Blindness Re-Visited: A Study of Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God*

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to study blindness as a physical impairment and as a metaphor in* The Geometry of God *by Uzma Aslam Khan. The paper uses both medical and literary discourse to provide functional definition of blindness, as opposed to strictly medical definition. The paper first establishes the ground by defining blindness and then analyses the selected text in detail to show how the author re-interprets blindness as a physical impairment by challenging oculocentrism, and extends it metaphorically to the rest of society.*

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Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, while showing his dissatisfaction with the traditional definition of blindness ("visual acuity of less than 20/200 with correction or a field of less than 20 degrees") emphasized the need to define blindness not merely "in medical and measurable terms [but to see it as] something which must be defined not medically or physically but functionally" (np). So the layman's definition of blind as someone who cannot see wouldn't fit in how Jernigan would define blindness. In quite an anecdotal style, he comes up with three "seemingly contradictory" propositions that he derived after discussing blindness with a group of high school students.

1. To be blind does not mean that one cannot see.

2. It is possible for an individual to have perfect sight and yet be physically and literally blind.

3. It is possible for an individual not to be able to see at all and still be a sighted person (ibid, np).

After the discussion with the students and coming to agreement about the propositions, Dr. Jernigan defined blindness thus: "One is blind to the extent that the individual must devise alternative techniques to do efficiently those things which he would do if he had normal vision" (ibid). The functional definition of blindness provided by Jernigan is literal and not metaphorical, as he himself claims in the article. Blindness however, like many other forms of medical illnesses, has also been used as a metaphor in our day-to-day conversations. In cognitive linguistics a metaphor is defined as "understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain" (Kovecses 4). So using blindness as a metaphor would mean using the entire conceptual domain of blindness to refer to some other conceptual domain(s) of knowledge. According to Kovecses, this would form a "conceptual metaphor." For example, 'ignorance is blindness' can be considered a conceptual metaphor. Kovecses also distinguishes between conceptual metaphor and a metaphorical linguistic expression. Considering the example that I have provided (ignorance is blindness), 'groping for words,' or 'you see what it means' would be considered metaphorical expressions based on the conceptual metaphor of 'ignorance is blindness.'

Use of metaphors is also very common in medical and health discourse. Neil Pickering in "Metaphors and Models in Medicine" alludes to two different schools of thought regarding the use of metaphor in science—anti-metaphor and pro-metaphor. Anti-metaphor school

believes that metaphor is only for linguistic embellishment and it has no space in science because science deals only with truth and fact whereas metaphors are "deceptive [and] false". Pro-metaphor school however believes that "metaphors play [] a part in generating hypotheses, extending explanations, stimulating original thought" (362). Pickering contends that whatever positions the anti or pro-metaphor schools of thought take, the fact remains that "in some of their most creative and scientifically significant thought, medical scientists may be more like poets than they think" (374).

According to Vyjeyanthi S. Periyakoil, MD, some of the very common metaphors in medicine are war metaphors, sports metaphors, and machine metaphors. In her "Using Metaphors in Medicine" she sheds light on the importance of the use of metaphor while quoting Anatole Broyard:

> Metaphors may be as necessary to illness as they are to literature, as comforting to the patient as his own bathrobe and slippers. At the very least, they are a relief from medical terminology . . . Perhaps only metaphor can express the bafflement, the panic combined with beatitude, of the threatened person. (qtd. in Periyakoil 843)

Metaphors in medicine can be helpful, just as Pickering and Periyakoil suggest but the myths around illness metaphors can be unsettling. Susan Sontag *in her Illness as Metaphor and Aids and its Metaphors* sheds light on how mythical construction of the illnesses like aids and cancer can prove to be fatal for the patients.

> [M]etaphoric trappings that deform the experience of having cancer have very real consequences: they inhibit people from seeking treatment early enough, or from making a greater effort to get competent treatment. The metaphors and myths, I was convinced, kill. (102)

When a disease attains the status of a metaphor, it may also attach with itself a stigma. For instance, cancer is metaphorically perceived as evil and all the ills of the society like corruption, injustice and so on are referred to as cancerous as they spread and infect the entire society. This attaches a sense of stigma and shame to the patient of cancer, hence "othering" the patient. The disease becomes an entire conceptual domain and carries with itself all the associations attached with it. Blindness is similarly treated as a metaphor:

> Blindness must have at first referred only to the deprivation of

> the sense of sight; but he who does not clearly distinguish ideas and their relationships; he whose reason is disturbed, obscured, does he not slightly resemble the blind man who does not perceive physical objects? The word blindness came naturally to hand to also express this deprivation of moral sight. And how without these obligatory metaphors, without these catachreses, would one have succeeded in retracing these ideas. (qtd. in Schor 77-78)

