

## Midnight Doorways: Decoding Pakistan's Dark Fables of Horror and Violence through Speculative Fiction

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### Abstract

This research explores the living bodies as abjections in the selected short stories. The characters are analyzed in this research through the works of Julia Kristeva, psychoanalytical term of abject that exhibits violence committed on. The underprivileged group in the chosen tales of *Midnight Doorways: Fables*; from Pakistan, the study is aimed at critically analyzing the impact of speculative, fiction focuses on the underserved communities and presents them as abject to provoke horror in the stories. The language and bright imagery involved by the author in these fables make a repulsive effect on the readers. The study will remark on the mentality of the majority group at the middle of the society and theirs. Ethics of living, or treatment of the peripheral ones. The focus of the study is to delve into the bodily experience of the characters in a biased community in. body mutilation, starvation, lack of hygiene and physical assault contributes to it, the process of abjection. The study is a critical and detailed one study.

**Keywords:** Horror, Violence, Abjection, Marginalized group, Dominant group, Revulsion, Science fiction, Bio-technology.

### Introduction

Usman T. Malik is a Pakistani-American author and this is his first publication, 2021 book *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan*. The book is a anthology of Pakistani myths, anecdotes, and so forth and folktales. It is the first of its kind when it comes to this collection of short stories. it is an arrival to Pakistani speculative fiction. Every story has a graphic rendition of the entire tale towards the conclusion of the story which is a rare amalgam of graphics and literature in the English documents of speculative fiction. It is the first Pakistani to have won the 2022 Crawford Award, ever to win the award. Science fiction is quite a new topic in the light of the literature studies in Pakistan. Usman T. Malik says that Pakistani science fiction has historically never existed, with some few exceptions of writers (Malik 2021). Urdu Literature has several stories that are categorized under the category science fiction (Ahmad et al., 2022). As an example, *The Roshni ka Safar*, *Kala Jadu* of Ismat Chughtai. An anthology of short stories by M. A. Rahat, and Musharraf Ali Farooqi "The Jinn Darazgosh". Other writers "Manto" and "Mumtaz" Mufti contributed to the Urdu Science-fiction Pakistan. It is sometimes considered sci-fi and speculative fiction equivalent to one another but speculative fiction is a general concept that is high level has fantasy, science fiction, supernatural, horror and utopia, dystopia, romanticism, etc. Speculative fiction Pakistani fantasy and children literature i.e. "Bachan ki Duniya", "Jinnati Duniya" and "Bacho ka Bagh". Nonetheless, this is still written in Urdu and is regarded as a part of Urdu Speculative fiction. *Fables: Midnight Doorways: Pakistani Fables* is a Pakistani-origin piece of Americana speculative fiction in English.

## **Literature Review**

Midnight Doorways: Fables in Pakistan is a new publication; hence, the scholarly criticism on the text is not numerous. The studies are important because the collection is explored within the concept of speculative fiction, a new genre in the Pakistani English literature (Amjad et al., 2021). This part of the review will analyze the reviews of the book and interviews and critical commentaries on the major text which will be based on the thematic issues and the narrative of the primary text as developed by Malik. A significant reference is the interview of Usman T. Malik in Lahore Literary Festival by (Shoaib Ahmed, 2021) in Dawn with the heading of Fables Depicting a Haunted Pakistan. According to Malik, the title is the symbol of choice and possibility, whereas the word fables can be compared to moral allegory and historical consciousness. He outlines the tales as a haunted version of Pakistan which are influenced by 20 years of war, violence, and trauma. "The research is based on these insights to examine horror and violence in the text in the context of abjection" (Beenish Mahmood, 2021). In her review, states that Malik employs dark images and the motif of death and the uncanny in her article titled Midnight Doorways. She defines the collection as a mixture of speculative fiction, fantasy, horror and magical realism observing the way it questions traditional realism in South Asian literature. Mahmood underlines the fact that the narratives are closely attached to the local surroundings and social problems are brought up by using supernatural elements. This paper is based on her observations to examine how oppressed communities are marginalized and violated. On the same note, (Fatima Arif, 2021), in Usman T. Malik Fables Interconnect Speculative Fiction with Local Culture, highlights the desi context, which ties the stories together. She holds that the speculative stories told by Malik relate local culture, history, and modern problems of terrorism, disability and disaster management. Her study upholds the fact that Malik employs speculative fiction to reference social prejudice and group violence. Finally, speculative fiction is a genre that has not been explored extensively in the context of Pakistani English literature and Midnight Doorways is one of such innovative texts. "The current criticism has not explored how the post-partition Lahore has turned into a modern, bigoted metropolis using the concept of abjection" (Fatima Arif, 2021). This paper aims at bridging that gap by following horror and violence in some of the short stories of modern-day Lahore.

