

# Interface of History and Fiction in Sorayya Khan's Noor

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## Abstract

Sorayya Khan resides outside Pakistan at present after having spent a significant part of her life in the Islamic republic, but she is still treated as the Pakistani voice in English Literature. She has remained fully focused on the typical Pakistani issues despite her physical distance from the homeland. Being fully aware of the power vested in literary fiction, she has infused her novel with unique self-consciousness regarding the social, cultural and political past of the lands she claims to portray. History, politics, Islam and nation are the common denominators of this writer. The past depicted in the selected novel "Noor" does not only belong to the powerless people like victims of the 1971 civil war but also to the absolutely powerful people like General Zia ul-Haq and hence the study expands the terrain of the history from below.

**Keywords:** History, Fiction, Interface, Violence, Contemporary Pakistani Fiction

## Introduction

History and literature share many features, but with the advent of the genre of the novel, this interface has scaled new heights. The very nascent fiction had set off appropriating history, however putatively antithetical to fiction in its approach as a discipline, to dovetail its rather fabricated narrative. Henry Fielding subtitled his novels as histories. The nineteenth century novels of Walter Scott even earned the paradoxical tag of historical fiction by virtue of its direct interaction with the written past. All was going well till history-writing remained more or less unidirectional and unproblematic. Then following the linguistic turn in the early twentieth century, concepts like truth, reality, singularity, universality, and objectivity were severely questioned. Knowledge became provisional, relative, plural, and cultural-specific, subjective and even textual. Thus moving away from the canonical realistic novels, the twentieth century literary and cultural movements problematized the hitherto smooth and direct interaction of history and fiction by questioning the very fundamentals of both the disciplines among others.

History like other discourses appeared just as a narrative discourse. Hayden White asserted that history writing was much different from story-telling due to its dependence upon narrative for meaning. White postulated the idea that it was the form that prevailed over the content of narrative, including history, and not vice-versa that had long since been taken for granted. On the other hand, Michel Foucault's discourse analyses overturned ahistorical epistemes in favour of a time-bound and politically charged knowledge. Concepts such as ideology, hegemony, and discourse tarnished the sanctum of the historical monolith. Historiography widened its domain to include basic human and cultural activities.

However, in comparison to history-writing, literature absorbs changes more rapidly. In the contemporary times, the novel stands out as the most inclusive, flexible, and volatile genre. It has embraced historical narratives more vigorously in the wake of postmodernist era when canons, disciplines, and grand narratives are no longer considered reliable means of knowledge conveyance. Critics like George Lukacs see historical novels as component of bringing structural changes. Apart from the conventional novel, the trends like new novel, non-fiction novel, antinovel, cult novel, and historiographic metafiction help fiction subtly interface with history. According to Linda Hutcheon, the self-reflexive fiction can engage itself with more challenging issues in the present.

Postcolonial novelists re-wrote history for corrective measures to bring out their pristine native past which was rejected by the colonial masters. Feminists, Marxists, and subaltern thinkers amongst others also



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appropriated the genre of the novel to make their voices heard in their respective social, ideological and cultural domains. Put simply, all the novelists who incorporate history do it for their particular purposes, so the Means and modes of incorporation vary accordingly. Now the history does not work for the novels as merely a context to set the story in/against. The novels rather problematize, challenge, unearth, and re-write the given history.

#### Main Article

The present paper shall work upon this very interface of history and fiction in the light of selected contemporary Pakistani novel in English. The reason of fiction almost appearing as history seems more pertinent when the novelist belongs to a nation like Pakistan that contains a repository of turbulent past in all spheres. The select text is *Noor* (2003) by Sorayya Khan. Sorayya Khan resides outside Pakistan at present after having lived a significant part of her life in the Islamic republic, but she is still treated as the Pakistani voice in English literature by some major critics like Cara Cilano. Apart from that, she remains fully focused on the typical Pakistani issues despite her physical distance from the homeland. Being fully aware of the power vested in literary fiction, she infuses her novel with unique self-consciousness regarding the social, cultural and political past of the lands she claims to portray. History, politics, Islam and nation are her common denominators. The past depicted in "*Noor*" does not only belong to the powerless people like the victims of the 1971 civil war but also to the absolutely powerful people like General Zia ul- Haq, hence the study expands the terrain of the history from below.

