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APOLITICALLY POLITICAL EPIC

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the narrative *Noor* by Surrayya Khan presents a description of whole political scenario of before and after the 1971 war through the memories of Sajida and Ali, retrieved by the paintings of *Noor*, the down-syndrome daughter of Sajida. Khan has manipulated the aspect of memory as a tool to scratch the scars of political history of 1971 war. This article runs over the stance that under the guise of a domestic tragedy, *Noor* is a political document of the events which led to the outbreak of war of 1971 and of the atrocious events which were committed to the Eastern Muslims by the West Pakistan Muslims after the culmination of war. *Noor* is a political narrative narrated by Khan apolitically. The characters in the novel don't represent a family rather a political drama which was enacted historically during the war of 1971. My argument is premised on the concept that *Noor's* paintings become the 'sites of memories' for both Sajida and Ali and convert the narrative into a type of 'fictional site of memory' in the domain of historical politics of West Pakistan related to East Pakistan. These simple paintings work as an impressionistic historical memorial of a political paranoia.

INTRODUCTION

This paper's argument lies on the statement that *Noor's* paintings become the 'sites of memories' for Ali and Sajida and whole political scenario of separation of East and West Pakistan is described through the memories which haunt Ali and his adopted daughter Sajida. *Noor's* paintings are converted into landscapes and places which haunt the both protagonists, the perpetrator (Ali) and the victim (Sajida). Memory can be termed as phenomenon which perpetuates genuinely, a bond which hooks us to the eternal present (Nora 8). By sites of memory means "physical sites which induce commemorative acts to be taken place" (Winter, 2010 p. 312). Pier Nora introduces the concept of 'site of memory' because he was afraid that with the passage of time history would

engulf the memory and it would fade away. Nora was in favour of creating and maintaining the sites of memory into the landscapes. He demarcated between the memory which is related to the individual or to the oral histories or tradition and the history which is officially canonized on a national level (Nora qtd in Di Maida et al). Nora's site of memory includes archival mediums, historical monuments and private places where people can get a way to commemorate their situations of importance. Nora's 'site' refers to a space where nations, communities or ethnic groups deposit their commemorative memories related to the core of their identities (Szpociński, 2016 p.246). Site of memory continues to be a core pivot round which the remembrance studies spins and it is acknowledged on an international level. The past gets articulated in these sites of memories that emphasize their importance not in museums or monuments only but categorize novels, personages, symbolic representations and even cities themselves (Rothberg, 2010, p. 3). For Maurice Halbwachs, "memory is more than just chronology, it is the (re-)construction of past practices, motions, and emotions, i.e. the fabric of social interaction" (Di Maida et al). Halbwachs adds the presence of space as the most significant aspect in directing and locating memories. Spatial framework as well as social framework is needed for every memory to be located elsewhere. "Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects" (Nora 9). Nora insisted on creating space as site of memories because he believed in more authentic nature of memory taking form from traditions and oral histories than the officially constructed history. Likewise Halbwachs recognizes the importance of space in locating and rendering memories' direction. He argues that all the memories whether they are of individual or collective value they are not only required to be located in social nexuses but also in spatial frameworks. Noor's paintings provide those spatial frameworks where traumatic memories shine brightly. Traumatic memory haunts like a ghost over the mind of the affected persons and delves into the chambers of the unconscious or even subconscious mind and after all strives to retrieve itself in the future, time and again, and the person senses those past events again in the form of flashbacks or small episodes. In the respective work traumatic memories are episodic and retrieved through the small impeccable canvas depictions. So Khan's technique of using paintings as a tool to call memory into action transforms the narrative into a 'fictional site of memory' in the political history of East and West Pakistan.

Paul Connerton(2011) considers the spatial framework not only as a tool to help us in remembering but also in forgetting in the fast developing modernity and reorganization of city spaces as Sajida and Ali have forgotten their past memories in the urban space of Islamabad city and their forgotten memories are retrieved through the impressionistic landscapes drawn by Noor. He agrees with Halbwach that "the physical landscape influences our memories in profound and unexpected ways." This type of frame memory separates us from the concepts which label landscape as a simple visual or social construction. Memories and landscapes have a labyrinthine relationship, dependent on the cultural contextualization yet landscapes have transcending effects in flashing the memories brightly (p 2-3). These are the landscapes reimaged by Noor which drag Sajida and Ali to the world of their memories and ensure the possibility of past's perpetual presence in the present. So Noor's landscapes and different paintings provide an impetus to enter the characters' minds. Color

symbolism is manipulated to paint a significant meaning deeper than what is apparently portrayed on the surface. (Butt et al 2019, p.2).

