and futurity.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

As literature ages gracefully, its genres expand and branch into several new ones. In the context of Pakistani anglophone writers, speculative fiction is gradually becoming a prominent genre. The genre's evolution has allowed authors to indulge in ingenious creativity, using fantastical worlds and imaginative storytelling to throw a sharp light on taboo topics. Speculative fiction is defined as the mode of creative inquiry, one that specifies human problems, exploring reality through open-ended thought experiments and rekindling a sense of wonder in all its forms, ranging from a celebration of human creativity to an introspection that begins from a reflection on our struggles and leads us to confront the boundaries of our understanding (Oziewicz 3). Pakistani anglophone authors who write speculative fiction probe powerful themes relating to socio-political realities surrounding Pakistan, including gender disparity, political interventions, and violence based on myths. My thesis stows Usman T. Malik's *Midnight Doorways* within this growing body of literature, emphasizing the need to desensitize the reader with the real Pakistani experiences to come to terms with the prejudice and marginalization that are prevalent in the country.

While the genre itself has existed in the Pakistani, or South Asian, literary platform for the longest time (ghost stories and djinn possessions come to mind), not many in this region can give a polished, refined definition of what the genre is about. Marek Oziewicz's explication serves well in each aspect of what this thesis would investigate:

> Speculative fiction in its most recent understanding is a fuzzy set super category that houses all non-mimetic genres—genres that in one way or another depart from imitating consensus reality… A collection of genres and culturally situated practices,

> speculative fiction is effectively what Pierre Bourdieu has called a cultural field: a domain of activity defined by its own field-specific rules of functioning, agents, and institutions (2).

From the excerpt above, one can diagnose speculative fiction as an umbrella term for all literatures that deliberately depart from "consensus reality" and instead wander into alternative realities, whether they are possible or impossible. Myth, horror, and the weird fiction check such boxes, and being Malik's forte, it is his home ground and the subgenres under which *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan* fall. It is justifiable to say, then, that his collection of short fiction stories—since brevity is the soul of wit—belongs to one single category: speculative fiction.

The emergence of speculative fiction in Pakistani anglophone literature marks a shift from realist representation toward more experimental, imaginative modes of critique. Central to this genre is cognitive estrangement, a concept introduced by Darko Suvin as the defamiliarization of reality through the introduction of a "novum"—an element that is cognitively plausible yet radically different from the empirical world (Suvin 71). Applied to the Pakistani backdrop, cognitive estrangement allows writers like Usman T. Malik to render social injustices, historical trauma, and cultural myths in ways that estrange the reader from the familiar and trigger critical inspection of the self.

Darko Suvin wrote three hundred plus pages to glue together his exceptionally sound theory of cognitive estrangement. His iterations in *Metamorphoses* go to the very core of how science fiction pulls the reader into a strangely new yet intellectually defensible world, displaced enough to see clearly the scars left by societal injustice and the ruthless

discrimination prevalent at the Western end. Suvin deciphers his theory of cognitive estrangement not in one sweeping denotation, but rather in separate elements. First, he ascribes estrangement as a state the reader travels to whilst burrowed in a story's novum, that is, "a point of view or look implying a new set of norms" (Suvin *Metamorphoses* 6). On cognition, he postulates that it is "a reflection *of* but also *on* reality" (10). For a clearer frame of reference, cognition can be considered the ability to enter inside the mirror (erected by the novum) one sees him or herself in, touch and comprehend the mirror image in more than one dimension, and think critically about the *how* and *why* of its existence. Novum, simply put, is the "imaginary novelty" on which the narrative pivots (63). In the past decade or so, Suvin ameliorated that the value of the novum does not come from how rich the world-building is or how intense the newness feels. The true novum is not a decorative indulgence, but something that reorganizes the world of story, pushes the reader into rethinking reality, and propagates creative insight or unscripted cognizance ("Novum Is As Novum Does" 5). Opening more space for other genres, regions, and contexts, Suvin's redrafted novum now swims towards the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, circling the globe and embracing every meaningful new world that bubbles to the surface from the sea of literature, which succinctly comprises Usman T. Malik's speculative short fiction collection, *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan.*

Three short stories from *Midnight Doorways* are posited as ideal case studies because of how aptly Malik uses myth, horror, and estrangement to make Pakistani reality look strangely new; "a reality that it displaces, wherefore interpreting it" (Suvin 67). All three stories have been selected for their surreal settings and inventive novums that root out the well-concealed moral quandaries of the society. Ammi retells the nightmarish day when the flood filled up the streets of Old Lahore in *Ishq*. At its core, the story is about Ammi's sister Parveen, a girl

with polio who falls in love with the local shakarkandi vendor in Narrow Street. Betrayal, spiritual vengeance, and the incapacitating power of love wash over the tale in sorrow and devastation. *The Wandering City* is set in the future, with a djinn dwelling that can float across the globe. It settles in Lahore, and the fable imagines an impossible urban structure whose migration reveals social displacement. Lastly, *In the Ruins of Mohenjodaro* stuns the modern histories by staging a ritualistic haunting against the backdrop of contemporary terrorism.

Pakistani speculative fiction prospers within the literary circle that is already coerced by cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical sentiments of estrangement. Mohammad A. Quayum observes that English language writing in South Asia has been, historically speaking, muddled by "aversion and suspicion towards the colonizers and their language" (11), a wrangle that becomes tenfold by conflicts over language, ethnicity, and religion. A push and pull such as this applies to Pakistan as well: English-language fiction in the region often originates from circumstances akin to cultural fractures, a compulsion to mediate among the indigenous worldviews and the global visibility that English affords. Pakistan's prickly past entraps the country's anglophone writers into an inherent estrangement (linguistically dislocated and politically overdetermined) well before its narratives introduce supernatural, mythic, or horrific novums.

Daman Khalid's edifying thesis lays bare the finding that Pakistani anglophone literature sits at the margins of global literary circulation. She asserted that "hegemonic systems of World Literature" are biased toward works that conform to neo-Orientalist expectations. The texts that depict Pakistan through terrorism, extremism, or geopolitical instability suppress the art that blooms in the local culture (Khalid 7). This prejudiced attitude spawns a structural

paradox. Pakistani writers who resist reductionist Western frames often earn the title of underdogs in international discourse, even though their work authenticates the lived realities, actual histories, and mythologies of the region. Consequently, cognitive estrangement becomes not only a craft technique, but a cultural conditioning. Covered in the hives of their troublesome past and the unruly present, Pakistani authors like Usman Malik reclaim interpretive agency and re-embed speculative methods within their empirical reality of indigenous traditions.

These scholarly breakthroughs decode why Malik's speculative stories have more to unravel than their folklorian heritage; they not only represent individual artistic choice, but concretize a broader movement within Pakistani literature that fights epistemic marginalization. By tapping into local mythical consciousness, spiritual histories, and culturally ingrained fears, Malik magicks novums on the pages that engage readers on cognitive, symbolic, and emotional registers. His stories are a well-suited specimen of how Pakistani speculative fiction snatches the genre from Western technoscientific dogmaticism and, similar to moving the furniture around to make space, reconfigure the speculative enough to give leeway to local histories, traumas, and metaphysics that further bend the limits of estranging critique.

Hence, the socio-literary intuition offered by Quayum and Khalid sharpens the stakes of analyzing *Midnight Doorways.* Their research betokens Malik's estrangement as an operative system within a literary field already defined by the displacement of the linguistic, cultural, and historical. His penmanship extends this estrangement, transitioning the familiar Pakistani setting into a bizarre backdrop. His reasoning behind such awe-inspiring novums does not include the pizzazz that sparks from thinking the unthinkable. Malik interrogates the cracks that spread across the nation's institutions. As the puzzle pieces fall into place, trying to wrap

our heads around the concept behind cognitive estrangement in speculative fiction, Pakistani anglophone writers such as Malik offer us a semblance of cognitive and mythic reorientation through which the buried, the taboo, and the unspoken miseries may finally be confronted.

Research problem

Speculative fiction is an emerging genre among Pakistani anglophone writers. There is little theoretical work that has been carried out to understand its scope in Pakistan. There are not many scholars who have attempted to study myth and horror in the Pakistani context by applying Darko Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement. Indeed, Pakistan is a troubled state and has remained in the crosshairs when it comes to social and political situations. My study would explore how Pakistani writers use cognitive estrangement in speculative fiction to critique society and imagine alternate futures. The shifting lens offers a fresh perspective to analyze Pakistani literature, realigning with culture and traditions by testing the boundaries of reality.

