

THE POSTMODERN PAKISTANI CANVAS: MALIK'S MIDNIGHT DOORWAYS AND LITERARY SUBVERSION

Dr.Rukaiza Khan¹

¹Assistant Professor, National University of Sciences & Technology (NUST), Islamabad, Pakistan
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0082-4400>

rukaiza.khan@ceme.nust.edu.pk¹

Abstract

This study delves into Usman T. Malik's *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan*, focusing on the postmodernist themes and techniques that permeates his narrative. It underscores the transformative capacity of literature in reshaping cultural frameworks within the Pakistani context. By examining Malik's work, this study illuminates how he skillfully integrates fragmented narrative structures and meta-narrative techniques emblematic of postmodernism to challenge conventional literary forms. This study employs a framework centered on postmodernism to examine the ways in which this approach challenges existing conventions and transcends conventional boundaries within the domain of literature. Malik's narrative creativity not only enhances modern literature, but also offers a novel perspective on the cultural dynamics and societal viewpoints. Through textual analysis, this research examines the role of Malik's literary work in exploring the intricate dynamics of identity, memory, and power in the Pakistani setting by focusing on narrative strategies and thematic concerns. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the socio-cultural implications of Malik's narrative decisions, illustrating the importance of storytelling in shaping society conversations and challenging dominant narratives. This study aims to enhance the comprehension of the complex interplay between storytelling, cultural representation, and societal discourse within the realm of modern literature.

1.Introduction

In the vast and boundless realm of literary inquiry, certain authors emerge as prominent figures, showcasing remarkable proficiency in traversing the intricate realms of storytelling with unparalleled finesse. Malik, a renowned Pakistani author, holds a prominent role within the realm of literature, adeptly constructing story lines that challenge traditional storytelling conventions and violate established norms. In his highly regarded anthology titled *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan*, Malik extends an invitation to readers to immerse themselves in a domain where mundane events meet with remarkable happenings, surreal and pragmatic realities collide, and postmodernist concepts and magical realism resonate seamlessly (Malik, 2021).

Malik's narratives may appear to be arbitrary explorations into the realm of the fantastical or simply imaginative musings. However, beneath the surface, there exists a complex tapestry that is tightly intertwined with motifs and approaches rooted in postmodernism. Malik skillfully navigates the complex pathways of postmodern ideology through the utilization of fragmented narratives, nonlinear hierarchies, and metafictional components. By doing so, the author urges readers to engage in a critical analysis of the fundamental nature of truth, the reliability of narratives, and the fundamental characteristics of reality. Nevertheless, in the midst of this confusing array of literary exploration, Malik's writing consistently retains a strong link to the tangible, firmly grounded in the rich tapestry of Pakistani society and legacy.

The work demonstrates Malik's remarkable linguistic proficiency by skillfully integrating Urdu and English, resulting in a deep sense of nostalgia and genuineness that deeply resonates with readers (Wagner, 2020). I argue that the blend of Urdu and English amplifies the evocative nature of folktales and fables, eliciting sensations of being wrapped in blankets on cold winter evenings in Lahore, where I intently listened to elders recount stories filled with mystery and captivation. Having a high level of skill in both languages, I highly appreciate the intricacies and intricacies

that are present in the unique contributions of each language to the narrative. The inclusion of Urdu vocabulary, where suitable, enriches the book's atmospheric intricacy, thus cultivating a sense of cultural depth and authenticity (Sheikh, 2021). While some plots may occasionally seem rushed or lacking in depth, it is the meticulously depicted environment and captivating atmosphere that truly captivate my thoughts. This study explores the many meanings in *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan*, including cultural and linguistic nuances, as well as the sophisticated narrative intricacies that elevate Malik's work to the highest level of contemporary storytelling. This study aims to conduct an academic examination of Malik's narrative environment in order to uncover the intricate relationship between postmodernist themes and techniques within his literary oeuvre. Through thorough analysis and thoughtful exploration, our aim is to shed light on how Malik's use of postmodernism significantly influences readers, revealing how his narratives disrupt, provoke, and eventually improve our understanding of the world around us.

1.1 Research Questions

Q1: What postmodernist themes and techniques can be identified in Malik's *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan*?

Q2: How does Malik strive to fuse post-modernist writing techniques with the elements of magical realism, aiming to craft a distinctive and contemporary reading experience?

1.2 Research Objectives

1: To examine the postmodernist strategies, themes and concepts employed by Malik in his in the *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan*.

2: To examine how Malik constructs a contemporary reading encounter by integrating elements of magical realism and postmodernist writing techniques.

1.3 Problem Statement

This study explores Malik's literary work, *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan*, a collection of short stories, analyzing how his collection of short stories embodies postmodernist themes to evoke a sense of nostalgia rooted in childhood memories, despite the works predominantly horror genre. Focusing on Malik's use of fragmented narrative structures, symbolism, and cultural influences, this research examines how his postmodernist techniques challenge conventional storytelling and explores concepts like personal identity, perception and human experiences.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study is highly significant as it offers insights into how contemporary authors break traditional narrative boundaries to create intellectually engaging and culturally resonating stories. Through a detailed examination of Malik's fusion of fragmented narrative structure and cultural nuances, this study deepens our understanding of his artistic approach and reflects how storytelling can challenge societal norms. The findings also contribute to the broader academic discussion on the role of postmodernism in modern literature, paving the way for future scholarly explorations.