Before proceeding further it is necessary to have a brief look at the political history of Bangladesh first. In the political history of south Asia, 1971 can be remarked similar to a brutal year which witnessed a civil war eruption between East and West Pakistan. In the result of that civil war, coupled with the intervention of India on the part of East Pakistan, the government of Pakistan disinherited the eastern territorial wing and the nation-state of Bangladesh was established independently by the large scale movement of freedom seeker. The creation of Pakistan was held through a 'utopian vision', envisioning a place where the Muslims of the sub-continent could follow the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Two-Nation Theory proposed by Muhammad Ali Jinnah achieved high momentum and after partition Muslims moved to their newly created territory obtained in the name of religion. When India and Pakistan gained independence, a ravaging war erupted: masses belonging to the both religions, Hinduism and Islam faced disastrous destruction, dislocated migrations, looting, rape, abduction, molestation and sweeping massacre. The concept of Two-Nation narrative ruptured when the cracks started to appear from the beginning when the economic resources of East Pakistan were depleted by West Pakistan and Urdu was imposed as a national language. Bengalis demanded Bengali language as official language and other basic right which were being neglected to be provided to them. An internal conflict between Urdu speaking Muslims, migrated from India to East Pakistan, and Bengali Muslims started. As Yasmin Saikia argues: inequalities in the dissemination of national resources, exploitation of the economic resources, ban on Bengali language and speech in the public sector and above all, lack of Bengali peoples' nomination as political representatives in the national parliament of the country were the major resentments which caused distress in Bengali people and ushered motivation to fight against the west Pakistan mostly dominated by Punjabi people (Saikia 2011, p.46-47). The Language Riots in 1950s along with flagrant cultural, economic and political domineering fostered an open rebellion in East Pakistan caused eventually a civil war in united Pakistan during the year 1971. Twenty-four years after 1947 when the sub-continent was partitioned, history recycled itself with the outburst of civil war, having the same brutalities like rape, looting, carnage and bloodshed. The brutal war came to an end a new nation-state of Bangladesh was established on 16 December 1971. One major cause which propelled East Pakistan masses to think about their liberation from West Pakistan was the historical event of a natural disaster, Bhal Cyclone which hit East Pakistan in November 1970 and West Pakistan remained unsuccessful or so to say negligent of rescuing the people who were suffering from hunger and homelessness after the calamity.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Noor, a powerful novel by Surraya Khan, is a pathetic story of memory, tragedy of a family, forgiveness and veracious narration of the politicized historical events of the past lives of the protagonists. The setting of the novel is placed in the modern day Islamabad, Pakistan and the past events are revealed through the paintings of an extraordinary baby-girl who compels her grandfather Ali and her mother Sajida to memorize their past, which lay suppressed in their minds.

Noor's artful works transport her family persons into their haunted memories of the cyclone which hit East Pakistan in November 1970 devouring millions of people and the atrocious episodes of violence committed by the West Pakistani personnel during the conflict during the year 1971 between East and West Pakistan leading to the liberation of Bangladesh. Paintings by Noor bring the sensations, sights, violent scenarios and sounds of the political past into limelight and the disillusionments which were pushed behind the curtain of time, are flashed back in the memories of Sajida and Ali. Noor is a political novel about the devastating measures of the 1970 cyclone, horrific brutalities of 1971 war and above all strengths of the human soul which sometimes, are transferred genetically to the future generations. Noor is a story of a military man, Ali who was sent to Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) to participate in the war against "his own people", and a rescued girl whom Ali adopted as his daughter, Sajida, who suffered from her family loss in Bangladesh during the 'Bhal cyclone' in 1970, and Ali's granddaughter Noor: differently abled strange girl having exceptional skills of painting, very 'different keeping revelations of the secrets still to be excavated and tied to the other world 'in a way no-one else was' (Khan 2003, p.146). The identities of all of these three characters have one thing in common; horrors of genocide, the killing of innocent people in the name of nationalism. Khan mirrors through this impressionistic fiction how a narrow political ideology of a bunch of despotic rulers can murder millions of innocent people, traumatize millions of children and rape millions of women. In 1971, in East Pakistan, the atrocities which were afflicted during the 1947 partition were reenacted in more intensified form having their authority as the state sponsored. Women were the most suffered-victims who endured the atrocities of the partition. Recent history doesn't provide the exemplary violence committed to the women like the women hunted by the violent perpetrators during the partition and Bangladeshi civil war. Punjab and Bengal were converted into 'labour rooms' of unbridled rampage inflicting upon all communities related to different religions. The women were forcibly stripped naked and paraded down the public crowds which intensified their trauma and national humiliation (Nittali qtd in Archana, Priyanka 2020, p.7664). Again in 1971, the women experienced the worst situations, not from other people but from their own country's army personals who were supposed to be their protectors. Those guardians followed a political strategic framework to emphasize their nationalistic super-superiority and thought.

