

Religion and Political Authority in Khushal Khan Khattak's Swat Nama: A Study of Power, Legitimacy and Social Order

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23244097>



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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between religion and political authority in Khushal Khan Khattak's Swat Nama, with particular attention to power, legitimacy, leadership, and social order. The argument is that Swat Nama is not merely a descriptive travel narrative: it is a normative literary text in which Khushal evaluates political institutions, local leadership, religious authority, and social practices according to an implicit standard of justice, competence, public welfare, and moral responsibility. His criticism of an unregulated political order, abusive or self-interested malaks, and religious figures who interfere in worldly affairs demonstrates that he does not reject authority as such. Rather, he distinguishes legitimate authority from authority exercised without ethical responsibility. His criticism of Akhund Darweza's Makhzan-al-Islam further reveals a struggle over the cultural and intellectual sources through which authority is produced and maintained. The article therefore argues that religion in Swat Nama functions both as a source of moral legitimacy and as an object of criticism when religious status is converted into social or political power. In this sense, Khushal's literary representation of Swat articulates a model of social order in which political, religious, and customary authorities have distinct responsibilities and must ultimately be judged by their contribution to justice and collective welfare.

Keywords: Khushal Khan Khattak; Swat Nama; religion; political authority; legitimacy; malaki; social order; Pashto literature

Introduction

Khushal Khan Khattak (1613–1689) occupies a central position in the classical period of Pashto literature. His literary production combines poetry, political reflection, social criticism, ethics, philosophy, and observations on the society in which he lived. Among his works, Swat Nama has a distinctive position because it brings geographical observation together with political, economic, religious, social, and cultural commentary. Khushal visited Swat in 1086 AH and spent approximately seven months observing the valley and its inhabitants. The resulting poem, as preserved in the edition edited by Hamesh Khalil, contains 481 verses and constitutes an unusually rich literary representation of seventeenth-century Swat (Khattak, 1986).

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Earlier research has established the multidisciplinary character of Swat Nama. It is considered as an important source for the study of the literature and culture of Swat (Dinakhel 2018, Dinakhel:2020). Broader research on Swat has emphasized the political, cultural, geographical, and social information embedded in Khushal's poem (Dinakhel, 2020). The present article takes one specific dimension of that material, religion and political authority, and develops it as a separate analytical problem. Rather than attempting to describe every aspect of Swat society, it asks how Khushal conceptualizes authority: who possesses it, why it should be obeyed, when it becomes illegitimate, and what relationship should exist between political rulers, local leaders, religious scholars, and the wider community.

This article investigates, among other things, the relationship of Pashto literature with political power and the ways in which literary forms are connected with social class and religious status. Swat Nama offers an especially productive case because Khushal does not simply record institutions; he evaluates them. His descriptions of kings, malaks, land distribution, religious figures, and literary-religious texts repeatedly move from observation to judgement. The poem consequently provides evidence for a political and moral vocabulary through which social order is assessed.

The central argument of this article is that Khushal's political thought in Swat Nama is neither a simple defence of kingship nor a rejection of traditional authority. Instead, it is a reformist conception of authority based on justice, accountability, social welfare, competence, and moral restraint. Religious authority is similarly ambivalent. Khushal recognizes the value of genuine learning and religious leadership but criticizes religious figures when they become instruments of ignorance, superstition, material accumulation, or inappropriate political intervention. His criticism of Makhzan-al-islam is therefore significant not only as literary criticism but also as a contest over the intellectual authority that shapes social consciousness.

Swat Nama as a Political and Critical Text

Swat Nama has often been approached as a travel poem [travelogue] or as a cultural description of Swat. Such readings are important, but the text's political dimension requires more sustained attention. Khushal explicitly records political institutions and leadership structures, while simultaneously commenting on the social consequences of those institutions. The work therefore operates on two levels: it is descriptive in its representation of the political world and normative in its evaluation of that world. Swat Nama contains political, geographical, economic, cultural, and critical dimensions (Dinakhel, 2020). This breadth is particularly important for understanding political authority because Khushal does not isolate politics from society. Political institutions are linked to land, social hierarchy, economic distribution, customary practice, religion, and collective welfare. Authority is therefore presented as embedded in everyday social relations rather than confined to formal rulers. The religious dimension is equally embedded in social life. Khushal refers to religious scholars, shaikhs, pirs, Darweza, Makhzan, prayer, Quranic

learning, and religious customs. Yet the presence of religious vocabulary does not mean that the poem simply endorses religious authority. On the contrary, Khushal repeatedly distinguishes between knowledge and ignorance, genuine religious leadership and self-serving religiosity. This distinction becomes essential to his concept of legitimate social order.