Research questions

To structure the thesis and carry out the analysis adequately, these critical questions have been constructed while considering Darko Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement, the speculative fiction *Midnight Doorways* as the genre of novums, and its impending fate in the Pakistani context:

1. How does Usman T. Malik use myth and folklore as novums that cognitively estrange Pakistani cultural realities in *Midnight Doorways*?
2. In what ways does Malik employ horror and the abject to defamiliarize social suffering, marginalization, and violence in Pakistan?
3. By what means does cognitive estrangement in Malik's speculative fiction enable alternative routes of discerning Pakistani social realities and imagining transformed futures?

Significance of the study

First and foremost, this study is an attempt to enlarge the pool of literature for Pakistani speculative fiction, a field that is under-examined in the scholarly community. It is also one of the few sustained analyses of *Midnight Doorways*, which strives to grasp the essence of the genre in Malik's short story collection. Bending the metal bars that incarcerate cognitive estrangement to the Western technoscientific paradigms, my research hopes to rescue Suvin's theory and endeavors to prove that it can be applied to South Asian texts, too. Taking into consideration both of Suvin's publications on his theory (*Metamorphoses* and *Novum Is As Novum Does*), the research paper brings to the fore indigenous cosmologies, myths, and folklore as bona fide forms of cognition, combating the cliches and making room for the Pakistani milieu in the speculative fiction space largely occupied by Western rationality. Being a culturally specific exploration, it intimates how estrangement can embroider the social realities of Pakistan into the stories by its writers and makes prominent the troubles and disquiet in a deeply prejudiced community. It builds on arguments of other scholars and dismantles the ideological marginalization evidenced in Malik's stories, which are among the rebellious steps taken towards the neo-Orientalist view, regaining narrative agency. Finally, scholarly work on Pakistani anglophone literature can consult this research's framework to survey other South Asian texts, genres, and writers.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cognitive estrangement and the novum

Darko Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement remains the foundational framework for understanding speculative modes across not only science fiction, but also fantasy and horror. In Metamorphoses of Science Fiction, he argues that science fiction is defined by the "presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition," produced through an imaginative system that differs from the empirical environment of the reader (Suvin Metamorphoses 7–8). For Suvin, cognition is not mere scientific exposition but a broader orientation toward rational intelligibility; he explicitly distinguishes it from "scientific vulgarization or even technological prognostication" (9). Instead, cognition operates through what he describes as a "realistic irreality," in which invented worlds become graspable because they obey coherent causal and social logic (Metamorphoses viii). Arguably, with the juxtaposition Suvin tries to put forth comes an ambiguity that raises further questions on how much of cognition can occur within the reader's mind and if it is only restricted to the fiction that attaches itself stubbornly to the laws of science. Simon Spiegel explains cognitive estrangement as a mode that "naturalizes the strange," making fictional impossibility recognizable through the norms of the author's epoch (Spiegel 372–73).

Estrangement, drawn partly from Bertolt Brecht, functions by rendering the familiar world unfamiliar enough to be perceived critically. Suvin takes Brecht's insight that estrangement "allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it unfamiliar" (Cooper 72) and repositions it as an ontological condition of speculative narrative. Quite unlike Brecht's

estrangement, which occurs within realist frameworks, Suvin's estrangement emerges from worlds whose difference is structural. This difference is generated by novum, the "central imaginary novelty" that organizes the fictional world and enables critical comparison with the reader's own (Menger 81). The strange newness pulls the reader out of their reality, making them highly aware of an imagined world with possibilities stretching beyond their lived experiences. The novum must be "scientifically apprehendable" and must stem from cognitive reasoning even when its premises are impossible (Menger 82). Thus, the novum does not require scientific realism but must be framed as coherent within the text's logic so that it can serve as the basis for cognitive estrangement.

Nevertheless, critics have noted tensions within Suvin's theory. Spiegel makes a keen observation that Suvin, at times, treats cognition as both the property of the text and the effect on the reader, without a clear discerning factor between the two levels (Spiegel 374). Further, while Suvin emphasizes that cognition is not identical to science, he also insists that the novum be "validated by the post-Cartesian and post-Baconian scientific method" (Metamorphoses 64–65), a demand that appears to contradict his broader definition of cognition. Renault, cited by Spiegel, argues that Suvin never clarifies what constitutes such validation (374–75). These obscurities have motivated several reconsiderations of Suvin's model.

Later critics put the cognitive estrangement theory under the microscope and discovered there was a whole realm that needed to be traversed through; the concept of estrangement was built on Suvin's rationalist framing, but these layers of perceptions, once removed, revealed so much more. Spiegel proposes that speculative texts often rely on "semantic gaps" that resist cognitive mapping rather than reinforce it, suggesting that estrangement may operate through

interpretive indeterminacy rather than rational coherence (384). Steven Holmes introduces the term “negative estrangement” to describe works in which disorientation, epistemic instability, or affective disturbance serve as primary estrangement mechanisms. This category is particularly important for horror, where fear and uncertainty destabilize the reader’s sense of reality rather than reinforce cognitive clarity. Metaphorically speaking, negative estrangement can be thought of as the thick fog rolling on an already ill-lit street, dense and suffocating a lonely pedestrian. The single illuminated street lamp is swallowed by the white, cool vapours, and the onyx night turns milky quartz.

Geoff Boucher’s concept of the “affective novum” further challenges Suvin’s rationalist bias. Boucher argues that fantasy and weird fiction frequently deploy novums whose impact is emotional rather than cognitive, producing estrangement through affective intensity—wonder, dread, thrill, awe, detachment—rather than through intellectual speculation. In a similar vein, Rich Cooper contends that fantasy is “the literature of estranged cognition” because its impossible worlds, be that as it may, provide structured, rule-governed environments that allow readers to reflect critically on empirical reality (Cooper 62–64). These redefinitions broaden Suvin’s model to include forms of estrangement generated by myth, affect, and the uncanny.

The broader category of speculative fiction dispenses an inclusive conceptual frame in which such expansions become coherent. Marek Oziewicz argues that speculative fiction is a metagenre defined by its use of non-realist narrative modes to explore human possibility. Rather than strictly sorting out between science fiction, fantasy, and horror, Oziewicz emphasizes his shared reliance on imaginative estrangement as a method of inquiry. Eva Menger similarly asserts that cognitive estrangement applies across speculative genres

because each employs distance, displacement, or alternative worlds to heighten the reader's awareness of their reality (Menger 81–82). These positions allow myth, folklore, and horror genres often excluded from classical SF theory to be understood as speculative modes capable of breeding estrangement.

These theoretical developments sum up to establish a critical foundation for interpreting contemporary Pakistani speculative fiction. They present that mythic, folkloric, and horrific novums can produce cognitive estrangement just as effectively as technological innovation (any sound mind would be able to make the logical connection between Emperor Palpatine or Lord Voldemort being villainous personalities). This expanded theoretical framework is crucial for examining Usman T. Malik's short fiction from *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan*, where supernational, mythic, and abject elements perform that tactful art of estranging, one that is traditionally associated with science fiction, while simultaneously engaging with South Asian histories, traumas, and social structures.

Myth, liminality, and horror in speculative fiction

Myth, liminality, and horror function as central modalities of speculative literature, each offering alternative routes to estrangement beyond Suvin's rationalist approach. Recent scholarship demonstrates that myth and magic do not merely belong to a premodern worldview but constitute adaptable narrative systems that continue to structure speculative fiction's interrogation of reality.

Frequently misunderstood as the opposite of rational knowledge, critics rebuke that myth serves as a cognitive and ontological framework rather than a simplified repository of "fantasy." In *Contemporary Pakistani Speculative Fiction,* Sadaf and Kanwal note that mythos historically coexisted with logos as a complementary mode of meaning-making; myth providing "examples" and "models" for understanding the world (Honko 16–17). Armstrong similarly emphasizes that myth was "never intended as an accurate account of historical events " but as a narrative that "had in some sense happened once but also happens all the time" (xii). The points raised by these writers deduce that myth is not anti-cognitive (or the anti-thesis of cognition); rather, it provides *another* form of cognition—one that encodes cultural worldviews, fears, and possibilities.

