



Cover page of 'Rethinking Punjab.'

## Judging a Book by its Cover?

Nukhbah T. Langah

The focus of this analysis is the cover of a book on Siraiki identity politics, *Re-thinking Punjab: The Construction of Siraiki Identity* (Khan, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Written by the political scientist Hussain Ahmad Khan, the book is a commentary on two contesting identities in Punjab: Siraiki and Punjabi. Reproduced on its cover is a painting by Pakistani artist Ahmad Ali Maganhar. I use this cover, comprised of image and title, to present certain paradoxes concerning Siraiki identity in postcolonial Pakistan. This discussion will also indicate the importance of an understanding of Siraiki identity that reaches beyond textual boundaries towards forms of non-textual representation such as the visual (Atkins 1993).

This bridge between text and visual art is indicated through the interplay of meaning between the book's title and the image it reproduces. The image symbolizes the artist's desire to create an imaginative space which emerges through a departure from "the printed word" (Howells 2003: 1). At the same time, its co-existence with the book's title indicates certain political pressures that pull Siraiki identity towards a desired merger with Punjabi, the dominant identity of the region. Khan's title and Maganhar's image can be seen as instances of languages other than Siraiki being used to express the postcolonial Siraiki condition – a foreign language such as English, or the language of visual art.<sup>2</sup> This expressive choice can be read as an attempt to grapple with paradoxes that arise from the conflict between Siraiki and competing identities that center in, and are expressed through, languages other than Siraiki.

The cover of Khan's book immediately gives rise to two questions: firstly, why is the title of the book *Re-thinking Punjab: The Construction of Siraiki Identity*? Secondly, why does the cover page constitute a rather ambiguous painting, and how can we interpret the latter? The following analysis attempts to answer these questions.

Khan's title *Re-thinking Punjab: The Construction of Siraiki Identity* appears to bestow a theme to both book and painting (Khan 2004). It reflects two contesting identities through the words 'Punjab' and 'Siraiki', which can be seen as represented in the two figures depicted in the painting. However, one wonders why, if he is concerned with Siraiki identity, Khan privileges the word 'Punjab' in his title. Could the title not have been *The Construction of Siraiki Identity: Re-thinking Punjab*? It appears that the author deliberately highlights the *Rethinking* in the case of *Punjab* in the title, and leaves *The Construction of Siraiki Identity*

for the subtitle. This choice could reflect the need to legitimize the publishing of this book by The National College of Arts, Lahore, as a reputed, state-run institution in Punjab. However, I would argue that the significance given to the word 'Punjab' transforms it from a geographic marker into a power symbol.

If Khan had used the word 'Punjabi' rather than 'Punjab', this would have indicated the 'Punjabi speaking minority' merely as a linguistic group residing in the province of Punjab in Pakistan. The word 'Punjabi' would also have narrowed down the book's concerns to Punjabi identity, which, demographically, is a minority group when compared to the number of Siraikis living in Punjab. However, the word 'Punjab' bears the force of geographical, social and political credibility of the entire ruling elite, including the Urdu-speaking minority immigrants from India: the Punjabi-Muhajir alliance. This realization also helps clarify why the author makes the interrogation of 'Siraiki' identity more important than discussing the proposal for the province of 'Siraikistan'. The postcolonial binaries in the title of the book thus revolve between an identity, 'Siraiki', and a region, 'Punjab', rather than the more obvious pairings of two identities, 'Siraiki' and 'Punjabi' or even two regions, 'Siraikistan' and Punjab'.

The Punjabi-Muhajir regional control over the province of Punjab is also symbolized by the word 'Punjab', which literally means 'the land of five rivers', as well as implies the area where Punjabi language is spoken. However, these two explanations of the name of this province fail to fulfill their literal meaning as, following the Partition of 1947, the five rivers of Pakistan do not actually pass through this region. Furthermore, as my analysis will demonstrate, the language that is called 'Punjabi' is neither the sole nor the majority language spoken in the province of Punjab.<sup>3</sup> The political hegemony of the minority linguistic group of 'Punjabis' is thus symbolized through the very name: 'Punjab' which has sought to merge within its ambit the entire linguistic population of the province. This name symbolizes a language of a people who in fact largely migrated from India at the time of Partition, and in the postcolonial period, have managed to dominate the country (Talbot & Thandi 2004). It also symbolizes the domination of Punjabi culture which is further reflected in Punjab's emphasis on its regional supremacy throughout the nation, through coinages such as 'Punjab University', 'Punjabi Adbi Board' (Punjabi Literary Board), and 'Punjabi Film Industry'.