This passage from Fontanier that Schor quotes, clearly defines blindness as a metaphor. If this is what blindness has come to be perceived as, how would a medically blind person feel when referred to as blind? I cannot vouch for its universality, but in many cultures blind people are not referred to as blind anymore because of the stigma attached to it and if one does refer to a blind person as blind in their presence, it is thought to be impudence and carelessness on the part of the speaker. Instead other synonyms for blindness are used that are not used as metaphor (in Urdu language, *Na-beena* instead of casual *Andha.* Lexical item *Andha* is metaphorically used for all the characteristics that Shor has quoted in the above excerpt. *Na-beena* on the other hand is used only for those who have lost their eyesight. Literally both the words mean the same, but one is an entire conceptual domain because of its metaphorical associations while the other is only a word used to refer to a condition).

Schor in her "Blindness as Metaphor" also traces other associations that are attached to blindness, "disfigurement" or "defacement" (79) being one of those. So besides other conceptual associations with blindness is also the embodiment, hence adding to the stigma and "othering" of the legal blind. Schor also notes, "in fiction blindness is almost always feminized" (101). Here it is safe to say that all the associations with blindness as a metaphor are in one way or the other marginalizing and "othering" the legal blind. My aim in this paper is to show how Khan in her novel *The Geometry of God* is re-interpreting blindness as a physical impairment to dismantle the marginalized status of the blind on one hand, and using blindness metaphor to refer to other kinds of functional, psychological, and sociological blindness in the society on the other hand. I position myself in this study as a rhetorician who studies a literary text as an artifact for its use of metaphor. Hence, this should be considered a metaphoric analysis of a text. Since the metaphor considered in the text is "blindness," the analysis also takes into account the medical discourse around blindness and the use of metaphor in medicine. The audience of the study therefore is rhetoricians

(since it is a rhetorical analysis), literary critics (since the artifact for analysis is a novel), and those who are interested in the study of illness metaphors in health discourse.

The Geometry of God is the story of four characters—paleontologist Amal, her blind sister Mehwish, their heretical grandfather Zahoor who is also a paleontologist, and Noman. It is set in the backdrop of General Zia's dictatorial regime in Pakistan and his imposed religious fundamentalism supported by fundamentalist religious groups. Along with many themes of the novel like love, religion, and science, 'blindness' runs as a motif in the fabric of the entire novel. It is through the blind character Mehwish that Khan introduces blindness as a physical condition, reinterprets it, and extends it metaphorically to other members of the society.

"Mehwish was blinded by the sun" (26)—this is part of the paradoxical statement given by the ophthalmologist (as reported by Amal) about Mehwish's accidental blindness. It is paradoxical as sun is the antithesis of darkness, so where there is sun, there is no darkness; blindness on the other hand may stand for darkness, so sun being the cause of darkness is a paradox and from hence onwards, Khan constantly deconstructs the traditional meaning of the word blindness. Nana (Zahoor, the maternal grandfather) explains her blindness as a condition where "her eyes receive light but transmit no image" (30). Amal (the elder sister) thinks that Mehwish has a "sun inside her" (29) that lets her see.

Seeing is almost always associated with eyes (or sense of sight). Khan however dismantles this relationship as she associates the word "see" with all other senses and even memory. So blindness, as khan sees it, is not an inability to see. This takes us back to Jernigan's claim: "to be blind does not mean that one cannot see" (np). When Amal draws a picture of Mehwish with a sun inside her, her grandfather asks her to "go over it again, pressing harder with [the] pencil this time, she will *feel* the marks and be able to *see* something" (30, emphasis is mine). So seeing here is clearly associated with the sense of touch. Amal also draws words on her spine and Mehwish *reads* those words. Mehwish can also see things with the sense of smell. Amal exclaims: "she also *knows* colors by scent" (35, emphasis is mine). Khan also uses this quality of her character to reiterate the arbitrariness of signification. Mehwish insists that blood is white because it smells like decayed meat and decayed meat is white (245). Mehwish also memorizes routes to different places she visits because khan has Amal observe: "*geography first exists in the*

mind" (43). So for Mehwish, seeing with eyes is not necessary to *know* the routes. Khan gradually builds up the common assumption that 'seeing is knowing' by using both the words alternately and then culminates her claim of eyesight not being the only source of seeing—hence knowing, by introducing the philosophy of "intelligence and taste—khayal and zauq" (56). These two, as taught to Amal by Nana are the sources of knowing: "in the first what is [k]nown is seprit [separate] from what nose [knows]. In the second it is the same. Without aunty messy [intimacy], no taste!" (56). So for Khan, eyes are not the only source of seeing. One can see with all other senses and even memory helps in seeing; and if seeing is knowing, then the source of knowing is again not the eyesight but "intelligence and taste—khayal and zauq."