Maternal trauma and harsh memorial experiences of Sajida seep through the next generation and pressurize the mental ability of Noor to convert those traumas into impressionistic images. Mothers have always been transmitters of violence, loss and abusive situations to the coming generations. This epic representation suggests how traumatic circumstances when afflicted upon women create an irresolvable disorder that travels from generation to generation (Awan, Syeda, 2020, p.130). The trauma inherited in the mind and soul of Sajida generates a traumatized mind. In this case Noor's mind gives a vent to the trauma disorder of her mother through artistic impressions. Trauma appears to be a transferable disorder because it relies on cognitive processes. The internal mental illness and psychic disorder of Sajida is transmitted to define the undefined Noor in terms of transferred psychic disorder. This psychic disorder symbolizes the psychic disorder of the political strategy setters of the times of

war of 1971 when women were raped for maintaining the male prestige and national honour and the lay men were victimized in the name of national pride. Khan creates a strange idea of 'nation space' when she explores the conceptions of nation, history (Chakrabarty 2017, p.88) and political strife [my emphasis] through Noor.

Role of Ali in the narrative Noor is that of representing the countless soldiers sacrificing their lives for the imperial goals of the nation-state and who were misused by the political leaders to do grave crimes like rape, killing and humiliation of the human beings. Noor's paintings remind him how as a perpetrator of violence, he was brainwashed by the rhetoric of political war to accept his primary task to obey the political orders of his officers. The 'precious opportunity' of being posted to East Pakistan turns out to be horrific one. Ali participated in the war, "strong and brash" always imagining his duty done well. His job was mostly a night shift in which he accompanied troops to shift "retrieved and inventoried remnants of blown-up bridges to storage locations" (Khan 2003, p.50). Ali confronted the reality of the war which forced him to realize the "ethical questions of insanियat/humanity" (Saikia 2011, p.10). War seemed to him no more than the shattering of highly idealized political standards and collapse of humanity, in the words of his mother, 'an animal gone mad'. Ali moved back to his home, 'battered by typhoid and the staggering facts of the war, clutching a child of five or six in his arms' (Khan 2003, p.50).

Ali's memories as a soldier and as a perpetrator become alive with the drawing of Noor of him in uniform and the next paintings provoke his memories of his efforts not to indulge in those events of being brutal to the helpless people. It's true when Nora says that Memory "delivers a profound truth" (Nora 1989, p.8). Noor's drawing of cyclone, sketching the river and swollen buffalo, push him to the memory of being forced by his officer to rape a young helpless mother who was forcibly laid 'on the desk, naked and limp' (140) after the officer raped her. His officer ordered Ali to rape the woman to show his aggression and patriotism, "You have a prick or not?"...Show me ... you are not a soldier ... you only fuck your mother" (140). Ali's experience of being coerced to rape women gets glued to the political paradigm because this bodily affliction communicates in A. J. Kabir's terms, the initiating edge of "power relationships predicated on violence" (Kabir 2013, p.7). Ritu Menon and Kamila Basin posit that the dramatic shift of violent atrocities against women in conjoint revolts soared high and reached to a savage verge of sexual violence indicating a symbolic marker of women sexuality in relation to the patriarchal imposition, between different ethnic communities (Menon & Bhasin 2000, p.41). Ranasinha argument carries importance that Khan's narrative develops a, "postcolonial feminist aesthetic" (Ranasinha) as well as a postcolonial political patriarchy [my emphasis] because West Pakistani political leaders and army men established a constitutive primacy of gender based violence and sexuality (Ranasinha 2016, p. 95) .