Hussain Ahmad Khan's title seems to replicate Punjabi supremacy by privileging the word 'Punjab'. Yet he does bring together two contesting linguistic identities through this title and subtitle. Khan therefore seems aware at least subconsciously of the fact that a 're-thinking' is required in Punjab in relation to the 'Siraiki' identity. In other words, the 'construction' of 'Siraiki' identity indicates the 'deconstruction' of 'Punjabi' identity, even though Khan's careful choice of words attempts to conceal this potentially subversive view. Thus the title alerts us to the mutual relationship as well as competition between the constructions of 'Siraiki' and 'Punjabi' identities. It seems that regional control is represented through the word 'Punjab', while Siraiki remains merely an 'identity' issue which is not mentioned as a language, group, geography and culture. However, the force of the word 'Siraiki' points to an overall identity, culture and geography that attempts to override it. Its presence alone can signal the presence of Siraiki *sunjaan* (meaning, 'identity' or 'consciousness') and *wukhrup* (meaning 'uniqueness' or 'distinction').

Ultimately, the 're-thinking' of 'Punjab' in the title of this book is as ambiguous as the painting that elegantly dresses the cover, because it fails to indicate exactly which identity will be discussed in this book. Khan discusses the 'construction' of an Urdu speaking *Muhajir*

immigrant identity, because the *Muhajirs* have mostly settled in Punjab. In fact, Khan's book argues that the identity of the *Muhajir* population ambiguously hangs between the two contesting identities, Siraiki and Punjabi. Despite being intimately related to the Siraiki/ Punjabi binary, the Punjabi-*Muhajir* alliance is ironically excluded from the title of the book. However, it lingers in the background of its subject matter. The 'construction' of Siraiki and hence 'deconstruction' of Punjabi that Khan mentions in the title of his book is in fact transformed into an analysis of the role of Urdu speaking *Muhajir* immigrants who settled in Vehari, which is part of the Siraiki region.<sup>4</sup> In this context, it is relevant that Khan himself is a member of the *Muhajir* community. Khan's role as a representative of this community residing largely in the Siraiki areas of Punjab, necessitates his need to build their case of not being accepted as 'natives' by Siraikis despite their authoritative alliance with the Punjabi rulers.

This pressure of *Muhajir* identity, which is intangibly felt in the title of the book and in its subject matter, continues in Khan's calculated domination over the artist's painting which lends a larger theme to the cover of his book. The artist, Ahmad Ali Maganhar, remains shadowy, because Khan chooses simply to give the following details on the book's jacket: "Cover: Detail from Painting by Ahmad Ali Maganhar".<sup>5</sup> Through this one short sentence, which further indicates that the cover image constitutes but one section of a larger painting, the readers are introduced to the artist and his creation. This information also excludes date, place and the medium of this artwork which further transforms it into a 'mystery painting' or, in the present analysis, a 'mystery text' (Howell 2003: 13). In this context, Khan represents this image through "ideological mystification" and "deceptive appearance of naturalness" (Mitchell 1986: 8).

It is important to discuss the significance of the title of Khan's book along with the cover painting because they correlate at various levels. One approach to understanding this correlation is to observe the title as labeling the painting or giving it a theme, and vice versa. This correlation also reflects in the psychological projection of both the artist who created it and the author who selects to present a section of it on the cover of his published work. The binary of the title reflects through the two words 'Punjab' and 'Siraiki', symbolizing the 'construction' or 'deconstruction' of these identities, replicated in the two figures in the painting. These two figures also represent further binaries of 'self' and the 'other' which may symbolize Siraiki/ Punjabi, Siraiki/ Punjabi *Muhajir* or body and text and text versus image (Bann & Allen 1991: 12; Mitchel 1986: 47-52, 110). The coalition of title and the painting therefore represents a postcolonial image communicating several contrasts and conflicts, as well as an understanding of the text as gaining articulation through visual art. This interpretation suggests that in the context of postcolonial Pakistan, the intricacy of such identities must be considered from various angles and through various mediums of representation for enhanced understanding.