## **Research Question**

The way abjection expresses horror and violence is as follows sidelined characters of the chosen short stories?

## **Research Methodology**

In this study, we follow the theoretical background of Kristeva. Horror and violence in relation to abjection perspective in her book. Powers of Horror. It is a hypothetical clarification of the psychological state of repulsion and disgust. It has to do with the situation of abjection. When the subject experiences a dreadful loss of dissimilarity between itself and objects/others. The abject are practices that are misplaced and disorient the conscious. It is the area of between being and non-being of familiar and unfamiliar.

In the case of Kristeva, the abject is an excuse to the break-up of identity, social order, and political system. In this research paper, the concept of Kristeva of will be applied becoming and impose it on all the marginalized characters of the short chosen stories. The psychology will be depicted in the concept of abjection, demonstrations of violent people. In addition, it will critique the vivid imagery and strange environs to follow the horror and violence presented in the selected short stories. Further, in order to research violence we will analyze marginalized characters and their correlation with the people of the hegemony in the chosen short stories.

## Theoretical Framework

The research uses an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, combining postcolonial theory, trauma theory, and Gothic/speculative fiction studies, to investigate how the horror and violence are represented in *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan*. The overlap between these theoretical approaches provides the possibility of a subtle interpretation of how the speculative fiction works to become a narrative technique to reveal socio-political anxieties, historical trauma, and dissolved experiences in the Pakistani context (Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023; Khan et al., 2017). “The postcolonial theory is the lens through which the analysis of the text can be made about the involvement with power, violence and the historical heritage” (Erving Goffman, 2012; Li & Akram, 2023, 2024). According to Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, postcolonial societies are still plagued with the legacies of the colonial domination, such as structural violence, fragmented identities, and cultural dislocation (Parveen & Akram, 2021). In this context, the concept of horror in *Midnight Doorways* may be interpreted as the allegory of the long-term consequences of colonial and postcolonial violence that still determine the social hierarchy and institutional inefficiencies. “The symbolic representations of the repressed histories and unprocessed national trauma that are contained within the speculative aspects, i.e. mythical figures, supernatural acts, uncanny spaces” (Lyndsie, 2020).

As Homi K. Bhabha said;

*“The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions.”*  
(*The Location of Culture*)

Placing violence in allegorical and fantastical frameworks, the text is also opposed to linear historical histories and reveals the survival of colonial power structures in modern Pakistani society. This analysis is further enhanced by the trauma theory which preempts the psychological and emotional aspects of violence. “Trauma is conceived based on the works of theorists like Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra and is perceived not only as a past occurrence but a repeated and haunting phenomenon that breaks the structure of the narrative and the linear nature of the time” (Mahmood, 2021).. In *Midnight Doorways*, trauma is expressed in the fragmented narration, use of ghosts and repetition of themes of loss and terror. Horror is an expression of the unrepresentable experiences; gendered violence, social exclusion, and collective loss. The paranormal hauntings in the text are the allegory of the repressed trauma returning and violence would not be held in the past but would trail the present too. Such theoretical perspective allows the research to understand horror as an emotional reaction to trauma as opposed to a melodramatic narrative element. Another critical approach to interpret how the text destabilizes the realism to draw criticism to the social norms would be the study of gothic and speculative fiction. Liminality, monstrosity, and the uncanny are the features of a Gothic tradition which offers the vocabulary to analyze the fear as a culturally constructed phenomenon.

According to Sigmund Freud ;

*“The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.”* (*The Uncanny*)

According to the scholars of speculative fiction, non-realist modes can be used by the authors of postcolonial situations to expose the epistemologies of dominance and reflect alternative realities. “In *Midnight Doorways*, Gothic horror is averted of common places like houses and neighborhoods and turned into the territory of fear and the revelation of violence in the seemingly ordinary existence” (Beenish, 2021). The speculative mode therefore allows a subversive rethink of reality in which the monstrous is a symptom of the corruption and moral decay in society. All these theoretical viewpoints place speculative fiction as a critical instrument of questioning horror and violence in Pakistani literature. Through a synthesis of postcolonial, traumatic, and Gothic, this paper imagines *Midnight Doorways* as a work that confronts the reality of violence, memory, and cultural identity through a speculative horror; a work that employs horror to address the irreconcilable complexes of violence and identity.