This view aligns with Suvin's broader definition of cognition as "a method of thinking" rather than strict scientific verifiability. When speculative fiction incorporates myth, it therefore draws on a narrative vocabulary already organized around meaning, ethics, morality, and the supernatural. Mythic frameworks can induce estrangement by recasting cultural narrative into new contexts, challenging readers to reconsider familiar moral or cosmological structures.

The concept of liminality deepens this understanding by foregrounding the ambiguities that define speculative texts. In *Liminal Bodies*, Balasa argues that speculative fiction consistently investigates "the relationship between myth, magic, science, and religion" and shows that these categories "coexist harmoniously" within science fiction (SF) as forms of understanding (Balasa 12). Speculative texts oftentimes depict hybrid or border-crossing figures—cyborgs, ghosts, shapeshifters, mythic beings—as embodiments of cultural anxieties about categorization. Balasa notes that such hybrids are "simultaneously feared and revered because of their uncategorizable nature" and that societies have historically associated

liminality with impurity or danger (66). This duality creates fertile ground for narrative estrangement: liminal entities challenge dominant ideological boundaries and reveal the constructed nature of social order.

Liminality also structures speculative fiction's treatment of mythic and supernatural beings. The Bible, for instance, is described as a "heteroglossia" containing mythic voices that blur boundaries between terrestrial and celestial, mortal and divine (66). Such textual liminality mirrors the narrative liminality of speculative literature, where the sacred and profane, magical and scientific, possible and impossible repeatedly interpenetrate. Myth and folklore, when reanimated within speculative fiction, become instrumental in inspecting cultural hybridity and the instability of identity.

Speculative fiction often dismantles the rigid oppositions between myth/magic and science that emerged during the Enlightenment. Balasa emphasizes that "myth, magic, religion, and science can be conflated" because none possesses fixed or impermeable boundaries (10). She argues that the supposed hierarchical evolution from myth to science is based on pretense; instead, speculative fiction showcases that these systems share underlying concerns and can coexist within a lucid worldview. Suvin, though he segregated fantasy and science fiction and called the former non-cognitive while the latter the better creative approach, remarks that literary genres tend to "interacting and intermixing, imitating, and cannibalizing each other" (*Metamorphoses* 21).

The aforementioned observations are crucial for engaging with horror and myth in contemporary literature. Horror often emerges when worldviews clash—when magic rudely intrudes upon science, when the mythic rowdily punctures the rational, or when culturally

embedded supernatural beliefs blatantly reveal alternate ontologies. In such cases, estrangement becomes affective and epistemic rather than strictly cognitive. The reader experiences dread not because of technological speculation but because the story confronts them with the instability of reality.

Horror functions as a mode of estrangement distinct from science fiction, often aligning more closely with the surreal or outright weird. Liminal bodies and supernatural creatures are particularly effective in producing what Holmes calls "negative estrangement," wherein the reader encounters destabilizing forces that resist rational comprehension. The fear evoked by such narratives emerges from the very impossibility of cognitive mastery. Yet even this facet of estrangement participates in the broader speculative project by unearthing the cultural anxieties and revealing fractures in dominant epistemologies.

Henceforth, myth-informed horror is another arena of the novum. Instead of introducing a technologically plausible novelty, mythic horror builds novums rooted in cultural memory, supernatural cosmologies, or spiritual ideologies. These novums may not be rationally certified, but they are *cognitively legible* within the cultural or symbolic logic of a story. This posits mythic horror within the continuum of speculative fiction, not outside it.

Oziewicz's conception of speculative fiction as a "fuzzy set supercategory" is especially profound here. He claims that speculative fiction encapsulates "all genres that deliberately depart from imitating 'consensus reality,'" including fantasy, horror, weird fiction, and magical realism (Oziewicz 1–3). This expanded hypothesis legitimizes the inclusion of myth and horror as speculative styles capable of rendering the reader estranged. Speculative fiction's non-mimetic impulse, Oziewicz notes, dismounts the Western privileging of realist

narrative and restores other ways of knowing—such as the mythic, the supernatural, the indigenous, and the folkloric (1–2).

Pakistani speculative fiction and Usman T. Malik

Contemporary scholarships place Pakistani speculative fiction as a rapidly emerging field that combats the mediocrity of national storytelling. Aroosa Kanwal and Asma Mansoor argue that Pakistani speculative writing negotiates uncertainties—between secular modernity and spiritual traditions, between global genre expectations and local cultural imagineries, and between national realism and postcolonial futurity (Kanwal and Mansoor 244–45). Their work recognizes speculative fiction as a genre that makes room in the literary mansion for articulating anxieties about violence, state power, ecological precarity, and religious-national identity.

Shazia Sadaf and Aroosa Kanwal further expand this mapping in *Contemporary Pakistani Speculative Fiction and the Global Imaginary,* asserting that Pakistani speculative literature "democratize human futures" by interlacing local histories, mythologies, and traumas in ways that resist Western techno-utopianism (Sadaf and Kanwal 4–6). They contend that Pakistani writers decolonize the speculative by lodging global genre expectations within South Asian cosmologies, which culminates in an inventiveness not seen among Western SF traditions (Sadaf and Kanwal 11–13). Pakistani speculative fiction, therefore, joins a hybrid category in which myth, religion, horror, and futurity are in constant dialogue.

Cara Cilano's analysis of Pakistani English literature as writing from "extreme edges" reinforces this perspective, touching upon the idea that Pakistani texts often occupy liminal spaces between violence and transcendence, realism and speculative impulse, history and imagination (Cilano 9–12). The "edge" becomes a productive aesthetic boundary, enabling writers to represent social fragmentation through imaginative estrangement.

Pakistani speculative fiction often draws upon traditional literary forms such as folklore, Sufi cosmologies, oral storytelling, and magical realism. Hajra Khalid's analysis of *Firefly in the Dark* and *Midnight Doorways* highlights that magical realism in Pakistani literature arises from "societal realities infused with magical ontologies" rather than from Latin American conventions (Khalid 357). She reaffirms that when Pakistani authors write magical realism, they do not merely imitate a global genre but reactivate indigenous mythic traditions interwoven with everyday life (361).

Geographical dimensions have, to some extent, some influence on South Asian speculative writing. In *The Sea is Alive,* the authors argue that South Asian waterscapes—rivers, monsoon seas, deltas—serve as mythic and speculative spaces where national histories, ecological apprehensions, and spiritual cosmologies intersect (Unni 6). Such spaces operate as liminal zones where the supernatural coexists with the ecological, fortifying the point made in *Liminal Bodies* that myth, religion, and science are not separate epistemologies but coexist in harmony (Balasi 11).

Horror is a principal cog in the mechanics of Pakistani speculative writing, especially when social violence has to be portrayed in stories. Maleeha Zahid and Areeba Tayyab's study of *Midnight Doorways* maintains that horror becomes the official device for exposing realities

that realism cannot entirely express: gendered violence, trauma, disfigurement, state brutality, and the lore-old marginalization (Zahir and Tayyab 83). Grotesque imagery, decaying bodies, a haunting presence, and spectral violence resort to what Holmes described as negative estrangement, where horror initiates epistemic instability and forces the reader to confront suppressed cultural fears.

Kata Rose similarly notes that speculative fiction allows trauma to be delineated in metamorphically and affectively expansive means, in turn giving the fiction a wider berth to convey experiences that surpass realist language (Rose 5–7). For Pakistani contexts—where violence is often politically silenced or culturally taboo—speculative horror possesses that superpower of "truth-telling" that realism just cannot acquire.

Horror is not an imported convention in Pakistan. It springs from indigenous supernatural traditions and lived experiences of violence, coinciding with Oziewicz's argument that speculative fiction restores non-Western ontologies as legitimate ways of knowing (Oziewicz 2–3). In Malik's short fiction, especially, the grounding of cultural epistemology makes horror a potent asset of estrangement.

Among modern Pakistani writers, Usman Tanveer Malik is a renowned figure in the global weird fiction movement. Mathew Rettino describes Malik's works as "weird fiction inflected with uneven development," propounding that his stories juxtapose supernatural terror with social and economic disparities in postcolonial Pakistan (Rettino 4–6). Malik's fiction blends myth, the uncanny, the grotesque, and speculative futurity to reveal the contradiction of Pakistani modernity.