However, the title and the painting whilst correlating with each other can also embody two views about the subject matter of this book. One is the artist's view, which is scarcely expressed through this section of his painting because Khan only includes his name at the back of the book. The other is the author's dominating view, which is reflected through the title, *Re-thinking Punjab: The Construction of Siraiki Identity*. Despite the fact that Khan revises Maganhar's view by superimposing his own ideology, he cannot erase Maganhar's point of view completely from the image on the cover. The section of the painting displayed on Khan's cover therefore seems to partially convey the artist's emotions. In this context, both the artist and the

author use their individual skills to project their emotions. The author's emotions are projected through the words printed in black ink on a clear background, while the artist does the same through the contrasts between shadowy images and strong colors. Even though the seeming directness of the words in the title dominates the ambiguous abstractness of the painting, the emotions of the artist and author converge on to the book's theme of dual identities. This duality gives birth to the postcolonial binaries of self/ other, lucidity/ ambiguity, clarity/ abstractness, language/ metaphor, Punjabi/ Siraiki, and construction/ deconstruction.

These paradoxes and binaries that define the Punjabi-Siraiki relationship continue to be reflected through the entire image, which presents two figures standing out against a warm reddish orange background, symbolizing the heat of a desert or rural setting. The dress of these two figures is kept rather ambiguous because it appears neither Siraiki nor Punjabi. In fact, the two figures stand so close to each other that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. This closeness also associates with the closeness between Khan's title and Manganhar's image, which indicates certain political pressures that pull Siraiki identity towards a desired merger with Punjabi, the dominant identity of the region. On the one hand, two turbans suggest that these figures are two separate male bodies. On the other, a single pair of Multani style *khusas* makes them appear as being one figure.<sup>6</sup> I read this image and its ambiguities as Ahmad Ali Manganhar's comment on the relationship between Punjabi and Siraiki. While their physical proximity may symbolize the presumed closeness of Siraiki/ Punjabi culture, one figure is made to look taller than the other, which indicates his dominating position, strength or maturity, which I argue in this case, is that of Punjab. However, the face of this taller figure appears smudged, as if he is losing his identity in the course of being made to 're-think Punjab'. It also appears that the facelessness of these figures is a distinct characteristic that their creator has given them to conceal their identity, just as he conceals their attire. However, there is also a sense of dialogue or communication between the two characters because the taller figure seems to be turned towards the shorter character. This gesture may symbolize the need for dialogue between Siraiki and Punjabi, even though one commands the other.

A horse's head appearing at the middle right end of the cover indicates that these two figures may be nomadic travelers passing through the desert setting suggested by the colors of the painting. This setting clashes with the green patches of land in the background and small green hills that stand at a distance. The greenish patches in the background may also indicate their journey from a green belt towards a desert. The strange contrasts of yellow and orange, white and green add to the ambiguity of the setting and make its interpretation more complicated. However, the heated political situation of the Punjab may be understood through the heat of these colors and against this background, the two figures symbolize, I contend, the two competing identities in Punjab: Siraiki and Punjabi. In this context, they may symbolize binary oppositions mentioned earlier within the discussion of the book's title; but they seem also to symbolize the conflict between Siraiki/ Punjabi ideologies, cultures and most crucially languages that my forthcoming thesis aims to explore in the light of postcolonial Siraiki literature and art.

Finally, the most distinct feature of this painting is a black shadow in front of the two figures which suggests a building or a house they are about to enter. The entrance of this building appears in the form of a fence in the left corner of the book cover.<sup>7</sup> The fence also indicates that there are boundaries that the two figures might not be able to cross or perhaps

an area which they are forbidden from entering. It may also be the entrance through which the reader of the book, or the observer of the painting, is allowed imaginatively to enter the painting and join the journey of the two travelers. Suggestions of time and space open up through the silhouette that follows the two figures and the fence that creates boundaries for them. The overall abstractness of the painting reflects the confusion of ideologies in this 're-thinking' or 're-construction' -- a confusion which is also the journey of these two travelers who seem to seek their identities in the desert landscape.