Noor documents the political liberation war of Bangladesh which picked up on approximately 300,000 to 3 million assassinations of Bangladeshis in the sweeping tide of that political cum laymen confrontation. Khan (2010) contends that the essence of conflict of 1971 was the disposal of 'Power and

Privilege between East and West Pakistan'. Instead of achieving internal peace and solidarity, the emergence of Bangladesh triggered more violence, one-party state was imposed, the two heads of state were assassinated preceding the long periods of military rule and finally 'a vulnerable democracy' emerged in 2000 (Ishteyaque, 2015, p.303). Noor is the shade of the politics which led to the separation of east and West Pakistan ending in the traumatic atrocities afflicted to the eastern people, which are projected through the memories of Sajida and Ali. At any point Sajida's memories were haunting her personality which takes shape in the form of Noor because when she conceives she gets warned about a dark shadow, something threatening about to happen. 'Noor was Sajida's secret' (Khan, 200, p.1). Sajida observes an apparition of a teen aged girl having the abnormalities or enduring autism i.e. she has a „snub nose“, „small ears“, „dark complexion“ and „pink and orange coloured hairs. The oddities possessed by Noor symbolize the recollections of the aggravated scenarios prevalent in the country in that clamorous time. The physical appearance of Noor refers to a boisterous haunting of the repressed memories of the personals of the novel.

Noor's drawings value differently for Sajida and Ali. Ali who wants to erase his memories of war and his participation in war as a soldier, feels compelled to recall all that. Simultaneously Sajida discovers her forgotten past, her origin, her identity and recalls everything which she has been attempting to dig out of her memories i.e. how she was adopted by Ali. Both of them reach at a reconciled closure. The subconscious of Sajida emerges in a magical moment in the form of Noor and reopens the traumatic wounds of both Sajida and Ali and reconciliation is done with the alleviation of their chronic sufferings. Both the characters in the fictional work and the reader themselves consider Sajida only victim and Ali as perpetrator but through Noor's paintings Khan makes all visualize the position of both Ali and Sajida as victims of the war narrative of 1971 by highlighting the traumatic wounds of their minds. A drawing of Noor recognized by both Sajida and Ali in which they witness a pile of corpses muddied after monsoon in East Pakistan and recognize their respective positions where Sajida stood silent after her family being murdered by Ali. Ali adopted Sajida as a compensation for being naïve in the war and took her home as a family member. That inerrable painting exposes Ali's reality not only as witnessing the atrocities but his position as an accomplice of those crimes against Bengalis: Noor's expressionistic drawings were clear indication of 'what Ali had locked away so carefully years ago in the cabinets of his mind (Khan 2003, p.167). With that drawing Sajida hesitates to confront Ali in questioning about her true identity and her relationship with Ali.

“With Noor's framed drawing between them, Sajida spoke. Her voice trembled as it never did. When she asked, when the question sat in front of him, he looked at it: the words, the emphasis, the question mark. Could it be? he wondered. Had he been practicing all those years? Rehearsing the stories, making them right? Sajida asked it again, and when she did, he knew he'd been waiting for it”.
(Khan 2003, p.233-234).

In “The Silence and Forgetting that wrote Noor,” Khan admits that the horrific stories of war terrified her and she wanted “to study the effects of war in the theatre of a family” (124). She argues that those who were supposed to

perpetrate horrors on others could not easily slide back into their social routine as easily “as if they’d been away on a hiatus, a vacation of some kind” (124).

Noor’s drawings alleviate those mental traumas of persons related to the war and the circumstances of the chaotic times make Sajida’s choices confined to either make amendments or continue to be traumatized by her memorial glimpses of the past. She reaches at a standstill point where she recognizes herself and her past.

“Sajida was reminded of her own secret. Even if Ali didn’t utter something specific, he’d offered her a different glimpse of himself. She was afraid to imagine him afraid. It was a bit like imagining him lost in a crowd”. (Khan 2003, p.235).

