

Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner Than Skin*

Reviewed by Andrew Tolle

Thinner Than Skin. Uzma Aslam Khan. Northampton, Massachusetts: Clockroot Books, 2012. 346 pages. ISBN 978-1-56656-908-8.

Uzma Aslam Khan intersects love, espionage, legend, and history in her fourth novel, *Thinner Than Skin*, to contemplate the lasting impact of colonialism on Pakistan's disputed northern borderlands. *Thinner Than Skin* explores the region's geopolitics, religious identities, gender roles, and environmental concerns in unassuming yet exquisite prose, capturing the landscape's beauty while evoking the new political tensions brewing in a land once part of the ancient Silk Route.

Nadir Sheik, the novel's protagonist, is a Pakistani-American photographer living in San Francisco, where he struggles to sell landscapes of California's deserts. He falls in love with Farhana, an American glacier expert with Pakistani ancestry. Farhana yearns for Nadir to take her "back" to Pakistan, ostensibly to study its glaciers. (Outside the poles, Khan informs us, Pakistan contains more glaciers than anywhere on Earth.) Already annoyed by Farhana's refusal to accept that a pilgrimage to his country would not, for her, be a "return," Nadir grows more frustrated with news that Farhana's colleague, Wes, will be joining their voyage. So Nadir's childhood friend, Irfan, who nurtures deep connections with the indigenous communities on their itinerary, comes along as well, and the four journey toward Kaghan Valley. But a suspected hotel bomber's arrest in Peshawar spurs rumors that an accomplice—a spy, even—is now travelling along the group's path. When the foursome arrives at Lake Saiful Muluk—a place of mythical jinns, fairies, and glaciers conceived by mating ice—their tragic encounter with a nomad named Maryam upends their well-laid plans.

Like the old Silk Route, which comprised a collection of paths rather than a single road, Pakistan's disputed northern borders lie in the middle of a "new" Silk Road, which also lacks clear definition (320). The indigenous communities of Central Asia know this fact too well: every day, the encroaching influence of new occupiers from China, Russia, India, Iran, and the United States further destabilizes their rhythmic ways of life. But to the Gujjar tribes of Pakistan, "Central Asia [is] divided not into states, but into mountain and steppe, desert and oasis" (138). Because the Gujjars do not conform to what they see as arbitrary borders, they are outsiders in the eyes of foreign institutions, the Pakistani government, and the region's more sedentary tribes.

In fact, each character in Khan's novel suffers from his or her own sense of unbelonging. Nadir cannot sell his beloved California landscapes because, as one agent explains, Americans expect Pakistani photographers to show the "misery" of their war-torn country (11). Because his American landscapes somehow lack "authenticity," Nadir must exploit his access to Pakistan to capture its "horror." Farhana, on the other hand, "long[s] for a country": she does not feel completely American despite having been raised in California, but neither has she experienced her Pakistani father's homeland (38). Meanwhile, in the Gujjar community of northern Pakistan, Maryam finds herself shunned for continuing the "pagan" rituals of her animist mother. And as for Ghafoor, Maryam's platonic lover and an emerging activist for Central Asia's indigenous tribes, "it had been...a very long while indeed, since he felt he had a country" (144).

Throughout the novel, Nadir and Farhana's passionate and fragile love reflects the mounting pressure of events developing in Kaghan Valley. Their relationship's ups and downs parallel intense progressions in the spy subplot, in Maryam's narrative of the travelers' impact on her community, and in Ghafoor's unintentional connection to Islamic extremists. As the Gujjar community begins to consider Nadir a murderer, Farhana and Wes exhibit signs of a possible affair. And the arrival of new forms of colonial influence (e.g., Chinese industry, the Taliban, Pakistani government agents) reinforces the tension looming over the lovers' relationship. Nadir nods at the analogy between external events and his relationship with Farhana when he imagines the two of them "running toward each other while people blew themselves up around us, and a bird swung circles in the sky" (241). The bird that Nadir envisions in the sky over his disastrous embrace with Farhana summons the American drones that routinely "gaze" over the region with "stupid eyes" from a "Playstation in Cactus Springs," Nevada (100-103).

Thinner Than Skin engages Western readers by providing a tourist's view of Pakistan alongside a Pakistani community's perspective of Western visitors; as a result, the novel punctures many common ethnic and religious stereotypes. When Farhana experiences cold feet before departing for Pakistan, she frets about violence reported on the news and decides that women cannot "survive" in such a country. Nadir responds by asking her if she considers the 85 million women in Pakistan "unsurviving" (103). Due to Farhana's preoccupation with hostilities in Pakistan, Nadir half-expects a news article on border kidnappings to be about his home country—that is, until he realizes that the article refers to Arizona's border with Mexico (104). "Are we too obsessed with al-Qaeda to care about our own backyard?" he provokingly wonders. Farhana's anxiety over visiting Pakistan contradicts the very premise of her fear when juxtaposed against Maryam's strength and resilience.

Characters are as religiously diverse as they are ethnically and linguistically, and these complex depictions enhance Western readers' understandings of South and Central Asian culture. Although Islamic militants often successfully exploit the memory of martyr Syed Ahmad to recruit Gujjar boys who resent the Pakistani government's compliance with Chinese industry and American drones, Maryam struggles to protect her young son from these "wrongly-turbaned men" (253). She may share their opposition to the government's disruption of nomadic lifestyles, but she acknowledges the contradictory nature of their fundamentalism: "[t]he voice on the radio always said radio was sin" (292). Maryam and other indigenous nomads do not pray regularly at the mosque or make the pilgrimage to Mecca because their mobile lifestyles prevent it; but they identify as traditional Muslims in public due to social pressure. Ghafoor, whose activism against foreign influence often places him on the side of fundamentalists, is nevertheless ambivalent to religion and hesitates discussing Islam with strangers because the "Muslim of the steppe... was too animist for the Muslim of the town, and the Muslim of the town, for the Soviets and the Chinese, was just too Muslim" (143). And while Nadir may consider himself culturally Islamic, in California he is "more often mistaken for Latino than A-rab, even by Latinos," and when asked by an American if he was "Moozlim or what?" he chooses the more equivocal "or what?" (10). One of the novel's most positive portrayals of Islam comes from a shopkeeper who reminds Nadir that the prophet Muhammad emphasized the importance of the *ghuraba*, which he translates as "the strangers." "Blessed are the outsiders," he quotes; and with this reference, Khan demonstrates why this land of outcasts finds comfort in Islam—even those unable to conform fully to its strictures.

Thinner Than Skin offers many dynamic examples of strong Pakistani women, and the fact that a male narrator's voice provides most of the story only strengthens the novel's consideration of gender issues. Like Nadir, Khan grew up in Pakistan before relocating to the United States; and for both Khan's fiction and Nadir's photography, Pakistan continues to provide a wealth of inspiration. By delivering Nadir's perspective in first-person but Maryam's in third-person, Khan distances herself from the self-sufficient Maryam while connecting herself more closely to Nadir's sensitive introspection. But the poignant feminist moment that gives the novel its title fittingly occurs in Maryam's narrative, when she teaches her daughter to disembowel a goat. Her daughter asks if her own skin is as thin as the goat's, and Maryam replies that it is thinner: "if a goat can be shred so easily, so could a woman" (124). Maryam's daughter must "grow a second skin to protect the thin one," but the second skin must remain hidden in order to work. Without mentioning the veil, Maryam rejects it by offering an emotional—but equally spiritual—alternative.