To sum up: the painting's setting can be considered Siraiki due to the colors which are suggestive of the rural or desert area of the Siraiki region which has always been underdeveloped as compared to the capital cities of Punjab such as Lahore. The turbans and *khusas* that the two characters wear give a traditional Siraiki characteristic to Siraiki culture, which remains 'exotic' for Punjab through these symbols. The two figures in the picture wear similar dresses also to create a mirroring image of them which reflects the author's emphasis on the closeness of Siraiki and the Punjabi cultures. The severe heat becomes a cultural representation of Siraiki identity and ruralness that is despised as well as romanticized by the artist as well as Punjab. The painting in general offers an ideal representation of Siraiki/ Punjabi binaries and may be used as an ornamental object along with Hussain's book in Punjab. However, the word 'Siraiki' in the title is a constant threat and a reminder of Punjab's potential division of power. The ambiguity of the two characters and the abstractness of the entire painting thus reflect the masking of this threat.

The objective of this analysis is to demonstrate that the binary oppositions and ambiguities of postcolonial Pakistani identities such as Siraiki and Punjabi are incomprehensible simply through the medium of the written text. This may be the reason why Khan feels the necessity for an artistic image on the cover of his book in order to convey the message of his title. The postcolonial situation in Punjab has forced the artist as well as author to represent binaries and paradoxes in their work. Yet the interdependence of the artwork and text also contains potential for conflict resolution or dialogue. The skills of artist and author both reveal and conceal their views and potentially resist the political pressures under which they both find themselves in some way. It is also this pressure which makes them create an imaginative space through art or text. In their imaginations, Khan and Maganhar cross textual and artistic boundaries by being imaginatively interdependent on each other. In their imaginations, Maganhar's boundary is the fence which allows the observer to imaginatively enter the painting. Khan creates a title to symbolize both this boundary and a possible 're-thinking' and reconsideration of the conflict between Siraiki/ Punjabi identities.

### End Notes

1. In my forthcoming doctoral thesis titled, 'Expressing Resistance through Siraiki Culture in Postcolonial Pakistan,' for the University of Leeds (UK), 'Siraiki' is identified as a postcolonial and ethno-linguistic identity that first emerged in Pakistan during the 1950s as a challenge to the political and economic supremacy of the Punjabi and Urdu speakers residing within the province of Punjab.

2. In Chapter 2 of my thesis I compare the implications of Khan's use of Maganhar's painting and its meanings, with the poetry and plays of a Siraiki poet Aslam Ansari. Ansari's work, written in English, is

collected in a book entitled *Lotus and the Sandwaves* (Ansari, 1998).

3. See Shackle, C. 1976. *From Wuch to Southern Lahnda*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies.

4. I refer to my meeting with Hussain Ahmad Khan, Research and Publication Centre (RCP), National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan, September 8, 2004.

5. My efforts to email Hussain Ahmad Khan and Research and Publication Board, National College of Arts, Lahore to get more information about this painting have so far been futile.

6. See the cover image of Khan's book.

7. Unfortunately this detail has not been reproduced in the version of the image that I have provided for this analysis.

### **Bibliography**

Ansari, Aslam. 1998. *Lotus and Sandwaves*. Multan: Light House.

Atkins, Robert. 1993. *Art Spoke*. London: Abbeville Press.

Bann, Stephen and William Allen (eds.). 1991. *Interpreting Contemporary Art*. London: Reaktion Books.

Howells, Richard. 2003. *Visual Culture*. London: Polity Press.

Khan, Hussain Ahmed. 2004. *Re-thinking Punjab: The Construction of Siraiiki Identity*. Lahore: National College of Arts, RCP.

Mitchell, W. J. T. 1986. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Shackle, Christopher. 1976. *From Wuch to Southern Lahnda*, London: School of Oriental and African Studies.

Talbot, Ian and Shinder S. Thandi (eds.). 2004. *People on the move : Punjabi Colonial, and Post-Colonial Migration*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.

Mitchell, W. J. T. 1986. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Shackle, Christopher. 1976. *From Wuch to Southern Lahnda*, London: School of Oriental and African Studies.

Talbot, Ian and Shinder S. Thandi (eds.). 2004. *People on the move : Punjabi Colonial, and Post-Colonial Migration*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.