In *Midnight Doorways,* the reader regularly finds themselves lost in liminal spaces (e.g., ruins, forests, decaying cities) that function as allegorical thresholds between Pakistan's eventful history and the gripping supernatural. Malik's story *in the Ruins of Mohenjodaro* implements archaeological myth and the historical trauma to create a mythic novum that estranges the reader from the linear history of the Indus Civilization. *The Wandering City* imagines a shifting urban landscape whose mobility becomes a metaphor for uncertainty, memory, and displacement. Lastly, *Ishq's* bodily grotesquery and abjection, such as rot, mutilation, and spectral intimacy, harshly reveal the gendered violence and the fragility of human identity.

Hajra Khalid notes that Malik's magical realism rises from the "materiality of Pakistani life," where supernatural events are experienced as "ordinary interruptions into the real" (Khalid 361–62). Balasa postulates the same idea in his studies, implicating that supernatural and scientific ideas co-exist, rather than overlap, in speculative fiction (Balasa 11). Malik's weird fiction thereby features both mythic cognition and adequate estrangement.

Braided into one fine rope of assimilation, these critical perspectives could testify that Usman T. Malik is a writer whose work exemplifies the hybrid, culturally foundational aesthetic of Pakistani speculative fiction. The tales he penned are the metaphorical altar for indigenous mythologies, postcolonial histories, and visceral, stomach-churning horror to stimulate estrangement that is both cognitive and constructive. They enact what Sadaf and Kanwal call the "democratization of human futures" by imagining various pathways that remain rooted in South Asian epistemologies (11). Malik's literature does not reproduce Suvin's scientific novum but welcomes mythic, bodily, and supernatural novums that sprang from local underpinnings.

The literature on cognitive estrangement testifies that Suvin's original theory is flexible enough to encompass mythic, supernatural, and horror-driven fables, on the condition that cognition is comprehended as a manner of understanding rather than scientific literalism. In *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Suvin defines cognitive estrangement as the dialectic produced through the interaction of cognition and the novum, the latter being the "imaginary novelty" that reshuffles the fictional world (Suvin *Metamorphoses* 7). However, in his later essay "*Novum Is As Novum Does*," Suvin refines this proposed meaning by stressing that a novum's potential lies in what it does, not what it is. A novum must identify the text's social or conceptual horizon, nominating altered relationships that illuminate contradictions in the empirical world ("Novum Is As Novum Does" 5). The shifting of gears, away from technological spectacles, rectifies that cognition is not reducible to Western science but is an epistemic stance that permits the reader to interrogate their own reality through the estranged world.

The embellishments Suvin made are paramount for mythic and horror-inflected speculative fiction. When Suvin critiques "pseudo-novums" exhibited under capitalist contexts—novelties that only entertain rather than transform minds ("Novum Is As Novum Does" 10)—he implicitly opens the door to non-technological novums that stem from cultural, mythic, or affective structures. Mythic novums, absurd bodies, ghost tales, and spiritual presences can all qualify as legitimate novums when they reorganize the reader's perception and result in deep critical reflection. Pakistani mythic horror, ultimately, finds itself within the same Suvin lineage, in spite of breeding supernatural credulity rather than sparking scientific curiosity.

Myth functions as a cognitive scaffolding, not an anti-rational belief system. Armstrong argues that myth articulates truths that "happen all the time" rather than historical events, offering interpretive tools for wrapping our minds around existence (Armstrong xii). Honko, in a similar train of thought, dubs myth as a conceptual "example" that morphs and remodels cultural meaning (Honko 16). Speculative fiction, based on myth, activates these epistemic structures to estrange, creating enough room to let the reader think both symbolically and cognitively.

Balasa's intriguing work on liminality showcases that hybrid bodies, supernatural beings, and sacred stories disrupt the tightly-knotted epistemological hierarchies by occupying spaces between categories (66). Horror intensifies the chaos tenfold (what we call Holme's infamous "negative estrangement"), where fear, abjection, or the eerie unsettles rational assumptions. These agencies cause estrangement not through scientific possibilities but through affective, cultural, and symbolic logic.

This broader, more open-ended viewpoint of cognition sits beside Suvin's later affirmation that cognition need not be technoscientific but must perpetuate a "coherent orientation" that forces the reader into picking apart the estranged world critically ("Novum Is As Novum Does" 7). Mythic and horrific novums do this by revealing hidden truths about cultural anxieties, historical woundings, and collective memory.

Pakistani speculative fiction lights a passage for future writers in how it layers myth and horror into a culturally rich bedrock, criticising society aptly as it does. As Kanwal and Mansoor put forth, Pakistani speculative narratives bubble up at the intersection of indigenous experiences, colonial histories, and contemporary precarity (244–45). These texts

tear apart realist expectations by reanimating mythic figures, spectral memories, and supernatural geographies. Sadaf and Kanwal add that Pakistani speculative fiction "democratizes human futures" by refusing Western technofuturism in favor of a culturally backed speculative blueprint (11–13). The novum is broken free of the chains that confined it to the field of science; the myth, metaphysics, and uncanny are beckoned into its home.

Cilano's notion of writing from "extreme edges" further explains why Pakistani fiction leans into speculative forms. The liminal position of Pakistani anglophone writing—between violence and transcendence, material realism and spiritual ontologies—creates fertile ground for estrangement (Cilano 9–12). Enhancing the storytelling are horror and the supernatural, bringing to the surface the traumas and contradictions that realism fails to punctuate.

As the puzzle pieces fall together, Suvin's 2000 revision becomes ever so resonant. By asserting that the novum is valuable only if it reorganizes cognition and reveals ideological contradictions ("Novum Is As Novum Does" 6), Suvin gives us clear instructions in his theory for reading Pakistani mythic horror as a valid, intellectually sound genre. Its novums (djinns, cursed cities, haunted bodies) are cognitive because they reconfigure how the reader perceives gendered violence, historical trauma, or social fragmentation.

Usman T. Malik's short stories, like *Ishq, The Wandering City, and In the Ruins of Mohenjodaro,* corroborate that mythic and horrific novums are cognitively estranging. His literary works do not waver from the enthralling South Asian culture, nor is the folktale left bereft as he integrates djinn lore, Sufi metaphysics, and ghost stories. Rettino observes that Malik's weird fiction opens the manhole to the "uneven development," showing how supernatural phenomena metaphorically expose socioeconomic disparities (Rettino 4–6).

Khalid underpins Malik's magical realist elements as an upshot of "materiality of Pakistani life," where supernatural occurrences are culturally intelligible rather than anomalous (Khalid 361–62). In *Metamorphoses*, Darko Suvin's standpoint remains that fantasy is *not* cognitive in nature (12), as he says that cognition only comes from a reality that makes sense to the reader, although it does not have to be relevant to their empirical reality. However—and Suvin amended his definition of novum, too, as discussed beforehand—in the Pakistani anglophone culture, djinns and the supernatural are a concept that is taken literally by the culture, and so it is as close to their empirical reality as the theory of relativity is to physicists.

In the Ruins of Mohenjodaro is a riveting story where the temporal boundaries collapse under the historically fallacious novum of the titular archeological site, a shovel digging up the persistence of trauma and civilization decay. Malik's second story, *The Wandering City,* contains a mobile urban habitation whose otherworldly movements are not explained by science but by a manifestation of the myth. This mystical, floating cosmopolis embodies a novum that estranges national and historical identities. Lastly, *Ishq* adopts bodily grotesquerie—rot, mutilation, spectral intimacy—to sway the reader away from their actual world and launch them to another where the flesh wounds of discrimination and social taboos are exposed to the acidic air of truth. Each of these three novums, while supernatural or horrific, fulfills Suvin's requirement that the novum yields new relationships and cognitive reorientation ("Novum Is As Novum Does" 5–7).

Malik's thought-provoking estrangement techniques are solidified by horror. Zahid and Tayyab depose that Malik's tactful manipulation of horror into his short fiction unwraps the violence that is culturally suppressed or politically censored (79–97). Rose's research implies that speculative pieces delve into trauma in a way that realism could never capture (Rose

6–7). Considering all these insightful findings, the fog lifts from Suvin's original definition of cognitive estrangement, thusly illustrating how Malik's manic novums—cursed children, gnarly bodies, wandering cities—deduce the paradox of Pakistani modernity while forming the basis of estrangement in culture and mythic cognition.