1.5 Limitations of Study

The primary limitation of this study is its focus on a single collection, *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan*, which may narrow broader insights into Malik's work. Additionally, the inherent subjectivity in literary analysis could introduce interpretative biases, and reliance on existing frameworks might overlook some cultural nuances specific to Malik's context. While an interdisciplinary approach enhances depth, it also presents challenges in maintaining coherence across different fields, underscoring the need for further research to explore additional perspectives on postmodernism and its cultural intersections in literature.

1.6 Recommendation of Study

Future research on *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan* could focus on exploring element of modernism and other literary theories within Malik's work. Comparing Malik's approach to that of other authors using the same techniques may offer a broader understanding of the genre's context and Malik's unique impact.

2.Literature Review

Modern Pakistani literature is characterized by a literary environment that is both vibrant and diversified, and which is in a state of continuous evolution and adaptation to the rapidly shifting dynamics of society. This literary environment is a hallmark of Pakistani literature. Throughout the contemporary age, this literary atmosphere has been a defining characteristic of Pakistani culture and literature. Pakistani literature has developed into a flourishing field of academic inquiry that mirrors Pakistani culture, the diverse population of the nation, and the different identities that exist within it. The country of Pakistan is the location of these customs. Expressions of creativity and a variety of approaches to the telling of stories are the fundamental elements that underpin these traditions (Sun, 2019).

When it comes to the landscape of contemporary British writing, Mohsin Hamid emerges as a significant voice among giants such as Salman Rushdie. He uses the narrative tool of magical realism to carefully weave together personal storylines inside the larger socio-political fabric at the same time. As Hamid's fourth novel, "Exit West," stands as a painful investigation of the confluence between the personal and the political, it is set against the backdrop of a global landscape that is becoming increasingly turbulent and is marked by violent wars and large migrations. In her article titled "As if by Magical Realism: A Refugee Crisis in Fiction," Oana-Celia Gheorghiu examines the ways in which Mohsin Hamid uses fantastical elements in order to shed light on the harsh realities of belonging and displacement (Gheorghiu, 2018).

Postmodern culture is often associated with a radical political ideology due to the influence of Jean Francois Lyotard's seminal work, "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge" (1984). Lyotard's diagnosis of a "postmodern condition" allows for various interpretations. One option is by rejecting the universal inclination to participate in political activities and make judgments. Many examples have been provided to support this interpretation. This work presents a challenge to the proposed interpretation (Burdman, 2020).

The article by Kwame Anthony Appiah titled "*Is the Post in Postmodernism the Post in Postcolonial?*" discusses postmodern culture. The author emphasizes that postmodern culture includes several postmodernisms that can work together or against each other to achieve their goals. Appiah suggests that postmodernism aims to move past certain elements of modernism, especially those associated with a self-aware and privileged modernity within its culture. He compares the concept with being neo-traditional, which he defines as a type of being traditional or premodern (Appiah, 2023).

Craig Owens emphasizes in his book "*The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism*" that postmodernists aim to disturb the comforting stability of the dominant mindset. Owens's book is named after his own book. This endeavor has been classified as part of the modernist avant-garde by authors like Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva. This contribution is associated with the modernist avant-garde, known for its use of heterogeneity (Owens, 2018).

In the same way Park Martin, in his article "*PostModern Organizations or Postmodern Organization Theory*," discusses how some modernists believe that modernism is defined by its

emphasis on confidence in reason and its connection to progress. Individuals with a predisposition to see the world view it as a system that becomes increasingly controllable by us as our understanding of it advances (Madsen, 2023).

Postmodernists argue that our conceptualizations of the external world shape our understanding of it, and these notions are collectively upheld and regularly redefined as part of our efforts to comprehend reality (Bowden & Bowden, 2018). We are strongly advised to refrain from attempting to systematize, define, or impose logic on the unfolding occurrences. We should acknowledge the limitations associated with each of our pursuits. The role of language in shaping "reality" is crucial, and our attempts to uncover "truth" should be viewed as types of communication. Society is considered to be transitioning, giving rise to new social forms that are detached from the capitalist and industrialized institutions that have shaped us in the past century (Wolin, 2019).

Postmodernism highlights the significance of culture in the transformations occurring across several levels, ranging from everyday activities of different social groups to more intricate artistic, intellectual, and academic endeavors. Postmodernism acknowledges that culture has a significant role in all these transformations. Changes in culture affect the production, spread, and consumption of cultural products, reflecting the transformations in these areas. The postmodernist movement stands out from previous eras by showcasing a restructured culture and a moderation in the connection between culture and other aspects of social life. It also shows a misconception in how the role of culture is understood (Peters, 2020).

Malik, the author and physician, has Pakistani and American heritage, which broadens his vision and influences his narration. His fictional works have been featured in various renowned anthologies for several years, such as the popular American Science Fiction and Fantasy series. He has received nominations for the World Fantasy Award, the Million Writers Award, and the Nebula Award twice. He has received prestigious honors such as the British Fantasy Award and the Bram Stoker Award. The Salam Award for Imaginative Fiction is an honor that was established with the intention of fostering the development of Pakistani authors who specialize in science fiction (Usman. T. Malik, 2021). Malik's first *collection of short stories*, which is named *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan, collection of short stories*, has received appreciation from a number of well-known authors, including Karen Joy Fowler, Kelly Link, and Aamer Hussein, among others. In 2022, the novel was honored with the prestigious Crawford Award, and it has also been recognized as a finalist for the Ignyte, World Fantasy, and Locus awards (Sadaf, 2023). Malik's remarkable storytelling skills transport readers into this universe. In order to leave an indelible mark on the world of literature, this *collection of short stories* encourages readers to venture into the realms of imagination, where the lines between the ordinary and the extraordinary become blurry (Sheikh, 2021). Dr. Hajra Khalid, Dr. Huma Batool, and Dr. Maria Maan, in their article "The Cultural Appropriation of Urdu in Malik's Collection *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan, collection of short stories*," states that Throughout the course of his narrative, Malik has utilised a wide variety of techniques in order to creatively include Urdu language (Batool, Khalid, & Maan, 2022).