Political Authority and the Problem of Disorder

One of Khushal's clearest political observations concerns the absence of a centralized ruler in Swat. His description is not neutral: he interprets the political structure as a condition of disorder and fragmented authority. He writes:

ملک د سوات د ملوکانو د نشاط دے
په دوران د یوسفزیه وران رباط دے

Translation: The country of Swat is a source of delight for kings; in the period of the Yusufzai it is a ruined settlement. (Khattak, 1986, p. 48)

هر هر خائے د سوات د ملک ملوکانه دے
بی سردارہ، بی حاکمه کوه خانه دے

Translation: Everywhere in Swat there is the domain of local rulers; it is like a house in mountains without a chief and without a governor. (Khattak, 1986, p. 49)

You can insert the following three sentences in the geographical or historical background section:

De Chiara (2020), in his comprehensive study of the toponymy of the Swat Valley, examines place names as important evidence for reconstructing the region's linguistic and historical landscape. His analysis of Swat's villages, mountains, rivers, valleys, and other geographical features demonstrates the presence of different linguistic layers, reflecting the complex historical interactions between Iranian and Indo-Aryan languages. This toponymic perspective provides a valuable framework for interpreting the geographical names mentioned by Khushal Khan Khattak in *Swat Nama* (De Chiara, 2020). *Sultan-i-Rome* provides an important historical framework for understanding the political and social development of Swat and the changing nature of authority in the region. His study of the Swat State examines political institutions, administration, tribal organization, and the processes through which centralized authority developed in Swat (Sultan-i-Rome, 2008). In *Swat Through the Millennia*, he places Swat within a much longer historical perspective, covering its geographical setting, successive political formations, Yusufzai occupation, social organization, and relations with the Mughal Empire (Sultan-i-Rome, 2021). His discussion of Khushal Khan Khattak and Swat is particularly relevant to the present study because it provides historical context for Khushal's observations on political authority and social order. Together, these works provide a useful historical background against which Khushal

Khan Khattak's representation of Swat in Swat Nama can be examined (Sultan-i-Rome, 2008, 2021).

These above mentioned verses of Khushal are important because Khushal connects political fragmentation with the absence of effective authority. His language suggests that the problem is not simply that there is no king, but that there is no sufficiently coherent mechanism of governance. The phrase “بي سرداره، بي حاکمه” (“without a chief, without a governor”) represents political society as lacking an integrating authority. The poet's concern is therefore institutional: fragmented power produces vulnerability and undermines social order. At the same time, Khushal's criticism should not be read as an uncomplicated argument for centralized monarchy. His later criticism of malaks and corrupt political actors demonstrates that political office is not legitimate merely because it exists. Authority must perform a social function. A ruler or local leader who fails to protect the weak, administer justice, or maintain public welfare loses the moral basis of authority.

Justice as the Basis of Political Legitimacy

Khushal's conception of political legitimacy becomes clearer in his description of the relationship between rulers and oppressed people. The following couplet presents justice as the defining responsibility of political authority:

که مظلوم چري ملک و ته داد خواه شي
چي يوه روپي بل ورکا، روسياه شي

Translation: If an oppressed person ever goes to the malak (chief) seeking justice, he is disgraced if his opponent gives even a single rupee. (Khattak, 1986, p. 62)

The verse presents a political order in which access to justice has been corrupted by monetary exchange. The oppressed person is not protected by authority; instead, the system humiliates him. The implicit standard against which the ruler is judged is therefore justice rather than status. Khushal's criticism is directed at the ethical failure of political authority: a ruler who allows justice to become a commodity cannot claim full legitimacy. This observation also helps explain why religion becomes relevant to the political argument. In a society where political authority is expected to maintain justice and moral order, religious discourse can provide a vocabulary through which justice and injustice are distinguished. But religious authority cannot automatically replace political accountability. Khushal's political ideal requires the responsibilities of different authorities to remain intelligible and socially useful.