Suvin's later essay, *Novum Is As Novum Does*, elucidates that the new strangeness Pakistani speculative authors create need not be a scientifically "possible impossibility:' it may only be a world-altering innovation that reorganizes the mental faculties. Malik, with his abnormal novums and refreshing world-building (especially in *The Wandering City),* accomplishes this right to the mark. They are not pseudo-novums invented for their grandiose; these novums Malik has constituted are culturally significant because they, instead of curtailing the shocking realities, unveil the social dilemmas, past ordeals, and institutional violence.

Ergo, with *Midnight Doorways,* Malik substantiates that cognitive estrangement is not restricted to science fiction (SF); rather, horror and myth are extensions of it. The reader's mind does not stop thinking logically about a situation when scientific possibilities are discarded (although Malik injects his own dose of the science-fantasy in his stories). On the contrary, a discernment can be set into motion by cultural epistemologies, emotional intensities, and symbolism. As Suvin's theory stretches its horizons and embraces non-scientific genres into its high-IQ maestro club, it becomes clearer than ever that Malik's fiction discomfits the reader enough to appropriate a hypervigilance towards prejudices of the community.

CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Darko Suvin's cognitive estrangement

In 1979, Darko Suvin wrote *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* that accentuated the avenues of science fiction (SF), calling it a "creative approach" to maneuver through the new worlds authors built in their stories (Suvin ix). This study is grounded in Darko Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement, a key theoretical lens in the study of science fiction and speculative literature. Suvin defines cognitive estrangement as the fusion of a fictional "novum"—a new and unfamiliar element—with a logically coherent world that deviates from empirical reality. The effect is that of defamiliarization: readers are distanced from their known world and encouraged to reflect critically upon it (71). Although Suvin never truly provides us with his definitive lexical interpretation of cognitive estrangement as a theory, he prescribes the characteristic of the novum to stories that triumph the reader's mind in relocating it to an imagined world that implies a new set of norms, calling the fiction estranging. It "allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (6). In *Metamorphoses*, however, he states that all naturalistic, fantastical, mythical, and folkloric stories do not produce a cognitive effect, articulating that these genres are mimical to the empirical world and, rather than curdle a clear path towards a sharper understanding, cause a distorted antagonism between the arbitrary supernatural episodes and the objective reality they gatecrash (8).

> As used here, [cognitive or cognition] implies not only a reflection *of* but also *on* reality. It implies a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than toward a static mirroring of the author's environment (10).

Thankfully, given the many limitations of his statements and the plethora of criticism he received after grossly reducing the capacity of the human mind to think and learn from speculative fiction, Suvin refutes his point and attributes novum to what it *does*, not what *it is*. Reflecting on his earlier proclamation, Suvin divulges that his decision to stress "cognition" rather than "science" was "fully justified" because cognition operates as a broader epistemic apparatus, not caged by technoscientific discourse ("Novum Is As Novum Does" 4). The correction fills a huge gap in my thesis, which analyzes Malik's myth and horror in *Midnight Doorway* through the analogies of cognitive estrangement. While originally formulated in relation to Western science fiction (Oziewicz 10), cognitive estrangement proves particularly useful in analyzing South Asian speculative fiction, where familiar cultural, historical, and social contexts are transformed through horror, myth, and the supernatural.

The pendulum analogy

Estrangement is conceptualized by Darko Suvin in an ingenious pendulum analogy where his pluridimensionality of the novum, and the idea of displacement from reality, could be explained by the oscillating movement of a ball moving from its original place to an extreme right or left, altogether occupying a space that exists in one efficient system. Here, the "zero world" is the lived reality of the author and the reader:

> The oscillation between the author's "zero world" and the new reality induces the narrative necessity of a means of reality displacement. As far as I can see, there are two such devices: a *voyage* to a new locus, and a *catalyzer* transforming the author's environment to a new locus… The first case seems better suited to a sudden introduction and the second to a gradual introduction of a new reality; no doubt, all kinds of contaminations and twists on these two means are thinkable. (71)

The model is essential in dissecting Malik's short fiction, which generously draws from both abrupt supernatural intrusions and slow, gruesome transformations to move the reader between the everyday Pakistani world and the unsettling realities.

In solidarity with Suvin's theory

Recent scholarship across world literature shows that cognitive estrangement is no longer confined to traditional science-fictional discourse; it now welcomes epistemological, affective, and socio-political dimensions. Medeiro's reading of Simon Ortiz's *Men on the Moon* lands exactly in the middle of this approach, exhibiting how indigenous storytelling deploys estrangement as a form of epistemic reclamation. He explicitly cites Suvin's definition of science fiction as an exemplar that reflects *and* reflects *on* reality, underlining that cognition crops up when "elements common to the reality of both parties [reader and writer] are distorted to make the familiar seem unfamiliar (Medeiros 125). It suggests that, at its backbone, estrangement is a *relational* cognitive act, raising the floodgates and drenching

the common people in marginalized epistemologies to "renew perception" and forcing them to arm themselves and push back against dominant narratives (Medeiros 127).

Verma and Patil similarly insist that defamiliarization functions best if the story traverses through the bushy complexities of the "cultural-emotional impact," where the reader is thrown into the condition of re-perceiving the everyday (1028). Their discussion of Amit Chaudhari signifies that estrangement does not depend on technological novums; instead, stylistic and affective shifts can just as easily carry out a cognitive act. Running parallel to this view is Suvin's contention that estrangement, even when non-scientific, must be *evaluative*, revealing historical or social contradictions (Suvin, *Metamorphoses* 4). In summation, both Medeiros's study and Verma and Patil's research declare the mythic as cognitive in nature.

A direct link-up with defamiliarization with Suvin's cognitive estrangement is Krabbenhoft's masterstroke in his study of José Saramago. He philosophizes that estrangement enables "implicit social criticism" by defamiliarizing historical and moral assumptions (125). Krabbenhoft also cites Shklovsky's concept of ostranenie—"a making strange… a renewal of perception" (130)—to portray how the cognitive function of estrangement can appear outside strict science fiction. Malik's stories, which are rife with horror-driven estrangements and have underlying themes of sociopolitical tensions, can now be placed under the microscope with a sharper lens, considering this augmentation of the Suvinian theory.

A contrasting but complementary strand appears in Jain and Trivedi's review of Sami Ahmad Khan's *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj*. They show how Khan blends mythology with advanced technology to produce a hybrid form of estrangement rooted in postcolonial

anxieties. Khan's fiction, they argue, demonstrates how "materiality, mythology and technology" interact to create speculative critiques of militarization and nationalism (Jain and Trivedi 185). Their analysis provides a model for understanding Pakistani writers like Usman T. Malik, whose mythic and horrific novums similarly fuse indigenous cosmologies with contemporary social tensions. Jain and Trivedi therefore support this thesis's claim that mythic cognition is entirely compatible with Suvin's estrangement—particularly when myth is deployed critically rather than nostalgically.

Hinchliffe ties it all together by subjecting speculative fiction as a means to fathom the tangled systems of surveillance, control, and visibility. For him, speculative fiction's estrangement uncovers "structures of monitoring, risks, and visibility" that shape social life (416). A befitting sociological model resembles Malik's world of horror that ransacks for the gendered violence, social precarity, and cultural anxieties. In Pakistani society, estranging metaphors for the unseen forces governing it are monsters from local lore, cities with an evocative past, and soul-stirring transformations that set the stage.

By applying Suvin's theoretical account to *Midnight Doorways*, this thesis explores how estrangement functions as a narrative device and a critical method for questioning reality, unsettling ideology, and envisioning otherwise impossible futures in contemporary Pakistani fiction. Cognitive estrangement thus proves to be a bendable, if not totally breakable, culturally adaptable technique to agitate the reader to temporarily become a social critic. The pool of literature that discusses Suvin's classical theory, including his later revisions, the pendulum analogy, modern expansions across defamiliarization, epistemology, and sociopolitical inquiry, all form the precis of South Asian speculative fiction. Mythic and horrific novums, therefore, can fully satisfy Suvin's demands for cognitive estrangement. The

theoretical framework lays a solid foundation for analyzing how Malik's stories revamp the usual Pakistani setting into estranged landscapes that disentomb the trauma, violence, and cultural memory that society so dearly wishes to bury.