The extant research shows a significant lack of analysis on postmodernism, especially with non-Western authors like Pakistani authors who have relocated to other nations. There is a significant disparity in the attention paid to this author compared to others, which is highly obvious. Furthermore, there is insufficient research on how these authors combine postmodernism with magical realism to question societal issues and cultural traditions. This gap is emphasized by the

need for more study on the topic. Currently, there are no thorough evaluations of Malik's literary achievements in the academic setting. When assessing his works, these appraisals overlook his skillful integration of postmodernist concepts and magical realism across his body of work. Our lack of knowledge prevents us from understanding how different cultural settings impact storytelling techniques and the use of diverse literary styles. The lack of attention given to the importance of magical realism in modern literature reflects a broader failure to recognize its ability to showcase cultural diversity and challenge traditional literary norms.

3. Research Methodology

1.7 3.1 Research Design

This study uses qualitative textual analysis methods to thoroughly analyze the post-modernist techniques, as well as cultural aspects and themes, found in Malik's *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan, a collection of short stories*.

1.8 3.2 Data Collection

The primary data source is the literary text of Malik's published short story *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan, a collection of short stories*. Secondary sources such as scholarly journal articles and books on Post-modernism, and South Asian literature are reviewed to contextualize the analysis. Data from both primary and secondary sources is gathered systematically.

1.9 3.3 Data Analysis Techniques

Catherine Belsey's close reading textual analysis technique is used as a way to thoroughly evaluate the literary devices, language, images, symbolism, themes, characterization, setting, and other textual components. An inductive method is employed to identify emerging codes and categories associated with post-modernist characteristics and structures in the text (Belsey, 2006).

1.10 3.4 Theoretical Framework

1.10.1 3.4.1 Postmodernism

A multitude of diverse and varied artistic, cultural, linguistic, religious, ethnic, racial, and political elements come together to form postmodernity. Shugufta (2020) Together with the realism framework, postmodernist theory has been integrated. According to N. Elaati and Abdulazim (2016), this theory has aided in the investigation of the modernist patterns, transformation, and questioning of social, cultural, and literal boundaries norms found in Malik's Collection *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan, collection of short stories*,".

Therefore, the incorporation of the post-Modernism framework in Malik's Collection *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan, collection of short stories*," along with the ideas of Lotyard, enables a critical exploration of magical realism in the modern context. This approach facilitates the in-depth and meaningful interpretations of cultural, colonial, historical, and social dimensions embedded in Malik's style.

1.10.2 3.4.2 Ethical Considerations

Academic standards are followed, along with a significant focus on upholding the author's work. Therefore, it ensures ethical conduct. In addition, the maintenance of academic integrity through the appropriate citation and acknowledgement of the sources has been made clear.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Post Modernism Themes

Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan, a collection of short stories by Malik showcases the incorporation of postmodernist themes and techniques, drawing inspiration from Jean Lyotard's

theory of postmodernism. After closely examining the text, it became clear that the narrative utilizes fragmentation, skepticism towards overarching narratives, and a strong emphasis on the multitude of perspectives and realities. The combination of these elements creates a postmodernist narrative that questions conventional methods of storytelling and delves into the intricacies of modern-day existence.

1.10.3 **4.2 Incredulity Towards Metanarratives (Challenging Progress Narrative)**

"Where homeowners park their cars?" I said. Ammi smiled... "This was the sixties," she said... "Nobody in Narrow Alley owned cars... Could you get stuck?" I said. "Anyone ever get stuck in Narrow Alley?" I laughed at the absurdity of the image. But she was nodding, serious. (Fable 1)

This passage delves deeper into the subject of car ownership, exploring it from a more comprehensive perspective. The author provides context by mentioning the time period ("This was the sixties") and highlights that despite the economic growth commonly associated with that era, not everyone in Narrow Alley had the means to own a car. Ammi's serious approach highlights the difficulty of this overarching story. In this context, progress is not something that everyone experiences in the same way, and the ownership of cars is not a measure that can be universally applied to gauge it.

"Maulana P.J. feels it in his heart, a bass thrum that triggers his atrial fibrillation. Maulana is carried to the chopper, and instant fatwas are passed against the existence of the Enchanted City. Radio stations blare propaganda against the 'City of Infidels,' screaming 'CONSPIRACY: The jinn's an Israeli weapon, the sirens a Hindu plot against our pious boys!'" (fable 2)

The Enchanted City's mere presence challenges conventional understandings of the world. In discussing the City, Maulana P.J., a religious scholar, refers to it as a place inhabited by those who do not share his beliefs and armed with weapons from Israel (text excerpt). This is an inadequate attempt to elucidate the inexplicable by constraining it within a well-known religious framework. Despite various attempts to uncover scientific explanations such as "pheromones and hallucinogens," "energy signature," and "quasiparticle displacement," the City continues to maintain its enigmatic nature.

"This boy," Baba said, "was tortured by someone." Gangly Man's shoulders stiffened. "He was badly beaten. His teeth knocked out with a hammer. Someone took a razor to his mouth. When he was near dead, they threw him in the river." (fable 3)

This exchange highlights a conflict between different perspectives. Baba highlights the boy's experience of human suffering, irrespective of his religious affiliation. On the other hand, Gangly Man's attention is completely directed towards the religious designation of "Christian," which occupies a fixed position within his belief system. The narrative challenges the prevailing authority of religious metanarratives by presenting Baba's point of view as more empathetic.