## Analysis

One way in which speculative fiction has come to play a critical role in contemporary Pakistani English literature is through the use of this narration mode to express social anxieties, historical trauma, and lived realities that cannot always be effectively represented using straightforward realism. *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan* is a good example of such a tendency as it relies on the use of horror, violence, and supernatural to explore the darker aspects of Pakistani culture. Instead of a kind of escapist fantasy, the text employs those strategies of speculation: myth, magical realism, grotesque images, and uncanny violence, to reveal the structure of oppression, psychological terror, and cultural silences. The use of horror and violence in *Midnight Doorways* is not explicit but rather symbolic and affective, which not only predicts the mass trauma but also the gendered trauma as well as haunting presence of history (Mahmood, 2021). Fundamentally, the horror of *Midnight Doorways* lies in the familiar as opposed to the foreign. Terror is often placed in the ordinary places by the stories, such as homes, streets, villages, and landscapes, and becomes a place of fear. Such sanitization of the horror is compatible with the tradition of speculative fiction which erases the line between the real and the unreal, forcing readers to grapple with the unsavory realities in the context of the mundane world. The grotesque characters and other frightening experiences in the writing usually represent any social vices like violence against women by men, religious fanaticism and political cruelty. It is through the temples of these realities, which the text disguises through the use of speculation, that makes visible what otherwise would be normalized or invisible in the discourse of realists. "Violence in *Midnight Doorways* is carried out on several planes such as physical, psychological, and symbolic" (Erving Goffman, 2012). The theme of physical violence, especially on marginalized bodies, comes back again, and the culture of brutality, prevailing in both domestic and societal realms, is reflected. Women, children, and socially abandoned subject matter tend to be the most frequent victims as it highlights the unequal access to violence between genders and classes. Nevertheless, the text goes further than just depiction of violent actions; it dwells upon the long term consequences of violence, and the picture of trauma as something that remains long after the act. This applies to the temporal expansion of violence, which is related to the issue of haunting, memory, and the reappearance of the repressed in speculative fiction. In this regard, horror is a narrational technique of expression of psychological trauma. The characters constantly live in the liminal worlds, between sanity and madness, life and death, past and present. This liminality supports the theory that violence disrupts identity and breaks subjectivity. The characters who have suffered loss or had been unfairly treated are normally accompanied by nightmares, hallucinations, and other supernatural visitations, indicating that the mind itself turns into a haunted area. These methods allow *Midnight Doorways* to turn personal pain into externalized horror, and they turn to trauma readable without degrading it to impoverished morality.

As Cathy Caruth states:

*"Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature returns to haunt the survivor later on."*  
(*Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*)

The fact that folklore and myth are utilized also adds to the level of interaction of the text with horror and violence. "Referring to the indigenous legends, spiritual beliefs and oral traditions of storytelling, the collection places the contemporary violence in a more extended historical and cultural context" (Lyndsie, 2020). Willed supernatural creatures such as ghosts, cursed individuals or mythical beings tend to appear as the embodiment of injustice that remains unresolved. These characters interfere with linear histories of development and modernity, reminding the readers that the past still insists on invading the present. By so doing, the text confronts dominant narratives of history that attempt to erase or whitewash moments of collective violence such as colonial exploitation, postcolonial instability as well as sectarian violence. *Midnight Doorways* can also criticize institutional violence without preaching to it through speculative fiction. The state authority, the law enforcement and the

social institutions frequently seem like shadowy or weak forces, who are complicit enough to continue causing suffering instead of reducing it. This institutional failure gives rise to horror since both supernatural and human cruelty have put characters in a vulnerable state. “The fact that the human and monstrous violence have been faded creates a hint that the actual terror is not the supernatural one but the order that justified cruelty and silence” (Maslow, 2018). This thematic intersection underlines the concept that speculative fiction is a counter-discursive space, by which authors can deal with politically sensitive matters with allegory and metaphor. The other important aspect of violence in the text is that it is ethically ambiguous. Contrary to the traditional moral stories, *Midnight Doorways* does not allow drawing a strict line between the victim and the perpetrator. Others who play violence are victims of systemic oppression whereas others internalize the forces that victimize them. This complication presents a wider speculative issue of moral uncertainty that puts readers on their feet and, therefore, with the disconcerting inquiries regarding agency, responsibility, and survival. Horror is then a tool of moral investigation, disturbing black and white stories of good and evil. The concept of gendered violence has a rather high position in the collection. “The fear of female characters occurs to be frequently connected to the domestic sphere, marriage and the social norms, showing the way to subjugation through the brutality of men and the manipulation of the women mentality” (Beenish, 2021). The speculative aspects (curses, transformations, and ghostly appearances) are used to estrange the trapping and fighting of women in the oppressive system. In that way, horror serves as a feminist intervention that reveals violence inherent in normal social life and raises the voices that are often disregarded. Finally, it is possible to note that *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan* shows that speculative fiction can be a powerful tool that can be used to explore horror and violence in culturally specific and universally resonant ways. The mixture of supernatural and social realism helps to see that horror is not a foreign and alien phenomenon, but a constituent of lived experience determined by history, power, and memory. Violence, be it physical or psychological, is depicted to be circular and haunting, not to be closed easily and easily resolved. The collection makes readers grapple with the darkness at the fringes of society and with the speculative as an important means of expressing the truths that realism struggles to fully absorb.