The research would employ a qualitative literary method for the close textual analysis of three stories from *Midnight Doorways*: *Ishq, The Wandering City,* and *In the Ruins of Mohenjodaro.* An in-depth breakdown of these short speculative short fictions will examine how myth, horror, and estrangement are factored structurally and symbolically. Rather than being a comparative or empirical study, it is an interpretation of contemporary Pakistani anglophone literature and the intertwining themes categorizing Malik's work under speculative fiction. The theory of cognitive estrangement by Darko Suvin and existing literature published supports the idea of speculative fiction as a profound genre to divulge in social issues and a medium to voice marginalized communities.

CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The affluent Pakistani culture comprises religious beliefs like djinns and the afterlife, and customs that have been borrowed from Hindus, who were, instead of neighbors, part of the Indian subcontinent before the nations divided. Fables and ghost stories have always been an indispensable part of Pakistani literature, irrelevant of the language or medium they were produced in, and so it seemed unequivocal that Pakistani anglophone writers would pen stories that are categorized under speculative fiction. Usman T. Malik's brilliance in *Midnight Doorways* goes to show how authors from this country have mastered the propensity to talk of djinns and churails, pagan gods and spectral bodies, in a skillfulness that drags the reader squarely in the middle of the unknown realms.

Assessing the literature on cognitive estrangement, the stretching of the theory, defamiliarization as a literary tool, and Suvin's own amendments in *Novum Is As Novum Does*, an analysis of three of the stories from *Midnight Doorways* would be carried out, namely *Ishq, The Wandering City*, and *In the Ruins of Mohenjodaro.* For each of these short fictions, the mythic or folklore element would be identified, running in parallel to the components of the pendulum analogy, detailing how horror and the abject defamiliarize social suffering, and coalescing these subgenres of speculative literature to illustrate how their estrangement opens doors to alternative ways of seeing and observing.

Ishq

Love is a tragedy waiting to happen. *Ishq* follows a tale of a young disabled girl, Parveen, who has a controversial yet heart-rending affair with the charismatic shakarkandi vendor, Hashim. The story is situated in Old Lahore's infamous Teddy Galli [Narrow Alley]. Polio-ridden Parveen suffers from her illness, and though her conservative parents know about her illicit affair with Hashim, they let her live the little life she has after the doctors find bone cancer in her femur. Although Parveen's passing away is a tragedy, the rain showers in the town delay her burial rites, leading to her rotting body wrapped in white cloth, lying in her bed. It is a story within a story, where Ammi (an unreliable narrator) is Parveen's sister, who is dying of cancer herself, and she relays the unfortunate fate of Parveen to her son in her heavily medicated state of mind. Parveen's death, which occurred when Ammi was young and naive, is overshadowed by the disastrous flooding in the area, but it is the idea of bodily decay and Parveen's haunting presence that estranges the reader from normalized suffering. Hashim, Ammi, her parents, and Parveen's body are stuck at their house in Narrow Alley as the streets are submerged in floodwater. Ammi, back then, was resentful of the fact that enchanting Hashim favored her crippled, beastly, and ugly sister. Possessed by her insecure, youthful desperation, Ammi tries to 'steal' Hashim by kissing him, even though her sister's decaying body lies in the same room; she dares to make a move on him. The only solution remaining is leaving behind Parveen's body, and Hashim reluctantly does. As Ammi and Hashim try to reach higher ground, Parveen's spectral being forces the pair to lose their bearings, confused in the gushing, dirty water. Hashim goes underwater and does not resurface, joining Parveen's vengeful spirit that came back for her lover.

In consonance with the pendulum analogy, the "zero world" is similar to the "consensus reality" (Oziewicz 2), and is the original position of the pendulum bob. It is the shared reality or the empirical environment of the reader and the author. The displacement to either end of

the moving bob is labelled as the narratively actualized novum (Suvin *Metamorphoses* 71). *Ishq's* zero world is Old Lahore, with poor infrastructure and a traumatic history of urban flooding. The displacement, or rather, estrangement, is a gradual and intensifying process in the story, which is why it would be considered a voyage to the novum. *Ishq's* novum, that strange newness, is the unnerving imagery of Parveen's rotting body in her bed, her paranormal presence in the windows of houses as the flood surges inside the streets, capsizing the city, and Hahim's apparently one-sided dialogue with Parveen's ghost before he dives into the floodwater and does not come back. The way Parveen's polio, bone cancer, and decomposing body are described first distorts the reader's empirical reality, then envelops them in a cacophony of social prejudice against illness and death. A scene that depicts the voyage and the first ghostly whisper in the story occurs when Ammi and Hashim decide to abandon Parveen's dead body to save themselves from the flood's destruction:

> She looked back once more before they exited the room and saw that the cloth had slipped off her sister again. Parveen's arm dangled off the bedstead, finger stirring the standing water. Her eyelids were puffed and open, and dully she watched them leave.

As the story and the characters become more deranged, the imminent doom lurks, and Parveen's phantom becomes stronger and more vengeful. In *Ishq*, Parveen wears golden bangles on her wrists. Ammi, who is sloshing through the floodwater after taking Hashim away from Parveen, experiences a surreal moment:

> She lifted the foot as high as she could, tottering on the other leg, and felt the underside. Something was buried in her flesh. She pulled it out and peered at it.
>
> It was a broken shard of yellow glass. A jagged piece once part of a bangle.

Parveen's? Not possible. Their house was at least two hundred feet down from here.

She raised her head, and her gaze went to the window of the house across the alley. Someone stood in the gloom, slender and pale, hair blackened with water. A girl? Her eyes were milky and shone like cataracts, and they were fixed on Ammi.

The purpose of the novum is to emblazon the tragedy of contempt the society holds against illnesses, and the fateful negligence of the government regarding the infrastructure of the city. The reader embarks on a hypercritical journey away from their empirical reality, where Old Lahore exists, but without a ghostly presence. Verma and Patil's premise on a narrative's cultural-emotional impact (1028), aiding cognitive estrangement, is consistent with Malik's implication of spectral figures and love's unforgiving fetters. The defamiliarization potency is awakened by the horror and ghastliness of the situation Ammi finds herself in. The reader is submerged in the flood, aware of what caused it (the government's ineptitude), and terrified of what Parveen's frightening apparition would do, privy to why she was lashing out in the first place (grudge against mistreatment). That is how cognitive estrangement occurs in *Ishq*. Medeiro's "renewed perception" (127) instilled in the reader, and Krabbenhoft's idea of "implicit social criticism" (125) are both caused by the Suvian theory, which leads us to understand that *Ishq* is a relatable yet detached portal to the unfortunate realities of and social anxieties in Pakistan. In this country, the sick are looked down upon as weak and unworthy of love. At the end of the story, even Ammi admits that it was not her sister who was the monster, but Ammi and the rest of the world, who withdrew themselves to understand the plight Parveen was going through. Once the truth of society's prejudice sets in, the reader can make a conscious effort to block out the preconceived notions that the diseased are undeserving of anything.

Old Lahore's flooding and destruction agitate a person, too, and rouse them out of a coma, making them realize the catastrophe brought upon by infrastructure failure.

Sadaf and Kanwal's thoughts on Pakistani writers digressing from traditional Western SF techniques to create an amalgam of horror, myth, and the supernatural, which decolonizes the genre of speculative fiction (11). So not only is Malik breaking the stigmas of what Pakistani anglophone writers can or cannot produce, but he also makes his mark by being critical of the society from which he belongs. *Midnight Doorways* is a corroboration of what Qauyum calls South Asian literature's suspicion towards the language spoken by the colonizers (11); Malik whisks the phantom tales and distressing imagery, bleeding the calamities and bigotry of the Pakistani society onto the page to aptly justify the circumstances in which he wrote his stories. The author's bifurcation from the Western conventions of speculative fiction (which mostly utilize the scientific rationale) without actually forsaking the essence of the genre displays a rebelliousness that manages to stay relevant, ultimately enlarging the bottomless chasm of speculative fiction.