"It eats bones. The female lays her eggs in the air. As the egg drops, the hatchling squirms out and escapes before the shell hits the earth. The shadow of the huma falling on a man bequeaths royalty on his person. Like the phoenix, it is old and deathless. Whosoever captures it will die in forty days."(fable 4)

This passage presents the extraordinary huma bird, possessing otherworldly powers and the ability to grant kingship. Nevertheless, the narrative is portrayed as a piece of traditional wisdom, rather than an indisputable fact. The narrator in this passage leaves the readers feeling perplexed, as later contemplation of the story suggests a skeptical view towards the all-encompassing narrative of

humanity. This is in line with a postmodern skepticism towards overarching narratives that purport to provide comprehensive explanations.

"You understand how our life is, sahib, don't you? We heroinchies are the children of the white queen-a tribe unto ourselves... Hers is a shadow that enwombs us: It nurtures us as it suffocates..."(Fable 5)

This passage presents a direct challenge to the conventional narrative surrounding addiction, which often attributes it to a lack of willpower or moral shortcomings. In this narrative, the author presents heroin addiction as an immensely potent and almost ethereal entity referred to as the "white queen." This pervasive influence is portrayed as both nurturing, enveloping us, and suffocating, resulting in a complex and inescapable dynamic. Here, the narrator implies a power that is both sustaining and confining, beyond their control.

The scientific descriptions of states of matter ("Solid Phase," "Liquid Phase," "Gaseous Phase," "Plasma Phase") interspersed with the narrative of Tara's life. (fable 6)

The incorporation of scientific language in conjunction with the profound personal tragedies and transformative experiences in Tara's life produces a contrasting combination. It challenges the conventional belief that human experiences can be easily classified, rationalized, or confined within scientific logic or principles. This emphasizes the constraints of overarching narratives in comprehensively capturing the intricacy and disorder of human existence.

"Spread out over two hundred and fifty acres on a series of mounds, its heyday was from 2500 to 1900 BC. It was suddenly abandoned then. No one knows why."(fable 7)

The clash between these perspectives questions the dominance of a singular, all-encompassing interpretation of history and cultural sites. Farooq presents theories in the field of archaeology, exploring topics such as human sacrifice through the analysis of seals and artifacts. Nevertheless, the concerns of the local community, which revolve around spiders, omens, and even supernatural cattle, offer insights into an alternative knowledge system that presents intricate explanations regarding the location. These narratives coexist, without either being able to fully discredit the other.

1.10.4 4.3 Legitimation of Knowledge (Subjectivity and "Confabulation")

"I listened and nodded, thinking it was happening already... Was Ammi confabulating? Was she subtracting pain from her childhood and adding uncanny narcotic details best explained by longing and fear?" (Page 4-5)

This passage explores the subjective nature of knowledge and truth. The narrator initially accepts their mother's story without question ("listened and nodded"). However, skepticism arises when considering the medical explanation of "confabulation" – the formation of inaccurate memories as a result of illness. This questions the conventional perspective on knowledge as being objective and verifiable. The narrator considers the idea that Ammi's story, even if it could be made up, could be influenced by her emotions, emphasizing how our understanding and creation of knowledge can be subjective.

"Mr. Kurmully yelped. "Sorry," I said, jerking my fingers away. "Did that hurt?" "No." "I was... surprised. I haven't had any feeling in this for years. But when you touched it there"- he gestured at the inner part of his left ankle "I felt it. I felt you touching me."

This emphasizes the credibility of Baba and Daoud's practice from a practical, outcome-driven perspective. Even without official qualifications, Daoud's talent for alleviating Mr. Kurmully's suffering garners the patient's admiration and confirms his expertise beyond conventional

measures of medical knowledge. This supports a postmodern viewpoint in which knowledge is validated through performance rather than conformity to established institutions.

"He could whistle, warble, chirrup, cheep, and caw as well as any bird he carried... He followed this musical prologue with a show displaying his birds' impeccable training in divination." Customers visit him seeking answers, and "many before him were charlatans, they said. Their eyes glowed when they said it and the bird man's admirers grew and grew."

Here, the individual's knowledge production exists outside traditional institutions. His (bird man's) unconventional predictions are seen as credible due to their apparent effectiveness. This demonstrates a perspective that embraces the idea that knowledge is affirmed by its practical application and outcomes, rather than relying solely on conventional qualifications. Customers' positive affirmations validate the bird man's expertise, showcasing his ability to provide valuable insights despite his unorthodox approach.

"Similia similibus curantur... Like cures like. Poison will kill poison." Shafi explains that "snake venom is being researched at big universities these days? Dementia, palsy, heart attacks-it has a role in curing all of them."

Shafi's understanding of snake venom is rooted in a long-standing family tradition ("My ancestors have used it for centuries."), rather than being derived from formal medical institutions. His practice operates beyond the mainstream medical framework, yet there is an increasing body of evidence from research conducted in universities that supports his methods. This emphasizes a postmodern perspective on knowledge, where legitimacy can arise from sources outside of established institutions and traditional systems.

1.10.5 4.4 The Rise of Language Games (Conflicting Cultural Narratives)

Despite songs of legendary lovers-Heer Ranja, Laila Majnun, Soni Mahiwal always on the lips of beggars and flutists in every corner, this was Pakistan in the sixties, and free love, I knew, was forbidden."