The Malak and the Distribution of Local Power

The malaki system provides perhaps the clearest example of Khushal's critical approach to political authority. The malak possesses social influence, followers, land-related power, and access to local decision-making. Yet Khushal questions the criteria by which such authority is acquired and exercised. He presents a political environment

in which influence can become an end in itself rather than a means of serving the community.

ملکي بي په کرم ده، نه په توره
په دا دواړه توکله مور د باندې بوره
کار يې خکه مسخره، حبطه، سپک دے
څوک چې زيات دے په تپه هغه ملک دے
سود حاصل يې يا د بدو، يا د خواست وي
په هر کلي، په هر چم باندې يې ز غاښت وي
د ملک يې د دفتر پولې پتي وي
نورې تورې خاورې توئ يې په کټي وي
د ملک يې که درې نور ورونه سکه وي
پدري پټے به يې درست رېشه رېشه وي
يوه بخره د ملک وي، درې د نورو
په کم، زيات يې سره جنگ وي په سسکورو

Translation: Malaki is acquired by luck or circumstance rather than through bravery or merit. The malaks are humiliated in both respects, as neither courage nor merit is the basis of their authority. Their position is mocked and their work is not respected because the criterion for becoming a malak is not merit but numerical strength or majority support. Their income comes either from bribery or begging. They assert their influence in every village and throughout the countryside. A malak's principal possession is his land and little else. If a malak has three brothers, their ancestral land is divided into several portions: one share belongs to the malak, while the remaining three shares go to his brothers. They are constantly engaged in disputes and conflicts over the distribution and ownership of land (Khattak, 1986, pp. 48, 67).

The long passage is significant because it moves beyond individual criticism to institutional criticism. The malak's authority is portrayed as socially productive only if it serves a wider community; when it becomes an instrument for private gain, it produces conflict. The repeated association with bribery and disputed land suggests that political authority and economic power are closely connected. In this representation, legitimacy depends upon the responsible management of resources and relationships.

ملکان د يوسفزيه لکه خرونه
په گندگۍ سره لرلې خلي، سرونه

Translation: The Yusufzai malaks are like donkeys, their mouths and heads covered in filth. (Khattak, 1986, p. 74)

ملکان د يوسفزيه غوايه خرونه
خوزول به يې له نه پوهي سرونه

Translation: The Yusufzai malaks are oxen and donkeys; they shake their heads out of ignorance. (Khattak, 1986, p. 88)

Khushal's satire is deliberately harsh. The animal imagery does not merely express personal dislike; it delegitimizes a class of local leaders by associating authority with ignorance and incompetence. The political lesson is that leadership requires knowledge and responsibility. Social status alone cannot produce legitimate authority.

Religion and the Boundaries of Authority

The most direct statement on religion and political organization occurs when Khushal distinguishes the responsibilities of ordinary people, religious scholars, and political leaders. His formulation is unusually explicit:

اولسونہ خیل کارونہ پہ خیل رائے کا
شیخ ملا خیل خیل کارونہ پہ خیل خائے کا
عالمان شیخان خیل کار خانان خیل کار کا
یوسفزیہ تبر و بپر سرہ روزگار کا
د شہخانو د دنیا سرہ خہ کار دے
د درویش د زرو پل سرہ خہ کار دے

Translation: Let the people conduct their affairs according to their own judgement; let the shaiikh and mullah perform their own proper work. Scholars and shaiikhs have their work, and khans have theirs; let the Yusufzai conduct their affairs accordingly. What business have shaiikhs with worldly affairs? What business has the dervish with the path of gold? (Khattak, 1986, pp. 91–92)