All the aforementioned examples are to support my claim that Khan re-interprets blindness. The re-interpretation helps her challenge the marginalization or "othering" of the blind by deconstructing the myths around blindness. Khan while challenging the oculocentrism (privileging sight over other senses), at the same time, understands the importance of sight. She does not indulge in the myth of sixth sense or the idea of "compensatory gifts of the sensorily deprived" (Schor 102). Nana asks Amal "to be Mehwish's eyes" so that she won't have any more accidents (31). So Khan seems to admit that blind are deprived of one sense out of five but this to her does not justify marginalization of the blind. She quite convincingly portrays that blind can still "see" with the use of other senses. I have already referred to Schor who has identified myths around blindness, "disfiguration" or "defacement" ( ) being one. There are a few instances where Mehwish is being marginalized by other characters because of her blindness. The bookshop keeper's son tries to sexually assault her and on her resistance he tells her that this is her only "chance," meaning that no man would even want to have sex with her. He asks her: "have you *seen* yourself" (246, emphasis is original). Miss Fauzia, the in-charge of the special school Mehwish goes to also taunts her: "who do you think you are why do you think you are different why can't you be like others sit quietly pray someone marries you useless" (203). Amal on the other hand see her as "Tall. Pretty. Blind" (48). Mehwish's blindness is nowhere suggestive of her being ugly or unattractive. She in fact is presented as a beautiful girl who knows how to carry herself. She can even dance on music "exactly as the actresses do" although she has never *seen* anybody dance. Amal decides: "like the sun she has it in her" (37). Schor also claimed that blindness is feminized in literature (101). Khan challenges this myth too. By making Mehwish an ordinary girl—neither "as evil incarnate, or its antithesis, the

embodiment of absolute virtue" (Gallaher, np), hence avoiding Mary/Eve dichotomy.

In order for the able-bodied to assume the central position, it is important that the disabled be marginalized. Mehwish while narrating the history of braille notes that in 1800s, people disapproved of Louis Braille's efforts of helping himself read, and so do people now in 1900s when she is caught "reading, drawing or humming" (202). People want the blind to be dependent but when the blind become independent, it takes away the opportunity from the sighted to "save" the blind (203).

There are some instances in the novel where Khan seems to suggest that seeing with eyes is a learned behavior. Schor also claims: "seeing [with eyes] is not, as is commonly thought, an innate activity, an inborn natural skill; rather it must be learned" (99). While quoting from Sacks, Schor adds:

> Though blindness may at first be a terrible privation and loss, it may become less so with the passage of time, for a deep adaptation, or reorientation, occurs, by which one reconstitutes, reappropriates, the world in nonvisual terms. It then becomes a different condition, a different form of being, one with its own sensibilities and coherence and feeling. (qtd. in Schor 98)

So what it suggests is the fact that being deprived of eyesight does not mean that the blind person can never do those things that the sighted can do. We have already seen all of the "alternative techniques" (Jernigan) that Mehwish uses to see, but there are sighted characters too who have to readjust their ways of seeing. When Amal assumes the role of being "Mehwish's eyes" (31) she has to appropriate her act of seeing too by "developing the habit of looking down" (44). She also observes: "I must search less for the designs of changing nature and more for the designs of unchanging men and women. I need a *different way of seeing: nearsighted, sly*" (46, emphasis is mine). Those with eyes also have their limitations. Amal frets: "I have only two eyes. I keep one lowered. The other reads billboards, soars up minarets, drifts with kites. My two eyes don't connect. One always wants to pull free. Mehwish is becoming this eye, instead of submitting with the other" (49).

Khan also distinguishes between real blindness and metaphoric blindness and tries to separate the two by not using the latter for the former. (This technique also helps her in challenging the marginalization if the blind.) Metaphorically ignorance is associated with blindness. However, on the basis of this conceptual metaphor, one cannot say that

blind are ignorant, although metaphorically it is legitimate to say that ignorant are blind (a=b but b is not equal to a). Amal works with Mehwish on her little experiments because she thinks: "she understands [her], she is not deaf" (33). So Mehwish's blindness is a physical condition that only inhibits her from *seeing* things with *eyes*. She has all of her other senses intact. Here again we can refer to Jernigan's functional definition of blindness: "One is blind to the extent that the individual must devise alternative techniques to do efficiently those things which he would do if he had normal vision." This definition fits Mehwish's condition but quite surprisingly those who have "normal vision" also use "alternative techniques" to see. This brings us to the second claim that I make: Khan extends blindness metaphor to other characters of the novel who represent the society in general.