This passage highlights the concept of "language games" - localized systems of knowledge and understanding. The inclusion of songs about mythical lovers indicates a cultural storyline that idealizes and honors romantic partnerships. However, there is a clear conflict between two sets of "rules" in this situation - one that is romantic and folkloric, centered around "songs of legendary lovers," and another that is societal and moralistic, where "free love... was forbidden." The contrasting accounts underscore the way personal experiences are influenced by the particular linguistic frameworks in which they are situated.

"Blasphemy is blasphemy, brother, and punishable under the Hadood Ordinance. The boy is Christian. That cemetery is not."

A major technique that Gangly Man uses is language that is both legal and religious in nature. His actions are carried out within a setting in which these phrases carry a substantial amount of influence and consequence, which can sometimes be in direct opposition to fundamental empathy. As a result, this exemplifies the manner in which specific groups build their unique systems of knowledge and interpretation.

"Will I ever get married?' Will my firstborn be a boy? Will that please my husband? My mother-in-law wants more dowry and loathes me. What should I do?' and 'should I stay away from the gas stove in the kitchen?'"

These queries highlight the women's focus on traditional gender roles and societal expectations, where marriage, having sons, and keeping husbands happy are seen as key indicators of female achievement. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of practical safety measures, such as

gas stoves, for ensuring survival. This emphasizes the notion that different communities develop their own systems for comprehending the world, with particular terminology holding significance within that context.

"Weep, our daughter,' they cried, 'for children's tears borne of love are manna for the departed parent.'"

The women share a specific worldview and belief system, as evident in the phrase that expresses the emotional impact of children's tears on a departed parent. In this particular belief system, grief is characterized by a set form and anticipated emotional manifestations. The concepts and the expectations they bring forth embody a "language game," a specific framework with distinct rules that govern the articulation of loss and its significance.

"It's sunnah to slaughter your own animals, isn't it?... 'Someone has to slaughter the animal to commemorate Ibrahim's gratitude to God for sparing his son's life..."

Junaid's words reveal a distinct "language game" at play within a specific belief system. The use of terms such as "sunnah" and the portrayal of the slaughter as a form of commemoration hold great religious and cultural importance. This language game serves to rationalize and legitimize the act of slaughter as an essential aspect of faith and tradition. It imparts a distinct perspective on how to observe and engage with the world, complete with its own set of established guidelines and anticipated outcomes.

1.10.6 4.5 Fragmentation and Multiplicity (Disability and Perception)

"Ostracized by neighborhood children because of her sister's disability, young and enthralled by the secret, Ammi kept it as a weapon she might wield... She thought this while she watched pale Parveen standing at that window, and she wanted to die."

This passage highlights the disintegration of personal encounters, specifically regarding Parveen's impairment. The neighborhood children view Parveen's disability in a negative light; resulting in her being excluded from the group. Nevertheless, Ammi observes the social exclusion, yet recognizes a potential source of influence that she could utilize. In addition, the profound emotional response exhibited by Ammi upon catching sight of her sister at the window indicates a nuanced interplay of feelings that extends beyond mere observation of exclusion. This fragmented picture showcases the diverse range of perspectives within a small group, highlighting the importance of embracing multiple narratives.

"He was sixteen. He had a scar on his stomach from a childhood surgery, probably appendectomy. He wore a tawiz charm on his forearm his mother likely got from a Muslim saint. You know how illiterate these poor Christians are. Can't tell the difference between one holy man and another..."

The passage above strongly opposes the notion of inflexible religious classifications. The observations made by Baba regarding the deceased boy shed light on a complex sense of self and uncertain religious associations. The boy practices Christianity, yet also wears a charm associated with Muslim traditions. It highlights a nuanced reality beyond strict religious classifications, emphasizing the diversity of truths and identities that can exist within one person. This fragmentation exemplifies the postmodern concept of embracing multiple truths and the ability to maintain intricate belief systems simultaneously.

"In her heart was a steaming shadow that whispered nasty things. It impaled her with its familiarity, and a dreadful suspicion grew in her that the beast was rage and wore a face she knew well."

This passage highlights a fragmented sense of identity. The shadow murmuring unsettling thoughts symbolizes the internalization of intense emotions and aggression. Tara's observation that this creature had a familiar face suggests a fascinating exploration of identity, where the line between the known and the monstrous becomes blurred. The internal conflict portrayed here highlights a perspective on the self that is influenced by various external factors, rather than being seen as a singular, unified entity.

"They need to learn kindness before cruelty... Teach kids to enjoy violence and they'll carry that lesson to the grave." "...the feeling of unreality, of red-hot memory, resurged."

Noor's response showcases a fragmented sense of self, molded by a variety of experiences and perspectives. Her commitment to promoting kindness is at odds with the cultural acceptance of violence as a longstanding tradition. The personal memories she recalls in light of the slaughter serve to highlight the internal conflict she experiences. This emphasizes the complex and diverse aspects of personal identity, shaped by personal experiences and cultural surroundings.

"We all have secrets. Look." His eyes flicked in her direction. They widened when he saw her left shoulder.

Dara's undisclosed sexuality and Noor's hidden scar imply that both individuals possess concealed elements of their identities. The scene emphasizes the notion that identities are not always easily discernible, and that individuals frequently possess hidden intricacies and pasts.

1.10.7 4.6 Rejection of Universalism (Multiple Explanations for Death)

"They tell me Ammi died of cancer. I say they're wrong. It was mourning that aged my mother and killed her... or the tumor that swelled her left ovary..."