The reason for this particular selection of the novel lies in the different ways of narrativizing the past and depiction of different time-periods in the history of Pakistan. The past in the novel is not dead and it strongly surfaces from the almost forgotten terrains through personal memories, familial and war narratives, imagination and will power. "*Noor*" has a great appeal to critics for its portrayal of the 1971 war atrocities, national conflict and feminist perspectives. The argument revolves, as its title implies, around the construction and deconstruction of national identities during and after war. The novel has multiple meanings as it not only implies the violence perpetrated in the past of (East) Pakistan-now, Bangladesh- but also the deliberate forgetting (or violation) of the violence of the 1971 war to sustain the national allegory of (West) Pakistan intact in the present. Also, the narrative violates linear and general mode of history-telling with an intense inclination towards space/place and marginalized people. *Noor*, the eponymous character of the novel, despite being a mentally challenged child, draws the pictures of the past of her family that parallels the past(s) of two nations with special focus on the national amnesia for civil war of West Pakistan. The metaphor of drawing the past not only flattens history, but reinforces the notion of its sheer textual traces available to readers. Sorayya Khan through her "*Noor*" tries to explore how fiction uses and abuses history through techniques like family narrative, magic realism, use of interviews

## Remarking An Analisation

with victims and victors, etc. to make histories- instead of a single history- come to surface. She also explains how the concepts of nation, gender, war crimes, identity crisis, and power of forgiveness corroborate this cogent narrative that challenges the discourse of state sponsored historiography.

As far as literary perspective is concerned, there is scarcity of writers dealing with the tragic events of 1971 civil war. Sorayya Khan's *Noor* can be taken as the first Pakistani novel in English in which the writer has done a substantial research work to interview the soldiers and families that were directly or indirectly influenced by the war. By interviewing them, she has come across the old saga of human suffering and tragedy. The returned soldiers are not ready to speak about their experiences of the war. They are trying to come to terms with the traumatic experiences and making efforts to lead a normal and healthy life. But they have failed to do so. They want to forget about the war and move on. Forgetfulness helps if you can make a fresh start. But as far as national tragedy is concerned, the historical amnesia can both be helpful and destructive. Amnesia can help in fighting the feelings of guilt that history burdens us with. It can be destructive because it puts obstruction on the way of critical understanding of the past.

Sorayya Khan admits in "The Silence and Forgetting that wrote *Noor*" that she was terrorized by the tales of war and she wanted "to study the effects of war in the theatre of a family" (124). the question always nagged her, "How can people move on after witnessing or participating in the war?"(125). She went to Bangladesh and interviewed many soldiers who had fought in the 1971 war. She observed that there was a great similarity between the survivors of tsunami and the soldiers who had fought in the war. She writes, "War and natural disasters are in fact entirely different in some ways, the end result- the complete desolation people are left to live in and with- is, in fact very similar" (5).

The novel also explores the violence and horrors of history in the form of independence war of Bangladesh. Khan has tried to explore the memories and experiences of the people of post-partition. Khan have revealed in her work how the past is remembered by the people and official histories. History and memory gets merged and fused in *Noor*. Paromita Chakrabarti observes, "Sorayya Khan is one of the first voices to break the silence around the almost genocidal extermination of Bengali men and women during the 1971 civil war. (1)

In a review of *Noor*, Mahmud Rahman says, " Sorayya Khan recounts two events from history: the cyclone that hit East Pakistan in November 1970 and the civil war that broke out a few months later between East and West Pakistan leading to the independence of Bangladesh." Almost one million people died in the deadly cyclone and war devastated about three million people. Sorayya Khan writes in *Silence and Forgetting*, "History is a narrative, not unlike a piece of fiction. In fiction, the most obvious silence occur in the white spaces between paragraphs or sections on a page of a book...there are some stories, in fact, where what happens is white spaces

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(those formless, shapeless, silences filled with possibility) is more critical than anything that "written"...History books generally tell us only one side of history. In Pakistan, for example, recent local history text books provide a sentence or two on the 1971 crisis that divided the country. Bangladeshi history books devote much more space to the events and say something quite different about their independence war." (122) The war is responsible for changing the life and psyche of people. After returning from war and adopting a six year old Bengali girl, Sajida, Ali, the Pakistani soldier, never talks about his participation and experiences of the war. Even Nanijaan never mentions and questions about the war. Sajida grows up in the new family in Pakistan having Ali as her father and Nanijaan as her grandmother. Sajida gets married to Hussein who also starts living in the same house as per wishes of Ali. When the novel opens, Sajida is already a mother of two boys and is expecting her third child. The name of the novel is after the third child "Noor". Noor is born as a special child with Down syndrome. Hussein loves his boys but does not accept Noor and maintains a distance from her. Noor, too, does not give him enough space in her life. Noor receives crayons as her first birthday present. She gets fascinated by the colourful crayons and starts colouring the plain sheets of paper with blue. Sajida gets attracted by the drawings but Hussein does not like them at all. The blue colour in the drawings reminds Sajida of the ocean of her homeland. Gradually Noor's paintings of different shades start reminding and deciphering the past of Sajida and Ali.