On the other hand Ali, through Noor’s drawings, is compelled to brood upon his past, why did he chose to participate in such brutal war, which things made him to afflict the people of East Pakistan with those grievous cruelties. In the end Ali grows able to realize his true place in the whole political narrative of 1971 war. He was fed on the propaganda of elitist nationalism and political leaders who were following their own plans to remain in power. He stands nowhere but at the core of being victimized in the war. He was among those who were the major victims of war because they suffered more during the war when they showed brutalities against their own nature and will and after that they considered themselves as the perpetrators of war and couldn’t get out of their pricking conscience. They were the greater fools and more pathetic victims than those innocent victims who were murdered or afflicted. Same is acknowledged in *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War*, ‘the members of all ethnic group and religious classes, both the far edges of the political divide were racked by the agonies of the fratricidal war and perpetrators were no exception, and humanity was just as normally divided’ (Bose 2011, p. 13). Ali envisages that he didn’t act as a savior of his nation or his own people but as cat’s paw in the game of politics of maintaining ruthless power. He acted as a ‘paid fighter’ hired by the elites trying to retain their own power regime (Khan 2020, p. 150). Ali recognizes his own identity as fake and politically constructed in the form of a soldier and discovers a great demarcation between his personal identity as an ordinary man and his identity as a soldier. As Hunt(2010) suggests, ‘Witnessing or participating in atrocious acts, being a killer or subjected to being tortured, observing the barbarity against civilians or soldiers, or large-scale destruction, all of the above engender cracks in the belief system of a person and bring a jolt in his conception of the identity’. The narrative Noor exposes the truth hidden in crevices and the shifting perspectives prevalent in the novel, in David Waterman terms, perform the task of interrogating the “notions of subjectivity, truth and reality, since ways of working and ways of being are relational, sensitive as they are to the evolving social and historical context, especially in a time of national crisis” (Waterman 2009, p.150). Khan uses memory as a technique and story line is delineated through a flashback in time and non-linear progression or disrupted chronology makes the narrative move back and forth in time. Her use of memory proves also oblivious of the specificity of place because painted landscapes attain the position of those real spaces which are connected to those specific time which

are memorized from the hidden shelves of the mind of Ali and Sajida. Khan's use of interconnection of memory, time and space renders her artistic epic into what Mickail Bakhtin calls 'Chronotope' and her narrative has an "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships" (Bemong et al 2010, p. 213) when she constructs a particular scenario of war through memory in a temporal and spatial interconnectedness: time through memory of the mind of the protagonists and space through drawn paintings of Noor.

CONCLUSION

Khan intermingles the narrative of family with the narrative of nations and produces a nationalistic political ideology rather than alluding to the epic history thus furnishing, at the end, a political epic from an intensely personalized domestic chronicle. She considers history as in R.G. Collingwood case, the manifestation of the past reconstructed in the present (qtd in Chakrabarty 2017, p.87). Indrani Chatterjee highlights how Khan interlinks the resemblances between family and the constitutional state by saying, 'Khan moulds the discernment of the family into nation by epitomizing symbolic connections between them (Chatterjee 2004, p.20).

When I say Noor's paintings as 'site of memory' mean those 'sites of memory' which function as the sites which remind a nation of their historical past and help them stay connected to their legacies and culture, but in the case of Noor's paintings, they remind Sajida about her cultural past, an agonizing calamity and for Ali they are the commemorations of his own brutalities done to the poor masses and for the audience they appear to be the visualized reflections of historical political culture of West Pakistani dictators. The disability challenges ideological discursivity (Alam). Noor's art attains a central focus and chains her to the personal agonies of the others, especially her mother. Her painting provide a pivotal point for transmitting the traumatic memories of individuals and transforming them into the collective memories of groups arising the silences, elisions and repressed anguish of collective trauma.

Noor's sheets of blue and her landscape paintings become a strong source of commemorating Sajida about her true identity of being a dark eastern person because memory describes a medium of shaping and maintaining the sense of identity, not a static revocation of past events (Caldicott and Fuchs 2003, p.12-13). Sajida's dark skin and small stature insist upon reminding her Bengali roots never evading her Bengali identity imprints. She reminds her biological relationships, she continued to repress for a long time period, her mother, her siblings and especially her infant brother who was let loose of her arm's grip during the storm. Her paintings work as a trope to extract the political traces which the strategic national consciousness had established. Ali recalls the atrocities done to the people of East Pakistan enacted for the sake of politics only. So Noor's paintings scratch the memories of the persons related to the opposite narratives. Sajida is representative of Eastern Wing, the politically victimized, and Ali is representative of the West Pakistan politics and ruling narrative. Every person experiences the memories of his own individuality and group. Memory inputs remembrance within the sacred. Memory is blind to all but the group it binds, as Maurice Halbwachs has said, that there are as many

memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual (Qtd in Rothberg 2014, p.7).

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