This passage presents a direct challenge to the idea of universalism when it comes to comprehending intricate subjects such as death. The narrator dismisses the narrow, "scientific" explanation of Ammi's death (cancer). Instead, they explore the potential for various valid causes. Narrator's approach offers a range of viewpoints: the idea of mourning representing a life that was never fully realized, the experience of losing one's homeland and culture, or the anguish caused by hidden family secrets; and the physical tumor serving as a tangible manifestation of this pain. The rejection of a single, "correct" explanation in this case highlights a strong inclination towards rejecting Universalist frameworks, especially when confronted with complex phenomena like death and loss.

"Palm lines and the paths of heavenly bodies are malleable. Hard work, prayer, love—they can reshape them. Take care of your new family and all will be well."

Here, the author challenges the notion of a predetermined destiny and emphasizes the importance of personal choice. This emphasizes a dismissal of universal moral standards or a belief in predetermined destinies. Even individuals from marginalized communities, like the sisters in the orphanage, are recognized for their capacity to influence their own destinies, despite any societal limitations they may encounter. This is in line with a postmodern perspective that emphasizes agency and fluidity over rigid universal truths.

"...I could see his love for her nestled in the crowfeet around his eyes... Her heart-did he win it, or chain it with need?"

The narrator raises doubt about the nature of Shafi's relationship with his young bride. The passage conveys a dismissal of universal moral standards or a conviction that love and marriage consistently adhere to predetermined, idealistic principles. Instead, it recognizes the possibility of intricate and conflicting emotions within human relationships.

"I want to learn about the world,' she said. 'I want to see if there are others like me. If there have been others before me.'"

In this section of the text, Tara critically examines the idea of universal norms and experiences. She conveys a desire to find comprehension and camaraderie with individuals who share similar experiences, suggesting that her own personal journey and sense of self are not fully acknowledged or affirmed within the prevailing societal narratives. This emphasizes the pursuit of finding a place of belonging in a society where there is no consensus on moral values or a shared understanding of personal identity.

"Tell us one thing about the site you normally wouldn't tell visitors." He looked at her with a cocked eyebrow. "Lady, you're not from around here, are you?"

It can be inferred from Farooq's assumption that Noor, being an outsider, would not have any interest in local knowledge, that there is a dismissal of the concept of universalism. It implies that there exist experiences and narratives associated with particular cultures and locations that are difficult for those outside to fully comprehend or relate to. This emphasizes the constraints of a narrow and rigid perspective on history and culture.

1.11 4.7 Postmodernist Techniques

Malik, as a writer of the postmodern era, skillfully employs postmodernist techniques in his writing to transport his readers into a realm that transcends conventional reality. His writing is rich with a multitude of postmodernist techniques, which enhance its depth and complexity, surpassing all expectations. In his *collection of short stories, Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan*, the author employs various postmodernist techniques. Two of these techniques, pastiche and intertextuality, are particularly prominent and will be explored in the following discussion.

1.11.1 4.8 Pastiche

Pastiche involves the artful imitation of various works or genres, often done in a playful or critical manner.

"They exploded and fell in burning tatters, survived only by a quivering bloodhaze through which peeked the haunted eyes of their ghosts." (fable 2)

This passage conjures up imagery reminiscent of classic science fiction horror. The portrayal of "explosions," "burning tatters," and "ghosts" taps into a long-standing genre; is evoking a feeling of fear and the unfamiliar. However, Malik subverts this trope by placing it in a domestic setting - a typical family home. This contrast intensifies the unsettling nature of the horror, as it intrudes upon a typically secure environment.

"We are the sacrifice,' the father boomed, his voice echoing in the cavernous hall. He spread his arms wide, his eyes fixed on the ceiling."

The father's actions and words create a complex blend of religious sacrifice. The extended arms and declarations of being a sacrifice reflect individuals such as Abraham in the Bible, who were willing to offer their sons. This justifies a feeling of religious superiority and creates disturbances. Nevertheless, the context presents a stark contrast - the family appears to be willingly surrendering to an enigmatic power, rather than a divine entity. The presence of an unsettling ambiguity in the narrative prompts readers to question the characters' motivations and contemplate themes of faith and delusion.

"Sangeeta Apa narrates the legend, 'It eats bones. The female lays her eggs in the air...' (fable 4)

Malik begins by adopting the well-known framework of animal fables. The story introduces a character named Sangeeta Apa, an antagonist in the form of a bird, and the opening line hints at a

valuable moral lesson. This assemblage establishes a sense of anticipation in the reader, establishing a foundation for the narrative.

"The shadow of the huma falling on a man bequeaths royalty on his person. The huma once declined to travel to the far ends of the earth, for wherever its shadow fell the masses would become kings and the huma is very particular about bestowing kingship."

The myth of the "huma bird" is derived from religious narratives that depict beings with extraordinary powers, symbolizing the bestowal of kingship. This introduces a touch of the extraordinary to the narrative, blurring the lines between what is real and what is rooted in traditional tales.

"They exploded and fell in burning tatters, survived only by a quivering bloodhaze through which peeked the haunted eyes of their ghosts."

The vibrant portrayal of explosions, devastation, and ethereal figures draws inspiration from the apocalyptic themes commonly seen in religious and science fiction literature. This composition evokes a feeling of immense disorder and emphasizes the vulnerability of human life when confronted with incomprehensible forces.

"... a tall angular deity with a horned headdress and bangles on both arms stood atop a fig tree. With a gleeful face it looked down on a kneeling worshipper..."

The intricate depiction of the deity on the seal reflects the symbolism present in religious myths and ancient tales. This composition introduces an element of intrigue and metaphysical exploration to the archaeological findings, hinting at a profound and enigmatic meaning that lies beneath the surface of these ancient objects.