Noor proves to be a special child who is in fact a connection between her mother and her grandfather and their hidden past. When Sajida conceived Noor, she immediately realized that her relationship with her past had been revived. Noor, the special child throws light on the debris of the past and connects Sajida to the present. At the same time, Noor reminds Ali the war which he was trying to forget and had never talked about it in the family. Ali is reminded of the war when he looks at Noor at the time of birth. Sorayya Khan observes, "Ali, in an earlier life and another land had seen children like Noor, a shade from black, in the hold of death. When Noor's face collapsed in to what it would be, he leaned closer and strongly recalled something of war he'd seen." (31) Noor through her paintings helps her mother and grandfather to confront the past that they have been trying to suppress. She enables her parents to transport through their haunting and horrifying memories of the cyclone of 1970 that claimed the lives of millions of people and violent atrocities of the 1971 war between East and West Pakistan that eventually created the independent country of Bangladesh. Noor's art paintings forced the family members to admit the betrayals and disillusionments that they thought had been buried with time.

#### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of the present research paper is to study the interaction of the select novel "*Noor*" with the recent history of Pakistan, that is, how and why the text participate in re-writing the rather recent

## *Remarking An Analisation*

event, especially the 1971 war. Apart from analyzing re-writing of the past which has been suppressed, unresolved or overlooked, the study shall dissect both history and fiction as discourses embedded in particular time and space as cultural text. Moreover, the study also briefly examines how the current global issues and concepts like nation, gender, religion, diaspora, wars, etc. help as well as affect the consciousness of geo-politically aware novelists while historicizing their fiction.

#### **Research Methodology**

The paper shall study the history-fiction interface primarily in the light of new historicist and cultural material approaches which see the literary text being the products of a particular time and culture. The ideological and subversive power of literature asserted by the cultural materialists such as Raymond Williams and Alan Sinfield has been used to analyze the resistance shown through the text. Postmodern literary techniques like intertextuality and magic realism are very conducive to comprehend the stance of the novel towards history.

#### **Review of literature**

History-fiction interface has been widely researched in general as well as in the discipline of literature. The genre of novel has been both praised and sullied to incorporate history in its narrative. Walter Scott set his novels in the past and brought out a new style that influenced even historians. Many other contemporary critics like Avrom Fleishman did not object to the use of direct historical settings in the literary genres provided the characters shown were real and authentic. Mid-twentieth century Marxist critic George Lukacs emphasized on the genuine portrayal of the era being presented in the novel. In the nutshell, the argument was pitched up for the long term discussion that has not ceased till date.

Hayden White deconstructed the hierarchical supremacy of history as discipline over the novel. For him history too, like literature, depends on the narrative, so equally vulnerable to the subjective points of view. Postmodernism played a huge role in bringing these seemingly distinct disciplines much closer focusing on the discourse of the era. Approaching the end of the century, the new historicist critics started studying history and literature simultaneously to understand the latent meaning of the literary texts, mainly dramas written in the Renaissance and Romantic periods. This movement took history-fiction interface, however, indirectly, to the decisive point from where it seems almost impossible to study a literary text without bringing in the contexts of history, politics, and culture.

As far as the select novel "*Noor*" is concerned, there is visible scarcity of critical work done on the text, let alone in the field of history-fiction interface. Very few books are available on the new generation of the Pakistani English writer. Cara Cilano has written three short critical books over the last few years which are more or less informative works. These are: *National Identities in Pakistan* (2011), *Contemporary Pakistani Fiction in English* (2013), and *Post-9/11 Espionage Fiction in the US and Pakistan* (2014). David Waterman has recently worked on the

Pakistani history, culture and literature in English. He argues in his book *Where World Collide: Pakistani Fiction in the New Millennium* (2015) that personal and political identity cannot be separated in the contemporary works of the Pakistani English fiction. Aviansh Jodha has written a brief article on this novel titled "*Eclectic Cartography: Spaces of Memory and Belonging in Sorayya Khan's Noor*", which shows its narrative based upon the individual memories on both sides, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Vinodsinh V. Patil studies this text as one among the various literary contributions of contemporary Pakistani women novelists' indiscussing war and politics. All these articles somehow lack in figuring out the scope of this novel in imagining and reconstructing a forgotten history. Paromita Chakarbarti in her essay "*Women's Bodies, Men's War: The Political Economy of Military Rape and Gender Violence*" (2020) has analysed Pakistani- American writer Sorayya Khan's *Noor* with special reference to the large scale rapes that took place in east Pakistan during 1971 liberation war.

#### Conclusion

The novel "*Noor*" brings in to notice the significance of the contemporary Pakistani novelist's inclination towards recent history for the ultimate purpose of the betterment of society. The novel also illustrates that the fiction written with profound historical consciousness can contribute to developing an alternative way of understanding the past. The select novel's disposition towards portraying the recent history of Pakistan not only gives an opportunity to study the history-fiction nexus, but also endeavours to comprehend vital discourses like history and state power through literature in the present times. The study has been quite helpful in taking notice of the literary techniques being used by the contemporary Pakistani novelist to historicize her fictional work that has to depict such a turbulent past-steeped in military coups, civil war, partition, and terrorism and much more.

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