The Wandering City

The second story, *The Wandering City,* is set in post-apocalyptic Pakistan and a vaguely futuristic landscape. The titular city drifts from Florida and settles in Lahore, and it soon dawns on the locals that the city (which is built on human dreams) consumes those who seek to exploit it. The mystical city's visit to Lahore gives Pakistan the spotlight worldwide, where newspapers and tabloids around the world crowd to Lahore to capture the movements of the unknown, bewitching city with its tall walls, sirens, and frozen figures. The Pakistanis

thought of the city as a dwelling of djinns, with one actually calling the azaan every Friday in a bellowing, eerie voice. Army's intervention, the local spike in marketing opportunities, the perfunctory regard for a boy's death crossing the walls of the city, and the fatwa of a superstitious maulana are the prominent plot points that lurch the story into an abrupt ending: the city vanished from Lahore, with no warning for the Lahoris who were used to the cameras flashing and basking in their arrogance for being chosen by the Wandering City.

Here in this story, Malik instantly overwhelms the reader into a reality far from their empirical one. Unlike *Ishq*, the story promptly introduces us to the occult essence of The Wandering City, an estrangement that, according to Suvin's pendulum analogy, would be gauged as a *catalyzer* (Suvin *Metamorphoses* 71). Thrown into a world where an entire city levitates within another city and settles there for an undefined period, the reader is pushed into a void where djinns are, to a limited extent, more openly interacting with the humans. The Holy Qur'an mentions the existence of djinns in Surah Al-Hijr, "And the jinn We created earlier from scorching fire." (The Qur'an 15.27). Since the faith of the Muslims rests on the teachings of the Quran, the Muslims believe in jinns. However, the majority of Muslims are aware that jinns live in a separate realm, one that they cannot perceive. There is very little correspondence possible between the two creatures that God created. Malik, however, liberally takes advantage of the theological constructs of jinns, leaving the bewildered Muslim reader to ponder the plausibility of such an unusual event taking place in the future.

The cultural epistemologies in *The Wandering City* are interwoven with the very concerning social affairs, such as the military takeover or the cold-heartedness of the people when their reputation is at stake. Subhan, a young boy, uses a crane to peek over the tall walls of The Wandering City, is serenaded by a siren within and suffers a fatal fall after leaping over the

wall. The Prime Minister and the Chief of Army Staff deliver speeches and announce a day of mourning for those lost due to the City's arrival, anticipating an upward growth in Pakistan's economy due to its transformative presence. The lukewarm efforts to cover Subhan's and so many people's deaths disclose the harsh truth about a community that chases fame and riches, rather than knowledge or moral integrity. Estranged though the reader might be from their "zero world," they cannot help but have an inkling that the Pakistani society today is not so different from the one Malik describes in *The Wandering City.* Nowadays, we witness the atrocities splattered across the newspapers or put up online, express our momentary regrets, then move on as if the injustices and adversities are passing moments and not deep-rooted flaws of the human race.

An intriguing factor in Malik's short fiction, *The Wandering City,* is how science-fantasy merges into one tour de force of the story. While taking a trip through the Wandering City, a guide explains, in scientific terms, how the City "protects itself."

> "We believe the sirens are the City's sentinel mechanism. Few wall-climbers are able to resist their call."
>
> "And why do you suppose that is?" asks a dignitary.
>
> "The Magic of the Mutable Marionettes." The director smiles. "Or so the old chronicles go. WECC scientists believe the granite at the top of the walls is laced with pheromones and hallucinogens. This was hinted at in animal experiments a few decades ago—before UNESCO and WECC put a stop to such work. There is also an energy signature detected each time a climber locks in on a siren, accompanied by the subtlest shift in the siren's physiognomy. We believe the siren changes features to maximize the potency of its call."

A mirror within a mirror, Malik deftly executes social commentary in this fable while keeping the reader estranged. Cognition resurfaces, stark as ever, when a dialogue is sparked between the tour group discussing the origins of the Wandering City and the motionless figures found within:

> "A city haunted by its own people. Forever alive in death," pronounces the director. "We believe these to be descendants of Scythian nomadic tribes who converted to Islam and built a city in which to settle—but were trapped in a space-time rift. The trigger remains unknown, although inscriptions discovered by WECC seem to describe 'a blight' after the arrival of a mysterious enchantress."
>
> A student snorts. "Yeah, blame a woman every time."

The Wandering City is set many years in the future, so the words spoken by the student resonate with the gender disparities that will prevail many decades from now. A sharp light is thrown on the progressiveness of the Pakistani society, and its snail's pace towards women's equality. Malik's proficiency at creating a novum, which is the City itself, enraptures the reader into a mental territory that scrutinizes the follies of men in a higher definition. His novum in *The Wandering City* is precisely what Suvin was talking about in *Metamorphoses*, tracing the function of novum as cognitively valid if its "novelty [is] convincingly explained in concrete, even if imaginary, terms, that is, in terms of the *specific* time, place, agents, and cosmic and social totality of each tale" (80). The mythic elements, with the futuristic, apocalyptic backdrop, give Malik's novum a polished look—one where the reader can maneuver through the affliction of the characters or the

calamities of the situations as if it were the reality that they were truly a part of, in turn, popping the bubble that blocked out the wails of a broken system.

Abiding by Hinchcliffe's prospect of monitoring and risk management in speculative fiction that warns the reader of it as a weapon to maintain control in a society (416), Malik thickens the plot by including the army's role in the nation's decisions for the City. Maulana, their sanctions, and the fatwas enforced against the djinn's bizarre, unearthly call for prayer pinpointed the negative attitude the society holds towards something they do not understand. To regain some control of their senses, the nation wields brute force to neutralize the inexplicable, to have the upper hand if ever a fight breaks out. Malik, by simply unmasking the agents that determine the fate of the country and the condition of its people, ignites a curiosity and indignation in a reader who belongs to such a place. These agents have the ability to eat away at the democratic power of the common man and woman, going as far as to make convenient amendments in the Constitution that ensure that their iron fist continues to hold the country.

A prime example of science-fantasy, *The Wandering City* instantiates what Krabbenhoft tackled in his research article on defamiliarization, and how it helps to comment on society (125). According to Verma and Patil, defamiliarization operates by splintering the stereotyped or habitual perceptions in order to incite a cultural-emotional awakening in the reader (1028). And is this not what a novum is used for, to shake the shoulders of the reader and implore self-reflection? Malik's City brings about the same cognizance in the citizens of Lahore as it does to a reader flipping the pages of *The Wandering City*, instigating a contemplation that demands democratic control back from the military institution.

In the Ruins of Mohenjodaro

What happens when your worst fears come to life? *In the Ruins of Mohenjodaro* reimagines the rich history of the Indus Valley civilisation and becomes a temporal rift between the past and the present. Noor is an English teacher in an Army Public School based in Petaro, who has come to the site on an Eid trip with the schoolboys and two faculty members, Junaid and Tabinda. Junaid is a veteran, and Tabinda was once a consultant anthropologist in 2001 for an excavation job at Mohenjodaro. Malik takes us on an evocative journey, where paranoia and trepidation thicken the plot. Old myths of the Terrible Emperor of the Night and ritualistic killing come to light, and the slow descent into pure chaos and macabre begins. Stuck at the site because of a terrorist attack in the nearby Cadet College Larkana blocks the roadway leading them out, the Eid trip party has to camp out in the night, on the first day of Eid al-Adha. Suddenly, boys start to go missing, and a mysterious, monstrous creature is after the group. Everybody dashes to the bus and takes refuge there, but when Noor awakes from her slumber, she is alone. Her surroundings are engulfed in dense fog. Just when she thinks that she has been abandoned by her group, Tabinda takes her out of the bus and to the Buddhist stupa. She indulges Noor in a confounding conversation about immolations and serving the inconsiderate pagan gods. Tabinda is revealed as the antagonist who came back to the site for exposure therapy, as the last experience here gave her night terrors. Cornering Noor, Tabinda hits her in the head and knocks her out. Once again, when Noor rouses, our main protagonist has to escape from her human sacrifice, riddled with visions, disturbances, and the pagan culture that was rumored to be the destruction of the people of Mohenjodaro. The story gives

the reader an insight into how heritage is erased, the trauma of war persists, and the nature of violence becomes a vicious cycle hard to break.

A beautiful and terrifying tale that overflows with social and political issues omnipresent in Pakistan, in *Ruins of Mohenjodaro*, ancient Indus Valley myths make a disconcerting return. The mythic Suvinian novum is a resplendent world where ritual sacrifices and the temporal collapse envelop the reader into a different, yet familiar, dominion—a journey to the novum that capsizes the realities in a gradual manner, one which Suvin calls the *voyage* (Suvin *Metamorphoses* 71). From the bus ride into the unsettling city to Noor's lucky escape, the reader's narrative environment turns murkier and darker by the moment.