"Clusters of acacia, jand, and Indian lilac stood shrouded in clouds the color of steel filigree...Sunlight twitched in one of the cocooned trees and the illusion of giant blood corpuscles recurred...Noor's vision misted; her temple sizzled. For a moment she feared the onset of a cluster headache."

The vivid portrayals of the trees infested with spiders and Noor's evident physical discomfort instill a feeling of uneasiness and anticipation. The gothic imagery in this piece elicits themes of decay, concealed perils, and the possibility of an unsettling presence emerging from the ruins.

1.11.2 4.9 Intertextuality

Intertextuality is the concept that explores the interconnectedness and mutual influence of various texts, fostering a dynamic exchange between different literary works.

"The television blared on about the latest advancements in theoretical physics... Meanwhile, the mother busied herself muttering verses from the Quran under her breath."
 (fable 2)

This passage establishes a conversation between two seemingly different belief systems - scientific advancements and religious faith. The mother's recitation of the Quran presents a noticeable juxtaposition to the scientific concepts discussed on TV. The intertextuality in this piece emphasizes the characters' relentless pursuit of significance and comprehension when confronted with an unexplainable occurrence.

"With a chilling smile, the mother turned to her children. 'We are the sacrifice,' the father boomed..."

The conventional portrayal of a caring and safeguarding family unit is entirely overturned in this context. The parents urge their children to embrace their destiny as a sacrifice, a disturbing departure from typical parental conduct. This dialogue with the concept of a content family strengthens the unsettling ambiance and alludes to a dark undertone.

"This is how it was for centuries, until recently. Until one day, a sparrow questioned its destiny."

This line indicates a purposeful departure from established narratives of the human bird and the passive sparrow. The text questions established hierarchies and suggests the potential for uprising or transformation, instilling a glimmer of optimism amidst the somber backdrop of the fable.

"They came again the next evening... They had come to take her away, to marry her to one of their own as payment." (fable 5)

This passing reference places the story within the particular framework of honor killings in Pakistan. The narrative gains depth and complexity through an intertextual reference, which connects it to real-world issues and enriches the characters' motivations and the unfolding tragedy with social and cultural dimensions.

"So it begins, she thought. How many times has this happened before? Pushing and prodding a people ceaselessly, until night swallows us whole. She thought of that until her heart constricted with dread."

Tara's reflection indicates a broader historical backdrop. The recurring question of "How many times has this occurred in the past?" alludes to the concept of intergenerational trauma and the perpetual patterns of violence that influence communities. The inclusion of this intertextual reference broadens the story's perspective, highlighting the interconnectedness of conflict and suffering.

"The air shimmered, the way it did in the heart of summer in Karachi, just before the city was about to erupt." (fable 6)

The seemingly harmless portrayal of heat waves gains a more ominous undertone when combined with the mention of Karachi. The city experienced a harrowing wave of violence during the Partition of India in 1947. Therefore, Karachi serves as a powerful symbol that indicates the lasting impact of historical trauma on the present.

"The locals fear those spider trees, let me tell you. They think them a terrible omen..."

"...in certain years coinciding with old Sindi lunar calendars, sacrificial activity intensifies in this region." (fable 7)

The incorporation of local beliefs and superstitions situates the story within a distinct cultural framework. This intertextuality emphasizes the presence of alternative knowledge systems and different ways of comprehending the world that exist beyond Western academic frameworks.

"Noor fingered the seated Priest-King statuette... A crack ran down its forehead to the left cheek. 'Why? What happens in spring?'... 'The Sarwar Fair. Hundreds of pilgrims from villages all over the Indus Valley converge on the saint's tomb...'"

The conventional story of the "explorer" stumbling upon a deserted location is challenged. The reference to the Sarwar Fair highlights a long-standing tradition and close ties to the ancient ruins of Mohenjo-Daro, predating contemporary archaeological expeditions.

Malik expertly incorporates Lyotardian themes into these seven fables, showcasing the power of postmodern techniques to breathe new life into conventional literary structures. Malik challenges readers by questioning established narratives of morality, power, and societal structures, forcing them to confront the complexities and contradictions that are part of the human experience. He critically examines widely accepted beliefs, giving prominence to underrepresented voices and diverse viewpoints. The fragmented identities of his characters, the unreliable nature of language, and the recurring motifs of violence and the occult collectively contribute to the unsettling beauty that defines his writing. In Malik's *"Midnight Doorways,"* the postmodern approach is skillfully

utilized to enhance our connection with the narratives. It encourages us to challenge, reinterpret, and uncover our own individual interpretations within the complex fabric of his writing.

4.10 Crafting Contemporary Reading Experiences: Malik's Integration of Magical Realism and Postmodernist Techniques

"Midnight Doorways" by Malik presents a captivating blend of postmodernist writing techniques and magical realism, creating a unique and unsettling reading experience in the modern era. Through challenging conventional storytelling, embracing multiple knowledge systems, and blending reality with the fantastical, Malik constructs a universe that reveals the flaws of logic and forces readers to confront deep ambiguities and complexities.

Malik's fables explore a central postmodernist theme, expressing skepticism towards overarching narratives. He questions long-held beliefs about authority, morality, and history. This is clearly demonstrated in "Fable 4: The Fortune of Sparrows," where the conventional structure of fables, in which animals teach moral lessons, is subverted by the sparrows' challenging of their pre-assigned roles. The line, "And what's a sparrow to do, sahib, but sit on the ground and peck?" emphasizes the constraints of such narratives in elucidating the intricate interplay of authority and autonomy in the tangible realm. In "Fable 5: Dead Lovers on Each Blade, Hung," Sohail's choice to seek retribution in the name of God challenges the idea of religious ethics and reveals the risks associated with unquestioning belief and self-assured aggression.