This passage is central to the argument of the article. Khushal does not reject religious authority. Rather, he argues for boundaries between different forms of authority. Religious scholars have a legitimate function, but their legitimacy is weakened when they pursue worldly power or material wealth. Political leaders likewise have responsibilities that cannot be transferred to religious figures merely because the latter possess spiritual status. The distinction between “their work” and “their place” suggests a functional conception of authority. Social order requires differentiation of responsibilities: the political leader governs political affairs, while the religious scholar performs a religious and intellectual role. The phrase “د درویش د زرو پل سرہ خہ کار دے” (“what business has the dervish with the path of gold?”) sharpens the moral argument by contrasting ascetic identity with worldly accumulation. Khushal therefore evaluates religious authority according to ethical consistency. This is important because the relationship between literature and religious status is not represented here as a simple opposition between religion and secular politics. Instead, the poem reveals negotiation among multiple sources of legitimacy: political authority, religious knowledge, customary authority, popular opinion, and personal

reputation. Khushal's intervention consists in asking each form of authority to remain accountable to its proper social purpose.

Religious Authority, Knowledge, and the Critique of Makhzan-al-Islam

Khushal's criticism of Akhund Darweza's Makhzan-al-Islam adds an intellectual dimension to the question of religious authority. The criticism is literary, theological, and social at the same time. He writes:

يو ڪتاب دے دروبزه سره جور کرے
چي د سوات خلق يي له علمه دے مور کرے
نامعقول مجهول بيان پکښي بي خايه
پکښي بد د سېد وايه يزید ستايه

Translation: Darweza produced a book that, [in Khushal's view], left the people of Swat satisfied with inadequate knowledge; it contains unreasonable and obscure statements, and in it Sayyed is abused and Yazid is praised. (Khattak, 1986, p. 72)

The importance of this criticism lies in Khushal's perception that a religious text can exercise social power. A book that becomes authoritative in a community does not merely transmit information; it shapes the community's understanding of religion, history, morality, and legitimate behaviour. Khushal's response is therefore a struggle over intellectual authority.

دروبزه چي بيان کرے خپل ڪتاب دے
نوم يي مخزن الاسرار کرے جناب دے
هر بيان يي ناموزون، مجهول، بي رنگه
خالي يا تو له دانشه، له فرهنگه
که يوه مصرعه په شل، بله په سل ده
نا مربوطه، ناموزونه په وئېل ده
قافيه يي لام او دال سره وهلي
په رديف کښي يي نون واو سره پېښلي
قصيده د بوصيري ترجمه کړي
عربي يي تر پښتو مضحکه کړي
هر هر بېت د قصيدي چي در مرجان دے
په پښتو کښي تر اورېشو لا ارزان دے

Translation: Darweza wrote a book and named it Makhzan al-Asrar. Every statement in it is inappropriate, obscure, and devoid of literary quality; it is empty of wisdom and knowledge. If one line contains twenty syllables, another contains a hundred. The verses are disconnected and metrically irregular. He has constructed the rhyme merely by using lam and dal, while the radif is formed with nun and waw. He translated al-Busiri's Qasida into Pashto, but in doing so, he reduced the dignity of the Arabic original. In Arabic, every verse of the Qasida is like a pearl, whereas in its Pashto translation it is cheaper than barley (Khattak, 1986, pp. 74–75).

These lines are remarkable because Khushal does not accept religious authority as immune from criticism. He subjects Makhzan to literary and intellectual scrutiny. This is significant for the history of Pashto literary criticism, but it is equally important for political sociology: control over knowledge is a form of power. By questioning a text treated as authoritative, Khushal challenges the cultural mechanism through which religious knowledge is legitimized.

که ژوندے شي افلاطون
په سوات کښې ونيسي سکون
اکوزيو ته بيان کا
کتابونه د فنون
هدايه کفایه دواړه
په پښتو کاندې موزون
دوي به وائي چي دا څه دي
مخزن ښه دے د اخون
نېشکر به غوايه څه کا
په وابڼه يي دے ژوندون

Translation: Even if Plato came to life and settled in Swat and composed books of learning for the Akozi tribe of swat people, they would say: What are these? Akhund's Makhzan is better. What a bullock will do of a sugarcane; its life is in grass. (Khattak, 1960, pp. 878–879)

Khushal's satire here shows that the authority of a text may become habitual and socially self-reproducing. His target is not simply Darweza's literary style; it is the uncritical elevation of one religious text above alternative forms of knowledge. The poem consequently raises a question central to the relationship between religion and social order: how does a community decide what counts as legitimate knowledge?