Seeing with other senses is not only for the blind. Amal reads the rocks with her hands (180) and she calls it "correlation. Amal says correlation is only possible because people do not only see with their eyes ears and hands but also with their memories" (181). Khan creates this image of 'sightedness' and the reader may well relate it to the religious fundamentalists who believe that humans should not be "slaves of the senses" (137). These fundamentalists call the scientists blinds because the eyes that these scientists have cannot "see" what the "gifted" can see. The gifted have a "third eye," they have "lifted the veil from [their] eyes. [They] need not 'interpret' or even 'read.' [They] see ALL, the visible and invisible, angels and djinns" (137). So while showing how the religious fundamentalists see everybody else as blind, Khan in fact puts forth the idea that these so-called "gifted" people, while denying the importance of senses are blind too. Wein and Baider compare the refusal to see or "denial" to (metaphoric) blindness (3141). So those who are sighted but refuse to see ("interpret" and "read") should also be considered blind. Jernigan also made a similar proposition: "It is possible for an individual to have perfect sight and yet be physically and literally blind" (np). We have to remember here that Jernigan is not talking about metaphoric blindness. In this category he considers those who are sensitive to light, or put into a vault with no light. In any case, people who refuse to see with their senses then should be considered "functionally blind" as Jernigan would have it. Khan also provides another very interesting example of the illiterate who can be considered functionally blind in a particular situation. When an illiterate has a book in their hands and they cannot read would perfectly fit Jernigan's proposition of a sighted person unable to perform like one. It is very much like Mehwish's blindness where her eyes can perceive the image

but do not transmit it. The "old baba" (an old bookshop keeper) is one such example in the novel. Mehwish herself sees the parallel but in that particular situation she at least has "alternative techniques" to read—via braille for instance, but old baba doesn't even have that. Mehwish observes: "He is not blind, he is illiterate" and then she tells him: "we would be better off if you were blind and I could see." All old baba has to say is "Well we are both blind" (241). According to the functional definition, old baba then is literally blind, like a person in a vault without light, and not metaphorically blind.

We have seen that the traditional definition of blindness is insufficient to understand blindness as a physical impairment. It needs a functional definition, as Jernigan has attempted to provide. We have also seen that Khan in her work has appropriated the definition of blindness too. This has enabled her to challenge the marginalization and "othering" of the blind by decentralizing oculocentrism. She has shown through her characters that it is not only through eyes that one can see. Seeing is possible by using other senses too. At the same time, she has maintained the distinction between literally blind and metaphorically blind. This distinction in her work is important because the mythical construction of blindness as metaphor may stigmatize and marginalize the blind. So we can generalize from this that blindness (or any other illness for that matter) as metaphor may be extended to those who are *not* medically blind but not to those who *are* medically blind. This proposition certainly does not oppose the use of metaphors but the myths around illness metaphors (blindness is not an illness in true sense of the word but it is always treated thus and it is associated with other illnesses like diabetes and so on (Schor 78)).

As already mentioned, Khan challenges oculocentrism and this brings forth another important point to consider. Once the superiority of the sense of sight is challenged, it also challenges the ableist discourse. Blind are usually seen as dependent, always needing assistance, a burden for the caretaker. This creates the relationship of power where the caretaker has all the authority and power while the blind is on the receiving end. However, once it is realized that every person in the society is one way or the other, functionally blind in some of the situations, this power relation between the caretaker and blind can also be dismantled. This may take into account both literal and metaphoric blindness. In the novel for instance, the religious fundamentalists think that they are the only sighted people and all the rest are blind, so they consider themselves as superior and responsible for the care of all others.

The scientists on the other hand consider the fundamentalists as blind because they refuse to see things that are so visible, e.g. evolution. Khan does not try to settle the dispute between science and religion but she does bring forth the idea that we all are one way or the other limited in what we see and perceive, whether we have the sense of sight or not. This brings every body on the same pedestal and the power structure gets disturbed. One who is inferior or subordinate in one situation may become the opposite in another situation. So the patient/caregiver relationship also gets destabilized. In the novel again, Mehwish who is thought to be dependent on others for lack of her eyesight eventually saves Noman from being hit by a bullet.

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