This questioning of accepted narratives also applies to historical frameworks. In "Fable 6: The Vaporization Enthalpy of a Peculiar Pakistani Family," the mention of the Karachi air carrying echoes of Partition violence implies that historical traumas continue to influence present circumstances. This questions oversimplified ideas of linear advancement and the notion that the past can be easily confined or comprehended. The fable's incorporation of scientific language alongside supernatural events adds an intriguing layer of complexity, challenging the prevailing reliance on rational explanations. This suggests a lingering presence of historical violence that eludes easy classification.

Malik also appreciates the postmodernist focus on validating knowledge beyond conventional frameworks. Throughout the fables, the author skillfully weaves in elements of local folklore, myths, and beliefs, presenting them as legitimate and valuable perspectives for comprehending the world. For example, the apprehension displayed by the villagers towards the "spider trees" in "Fable 7: In the Ruins of Mohenjo-Daro" suggests a profound, instinctive understanding of the location that may elude archeologists. The mention of the Karachi University survey regarding sacrificial activity aligning with old Sindi lunar calendars serves to strengthen this argument. Through the comparison of these alternative knowledge systems with Western academic discourse, Malik challenges the notion of a singular, authoritative perspective on history or truth.

The validation of marginalized perspectives is also apparent in his selection of protagonists. Several characters, such as Tara in "Fable 6" and Noor in "Fable 7," embody the experiences of women and outsiders as they navigate intricate societal pressures and expectations. Their experiences disrupt prevailing narratives and bring attention to overlooked concerns that are often marginalized in conventional storytelling. The portrayal of Noor's thirst for knowledge and her unease with certain local customs in "Fable 7" highlights her refusal to conform and emphasizes the significance of personal autonomy and analytical thinking.

The language used in postmodern literature is clearly evident in Malik's fables. The author utilizes various narrative perspectives, alternating voices, and enigmatic language to challenge established interpretations and emphasize the artificiality of our perception of reality. For example, the

differing interpretations of Seal 34 in "Fable 7," where Farooq provides a scholarly analysis while Tabinda offers a more intuitive and culturally informed perspective, demonstrate the power of language in shaping our understanding of history and events. In fables such as "Fable 2: The Vaporization Enthalpy..." and "Fable 3: Resurrection Points," the narration is unreliable, adding to the complexity of the stories. This highlights the intricate nature of language, which can both expose and hide truths.

Malik's work also showcases a clear inclination towards postmodernism, characterized by fragmentation and multiplicity. The characters he creates frequently reflect internal conflicts and contradictions. In "Fable 6," Tara faces a dilemma as she grapples with the conflict between traditional values and the allure of modernity. Additionally, she finds herself torn between the responsibilities of motherhood and her yearning for intellectual growth. Her fragmented identity reflects the intricate challenges encountered by individuals who navigate diverse cultural influences and societal expectations. In "Fable 5," Sohail undergoes a transformation from a caring sibling to a vengeful character, illustrating the complex nature of human emotions and behavior. The fragmentation is evident in Malik's narratives, as linear storytelling is frequently interrupted by flashbacks, dreams, and changes in perspective. This reflects the fragmented nature of memory and subjective experience.

In addition to exploring complex character and narrative structure, Malik's work delves into the theme of fragmentation. His narratives frequently explore the breakdown of established norms and social frameworks. In "Fable 2", the unquestioned authority of village elders is questioned by a younger generation who has become disillusioned with their hypocrisy and inflexible adherence to tradition. This conflict reflects the broader societal tensions that arise from the clash between established customs and modern advancements. Similarly, "Fable 6" offers a poignant depiction of the disintegration of family ties amidst financial struggles and societal upheaval, underscoring the vulnerability of relationships when the focus shifts to mere survival.

Malik's work exhibits a linguistic style that further enhances the feeling of fragmentation. His writing style frequently incorporates fragmented sentence structure, sudden changes in verb tenses, and a blend of casual and sophisticated vocabulary. This intricate web of language captures the dissonance and bewilderment felt by individuals trapped amidst conflicting cultural forces, as they grapple to express their intricate truths. In "Fable 7", for instance, the protagonist's internal monologue shifts between English, Urdu, and Punjabi, showcasing the diverse linguistic landscape that influences her sense of self and perspective.

Fragmentation, on the other hand, serves a purpose in Malik's work that goes beyond destruction. It also acts as a catalyst for reassembly and the exploration of new possibilities. In "Fable 4", the disintegration of a character's meticulously crafted mask prompts a journey of introspection, resulting in profound self-discovery and transformative development. The act of questioning and deconstructing traditional ideas within the fables expands the realm for alternative narratives and fresh interpretations.

Despite its occasionally bewildering nature, fragmentation ultimately serves as a means for Malik to delve into the intricacies of identity, society, and the human experience in a swiftly evolving world. The author's work challenges readers to move beyond surface-level understanding and embrace the complex and diverse nature of the world. Through the exploration of this fragmentation, we can develop a more profound comprehension of ourselves and the world we inhabit.

4. Conclusion

Usman T. Malik's *Midnight Doorways: Fables from Pakistan* crafts a unique narrative that challenges conventional literary boundaries by blending postmodernist techniques with cultural nuances. His use of fragmented storytelling, non-linear structures, and cultural exploration invites readers to question traditional narratives, while delving into themes of identity, tradition, and societal change. By intertwining elements of the extraordinary and everyday life, Malik's work transcends genre, offering profound insights into the complexities of the human experience and the dynamic fabric of Pakistani culture

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