دوه کاره دي په سوات کښې که خفي دي که جلي
مخزن د دروېزه دے يا دفتر د شېخ ملي

Translation: There are two things in Swat, whether hidden or manifest: Darweza's Makhzan and Shaikh Mali's Daftar. (Khattak, 1960, p. 925)

The juxtaposition is especially revealing. Makhzan represents religious-intellectual authority, while the daftar of Sheikh Mali represents an institutional mechanism connected with land and social organization. Khushal places both within the same social field of authority. His criticism therefore reaches beyond theology: religious texts and political-economic institutions can both acquire power over society, and both require critical scrutiny.

Religion, Moral Authority, and Social Reform

Although Khushal is sharply critical of certain religious figures, the evidence does not support the conclusion that he is anti-religious. His position is better described as reformist and discriminating. He distinguishes between genuine scholars and those who exploit religious status. Khushal valued “true scholars and leaders” while criticizing ignorant or inactive pirs, mullahs, and shaikhs (Dinakhel, 2020). This distinction is crucial: religious authority remains legitimate when joined to knowledge, ethical conduct, and social responsibility. The same principle appears in Khushal’s broader reform agenda. The material in *Swat Nama* emphasizes education, political consciousness, collective interests, resistance to corruption, abandonment of harmful customs, and participation in social development. These concerns indicate that his ideal of social order is not based simply on obedience. It is based on improvement. Authority should produce a society capable of learning, justice, productive economic activity, and collective responsibility. This reformist dimension also changes the way the poem’s religious criticism should be read. Khushal is not merely separating religion from politics. He is attempting to prevent the conversion of religious prestige into unaccountable worldly power while retaining the moral and intellectual functions of religion. His argument resembles a differentiation of social responsibilities: political authority must govern justly; religious authority must preserve knowledge and moral guidance; local leaders must protect community interests; and ordinary people must exercise judgement and participate in collective life.

Authority, Social Order, and Collective Welfare

The political and religious contents of *Swat Nama* converge around a broader conception of social order. Khushal repeatedly observes the relationship between leadership and social welfare. His criticism of the malaks is connected with land disputes, bribery, and conflict; his criticism of rulers is connected with access to justice; and his criticism of religious figures is connected with ignorance, materialism, and inappropriate worldly involvement. These are not separate criticisms. Together they form a theory of responsible authority. The social order imagined in the poem is therefore plural rather than monolithic. Different groups possess different forms of influence: rulers, khans, malaks, religious scholars, shaikhs, and ordinary community members. The problem arises when one form of authority exceeds its legitimate sphere or when authority becomes detached from public responsibility. Political disorder and religious overreach are consequently related phenomena because both weaken the distinction between service and domination. Khushal’s language of reform also places collective welfare above narrow private interest. His reform programme identifies national unity, education, economic participation, women’s rights, political awareness, collective interests, resistance to corruption, and rejection of harmful customs as major concerns. Such a programme suggests that legitimate authority is

ultimately instrumental: its value is measured by the condition of the community it governs or influences.

اولسونه خپل کارونه په خپل رائے کا
شېخ ملا خپل خپل کارونه په خپل خائے کا

Translation: Let the people conduct their affairs according to their own judgement; let the shaikh and mullah perform their own work in their proper place. (Khattak, 1986, pp. 91–92)

The first line is particularly significant because it grants the people a degree of collective agency. Political legitimacy is not represented as an unlimited right of elites to command. The people themselves possess judgement. The political community is therefore an active participant in social order rather than merely an object of rule.

Literature, Power, and Religious Status

Swat Nama demonstrates how a classical Pashto literary work can become a site in which political power, religious status, social class, and literary authority interact. The poem does not simply describe political institutions from outside. Khushal's literary voice participates in the construction and critique of authority. His satire, geographical description, social observation, and literary criticism together produce a particular representation of legitimate and illegitimate power. First, the poem demonstrates the relationship between literature and political power. Khushal writes as a poet who is himself deeply involved in political struggle. His descriptions of rulers and malaks are therefore shaped by an active political consciousness. The poem becomes a medium through which political institutions can be evaluated and reformulated in literary language.