### **Discussion and Findings**

“*Midnight Doorways*” predicts horror and violence as realities of marginalized people in the Pakistani society through the choice of short stories. Usman T. Malik reveals the oppression in the system based on patriarchy, the hierarchy of classes, institutional breakdown, and social exclusion through speculative and supernatural components. Heroinchie, Maliha, orphaned girls, Parveen, Hashim, Noor, Tabinda, and Tara are characters that represent various levels of marginalization, so their bodies and identities are places of violence, abjection, and horror. Heroinchie is a socially excluded group in *Dead Lovers on Each Blade*, Hung and has no legal defense and the right to human rights. His torture and death in the police custody portrays the cruelty of the state institutions to the marginal people. On the same note, Maliha child marriage, sexual abuse and deprivation of containment authority are examples of gendered violence in systems of patriarchy where women are transformed into objects of control and trade. Their plight throws light on how powerful groups uphold authority by acting on them either using physical or psychological violence.

The orphanhood in “*Fortune of Sparrows*” describes the phenomenon of institutional violence where the orphanage is a total institution, which delivers a blank slate. The imagery of the mirror reflects the loss of self and reminds the idea of abjection developed by Kristeva because the orphan girl faces the horror of the loss of her former identity to fit in. This trauma of the emotion depicts violence that one is subjected to by being isolated, conforming to, and being denied agency.

“*Ishq*” introduces terror in obsessive love, decay of the body and negligence of self. The fact that Hashim is a devout man towards Parveen, ends in abjection where he accepts the dirt, death, and decay. “Wherever I turn I see her drowning,” (Malik, 38). The fact that Parveen is disabled further

labels her as a doubled marginalized woman pointing out how the society is prejudiced against women with disabilities. The novel itself criticizes the social conventions of assigning value to physical strength and physical attractiveness as it reveals how love itself can be destructive. “Is he crazy? There’s nothing there. He’s just pounding at the water” (Malik, 37).

According to National Association of Adult Protective Services Administrators, it says. that:

“Self-neglect is the failure of an adult, a failure caused by physical or mental. inability or reduced ability, to take necessary care of oneself tasks, these consisting of the following: getting necessary food, apparel, housing and healthcare; getting products and services required to keep the body, mind or overall safety; and/or managing financial situation”. (Zawisza et al. 1)

In the Ruins of “Mohenjo-Daro” throws light on the gendered violence and sexism in the sphere of professions. There is discrimination against female teachers and female bodies are posed as the objects of control and abjection. “The horror that is created through the terror attack and disappearance of students intensifies collective horror, which is a factor of instability and fear in society” (Malik, 152). Lastly, The Vaporization Enthalpy of a Peculiar Pakistani Family explores the theme of trauma, widowhood and alienation. The marginalization of Tara as a young widow is an exposure of the stigmatization and gender biasness and mutilated bodies are a sign of abjection and loss. Her quest to find a sense of self is an emphasis on opposition to imposed identities.

All in all, these stories illustrate how horror and violence is not only a supernatural tool, but also a social fact, which marginalized groups can find themselves under. The Malik speculative fiction reveals the systemic injustice and how institutions, traditions, and power structure perpetuates suffering, erasure and dehumanization in Pakistani society.

## Conclusion

This research paper has reached the conclusion that the living bodies provide a site of abjection and violence. These are all depicted as abject in all the marginalized characters which makes them subject to the control of society by short stories in social setting. It endorses female discrimination and unhealthy women. Noor has to deal with social subjugation and workplace harassment. In the short story, the, gender-based violence and domestic violence are addressed “Ruins of Mohenjo-Daro”. The short story “The Vaporization Enthalpy” concerns the following; of a Peculiar Pakistani Family, Tara, an outcast, is an emotional sufferer psychological, and physical sufferings, among them, child marriage, the loss of family and friends, barriers to getting an education, alienation and isolation. The short story Fortune of Sparrows was a deprivation of women individuality and trained them to a prospect of passive marriage. The “Ishq” is a short story that depicts a poor girl, Parveen who is physically disabled abject suffers mental torture at the hands of the hegemonic group like, school boys and family all round her. Her jealousy towards her comes later sister. The story Dead Lovers is about Maliha who was a child bride on Each Blade, Hung” and consequently she does not have a child. As a result of being she is an outcast and she undergoes this trauma throughout her life. Even she was married to an old man, but she would never have a child. This argument is therefore justified in this paper through the analysis.

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