As Noor is tied to the underground pool where the sacrifice is taking place, she finds bones too small to be of an adult's. It is a toe-curling thought to have, and provocative enough to question the extent to which violence is carried out in Pakistan. Our culture is overrun with djinn stories and mythic elements, but few traipse the mysteries of the Indus Valley civilisation. Malik skillfully combs through the myths and gives us a memorable story (with lessons to learn).

There are several daunting scenes in the *Ruins of Mohenjodaro*. One such scene is when Tabinda reiterates the ritual of human sacrifice in the old days, saying that it was "always the oldest offspring laid carefully by the blood gutters." Or she explains that the massive pool in the middle of the city is to fill it with blood for the Terrible Emperor of the Night as a pagan custom. Noor's heart-rending and horrific memory of her brother's suicide bombing is also an apt example of horror and abject in Malik's story collection. Terrorism, although serving

as a subplot, and the ancient ritual violence overlay each other, reframing the pervasive brutality in Pakistani society.

An interesting take on waterscapes is that of Athira Unni, who establishes in *The Sea is Alive,* a study of South Asian speculative fiction, that natural landscapes perform not merely as settings but as estranging thresholds that destabilize dominant epistemologies. She argues that "waterscapes in speculative fiction function as sites of liminality, with boundary crossings happening across their borders" (Unni 57), positioning rivers, seas, and lakes as symbolic zones where histories, myths, and ecological anxieties converge. In the South Asian context in particular, Unni notes that such waterscapes are "rife with local myths, folk stories, and the potential for innovative narratives" (Unni 57), suggesting that regional speculative fiction draws upon indigenous cosmologies embedded in the landscape itself. Furthermore, she contends that waterscapes serve simultaneously as "economic and political resources, habitats, and sites of personal transformation" (Unni 56), making them prominent novums through which speculative narratives delve into trauma, futurity, and cultural memory. Her idea verbatim informs the reading of Malik's Mohenjodaro, where the ruins operate as a similarly liminal, haunted geography in which fossilized histories violently resurface. The author manipulates the reality of the Indus Valley's archaeological site in a magnum opus, which lays out the different kinds of violence, namely military school shooting, ritual sacrifices, suicide bombing, wife-beating, and animal cruelty. Malik's virtuoso is perceptible in the way he combines these types of violence without forcing it upon the reader, facilitating the effect of cognitive estrangement.

Balasa remarked in his study that both religion and science are viewed through "the lens of knowledge," and that science is *extrinsically* validated and religion *intrinsically* validated

(18). In *Mohenjodaro,* the mythic novum rises from the paganism and old lore like that of the Mahabharata, and Tabinda's faith in these myths, including the drugging and hallucination of Noor, solidified the novum as paranormal but equally cognitive. The reader deliberates about the consequences of extremism, of how a human can transform into a cruel, beastly being if he or she blindly believes in customs or folktales; the moral compass crumbles into dust, and all hell breaks loose.

Insofar, Malik's novums are all justified. He succeeds in defamiliarizing the reader and fashions a "cultural-emotional impact" (Verma and Patil 1028) with his inventiveness. An abhorrent imagery that appears in the story, where Noor's post-traumatic stress disorder is triggered when she is drugged:

> Images of that monstrous city swirled in her brain, and her eyes bulged until a red curtain slipped over her vision—just like in the early days after Muneer's [her brother] death. The smell of his flesh, cooked from the blast, on her skin; the sharp iron odor of his blood; the taste of her own misery and terror as she stood shrieking in the summer wind, watching the red and white debris that was once her brother—they would come to her months after she left the hospital.

A reader might not relate to Noor's trauma in its essence, but the rich, soul-stirring detail with which her vision is described reaffirms the cognitiveness in the estrangement Suvin glorifies. Layered with horror upon horror, catapulting the reader into one atrocity after another, Malik professes that the society, which is filled with immense grotesquery, has reached a point where the people are desensitized to its repercussions. *In the Ruins of Mohenjodaro* is a reminder that violence is happening in many forms around us, and to alleviate the adversities, one must first be aware of its prevalence. He cunningly illustrates,

for instance, that society has converted the sacrificial custom of Eid al-Fitr to a rite of passage for men, who need to harden themselves by spilling the blood of an animal with their own hands. The initial sentiments behind the sacrifice evaporate, reducing the ritual into a day that tests the bounds of toxic masculinity.

Both Khalid's insight and Sadaf and Kanwal's conception, therefore, explicate *Midnight Doorways'* obstinate characteristic of redefining Suvin's original, strictly Western-based theory of cognitive estrangement. Being a South Asian writer with roots from post-colonial society, Malik's ability to mint his short fiction collection with the Pakistani stamp, criticizing the *society* rather than the culture itself, adds to the growing pile of the genre of Pakistani anglophone speculative fiction.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

After reading *Ishq, The Wandering City,* and *In the Ruins of Mohenjodaro*, the thesis substantiates that these three stories from Usman T. Malik's *Midnight Doorways* and their horror-mythic novums can perform cognitive work just as effectively as Suvin's classical technospecific novum. Haunting presences, ritualistic violence, liminal geographies, and bodily abjectness are artful features in Malik's stories. These can reorganize the perception, unsettle dominant narratives, and reframe the familiar as strange. The interpretive space widens, and the reader confronts prejudices, traumas, and social contradictions that would otherwise remain obscured by the inertia of everyday life.

Ishq punctuates horror and the abject in relation to gendered violence, illness, and infrastructural neglect. Parveen's ghostly appearance, a spectral novum, disorients the reader not through scientific means but through symbolic and emotional cognition. Tragedy unfolds in the eye of the storm, the urban flooding portrayed by Malik, and the integration of his frightening imagery results in a retrospection of social prejudice and the fragility of marginalized bodies. In *The Wandering City*, mythic futurity and the bizarre spatiality are displaced to an estranged vantage point that uncovers the mechanism of power, militarization, and the collective moral indifference. A drifting city (an unheard-of phenomenon) launches the reader to re-examine narratives of progress, national pride, and the allure of spectacle. Finally, *In the Ruins of Mohenjodaro* is a consummate story that uses archeological myth, ritualistic violence, and temporal collapse to reveal how historical trauma and contemporary violence are interwoven in the fabric of the cultural psyche.

Aligning with what Sadaf and Kanwal describe as the "democratization of human futures," Malik's choice of mythic and horrific novums reclaim speculative fiction from Western technoscientific traditions, planting it firmly in the indigenous epistemologies. As Quayum and Khalid note, Pakistani anglophone literature spawns from linguistic displacement and postcolonial marginalization. Malik's genius shows in how he transforms this estranged position into a generative aesthetic strategy that pushes away the conventional notions of modernity, identity, violence, and belief. Rather than being escapists (as the *Metamorphoses* Suvin would call them), these horror-mythic novums are deeply evaluative, unearthing the cultural traumas and social issues. These findings conform to Suvin's revised definitions of the novum, evident that his theory of cognitive estrangement is flexible enough to encompass South Asian speculative literature, wherein cognition is induced not from scientific plausibility but from symbolic, cultural, and effective insight. *Midnight Doorways* by Usman T. Malik, therefore, is a precedent for cognitive estrangement as a portal to hidden truths within Pakistani society, and a paragon that unlocks imaginative corridors to more just and critically engaging futures.

Recommendations

Numerous other authors are publishing riveting stories in Pakistani Anglophone speculative fiction. Future work can go beyond Malik to strengthen the impact of the genre and how it is a fine concoction of myth, folklore, and social critique. Comparative studies across South Asia could inspect how various national traditions use mythic estrangement and horror to think through the dimensions of postcolonial dilemmas and the fickle cultural memory. To end, Pakistani Anglophone speculative fiction should be read and taught as a purposeful site

of world-making rather than as a fringe or derivative genre. Research that revolves around these ideas can change the course of history, aiding in the overturning of Western assumptions about cognition, futurity, and what counts as "knowledge." Social commentary is achieved, quite fortuitously, by authors like Malik, who craft stories founded on indigenous epistemologies.

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Appendix I

Plagiarism Report

Appendix II

AI Report