Second, the poem demonstrates the relationship between literature and religious status. Religious figures and texts possess social authority, but Khushal insists that such authority can be questioned through knowledge and literary criticism. His treatment of Darweza and Makhzan illustrates how literary production itself can challenge religiously sanctioned cultural authority.

Third, the poem reveals the interaction between political and religious authority rather than treating them as isolated domains. Khushal's insistence that "shaikh and mullah" should perform their own work while "khans" perform theirs indicates that the social field contains multiple legitimate roles. The problem is not authority itself but the misuse, accumulation, or commercialization of authority. Its seventeenth-century representation of Swat demonstrates how literature can preserve evidence of institutions, social relations, religious practices, and political concepts while simultaneously transforming them through poetic form and authorial judgement. The text should therefore be read both as a literary artefact and as an intellectual intervention in the social world it represents.

Discussion

The evidence examined above allows three conclusions about Khushal's concept of legitimacy. First, legitimacy is ethical. The ruler must provide justice rather than exploit the weak. Second, legitimacy is functional. The malak, khan, scholar, and shaikh each have social responsibilities, and authority loses legitimacy when those responsibilities are abandoned. Third, legitimacy is intellectual. A religious or literary text cannot claim authority merely because a community has become accustomed to it; knowledge must remain open to critical examination. This threefold model, ethical, functional, and intellectual helps explain the unusual combination of politics and religion in Swat Nama. Khushal is simultaneously a political thinker, social critic, and literary critic. His political observations are inseparable from his moral vocabulary, while his religious criticism is inseparable from his understanding of knowledge and social power. The poem's reformist character consequently lies in its attempt to reconnect authority with responsibility. The argument also cautions against reading Khushal's descriptions as transparent ethnographic facts. Swat Nama is a literary representation shaped by Khushal's position, experience, political commitments, and rhetorical purposes. His harsh descriptions of Yusufzai malaks, for example, are evaluative and satirical. They should therefore be treated as evidence of Khushal's political perception and literary strategy as well as evidence about the society he observed. This distinction is important for a philological and historically contextualized reading.. The poem's enduring significance lies precisely in this combination of observation and judgement. Khushal does not merely preserve a picture of seventeenth-century Swat; he asks what kind of social order should exist. Political authority must protect rather than exploit; local leadership must serve rather than accumulate; religious authority must teach rather than manipulate; and the community must exercise judgement rather than surrender unquestioningly to inherited authority. Swat Nama is consequently a literary discourse on the moral organization of society.

Conclusion

This study has argued that religion and political authority in Khushal Khan Khattak's Swat Nama are best understood through the concepts of power, legitimacy, and social order. Khushal's representation of Swat identifies political fragmentation as a problem, but his solution is not simply the creation of stronger rulers. He demands responsible authority. His criticism of rulers focuses on justice; his criticism of malaks focuses on corruption, ignorance, and private interests; and his criticism of religious figures focuses on the misuse of religious status and involvement in worldly accumulation. At the same time, Khushal does not eliminate religion from the political and social order. He recognizes the importance of scholars and religious learning, but insists that religious authority must retain moral and intellectual integrity. His criticism of Makhzan demonstrates that even an influential religious text can be subjected to literary and intellectual scrutiny. The resulting picture is therefore neither secular nor theocratic. It is a differentiated social order in which several forms

of authority coexist and are judged according to their responsibilities. *Swat Nama* shows that a classical literary work can function simultaneously as poetry, political commentary, social criticism, intellectual debate, and historical representation. A fuller study of such texts can therefore contribute to a diachronic history of Pashto literary thought in which questions of authority, religion, identity, social organization, and cultural contact are examined together.

Acknowledgement

This article was prepared as part of my Postdoctoral research conducted within the ANR-PLIC project, Pashto Literature Between Identity and Contact (ANR-23-CE27-0006-01). I gratefully acknowledge the financial and institutional support of the French National Research Agency (ANR) and INALCO/CeRMI, which provided an important academic environment for this research. I am especially grateful to Professor Matteo De Chiara for his valuable guidance, scholarly advice, and continuous encouragement throughout the research. I also thank the staff of INALCO and the BULAC Library for their assistance and for facilitating access to relevant scholarly resources.

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