

Topography of Loss: Homeland, History and Memory in Sorayya Khan's Fiction

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Abstract

The paper explores the interplay of memory and history in the three novels of Sorayya Khan – *Noor* (2003), *Five Queen's Road* (2009) and *City of Spies* (2015). In each of these novels, the writer explores the violence of history. In the first novel it is the liberation war of Bangladesh, in the second, the partition of India and in the third, it is the international control over Pakistan, in this case, the American presence. Not necessarily concerned with chronological histories she centre-stages individual actions and the causes and effects behind them. Based in the States, Khan is born of a mixed marriage but her fiction is concerned with her paternal legacy. The loss of the “homeland” the process of rehabilitation and the values that hold human beings rooted in the past are all dominant concerns in her fiction.. Individual choices are very often overpowered by political realities.

Keywords

Homeland, diaspora, history, memory, landscape, war

The past is never dead, it is not even past.

(William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* 73)

The present paper works with the novels written by Sorayya Khan, a writer of Pakistani origin, who roots her work in her experiences and her memories of socio-political upheavals in Pakistan and the way her in-between position influences her views of her homeland, history and culture. It is the way that history is remembered by people which interests Khan who weaves together the post-partition history of the subcontinent by amalgamating oral testimonies and research to reveal the different ways in which the past is remembered by the

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people and official histories. The former are experienced and felt, while official histories do not go beyond the mere facts and happenings.

Located as Khan is in the States, a question which is of dominant concern to her is: "What is a homeland?" Does it consist of personal ties, memories or history? From where does the sense of belonging arise and can a sense of belonging be transferred to other locations? The answers she finds are varied as she works with different historical phases – the Partition of India, the war which led to the birth of Bangladesh and the dominance of the US in Pakistan with CIA activities at their peak in the early eighties. The questions that hover in the background are many and also very different from each other, although they are dominantly concerned with the areas of freedom and equality and the recognition of human beings in relation to one another. The concept of a nation space emerges very differently in each of her novels as Khan interrogates the meanings of nation and history.

The sense of a homeland is anchored in nation space, a category which Benedict Anderson has described as "an imagined community" (6), as at no point does one see the whole nation or the whole community. It is a feeling of affiliation and cultural oneness as it is also the love of the land. As human beings, the sense of belonging to a family, a people and a country is of importance for the formation of our identities as also for a sense of security. In the case of diaspora, this "place of origin" may be the focus of a sustained "ideology of return" as Avtar Brah (180) mentions, or it can still figure as a place in the present or be seen as belonging entirely to the past. Defining history, R.G. Collingwood in Carr's *What is History* states, "History is the past as created in the present" (1). It is difficult to define the past because the past is "an ocean of factual things most of which are sunk out of sight into the depths of oblivion" (1). It is impossible to create the past in the present but it can be done up to an extent with the tools available and by the motivations which happen to provoke our curiosity. Thus, writing history involves selection and interpretation of events and approaches.

Yet why do we go back to history? History helps us understand people and societies. It also gives us information about how people and societies behaved. Just as experiments are conducted in a laboratory to come to certain conclusions, History serves as an imperfect laboratory, and information from the past serves as our most vital evidence as to why and how the human species behaves in a certain way. It also helps us understand change and how the society we live in came to be. At the same time, it offers a terrain for moral contemplation.

Memory, on the other hand, is the name given to the ability human beings have to remember things from the past, which may include timespans from a few hours ago or even a few months or years ago. If we ask ourselves the purpose of memory, the answer is that some scientists regard survival as the

primary imperative of memory. Cognitive psychologist Margaret W. Matlin has described memory as the “process of retaining information over time” (6). Others have defined it as the ability to use our past experiences to determine our future path. Stouck believes that the act of remembering is always contextual, “a continuous process of reconstructing the past in terms of the present and in the light of the anticipated future” (24). Today memory has become a significant theme in contemporary literature which is the key to personal, social and cultural identity. Perhaps it is also a very significant ingredient of our existential survival, for human beings cannot live merely in the present.

The three novels by Sorayya Khan – *Noor* (2003), *Five Queen’s Road* (2009) and *City of Spies* (2015) – reflect on both history and memory with the narratives being related at significant junctures. While *Five Queen’s Road* is the eponymous house that represents the ravaged country after Partition, *Noor* deals with the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971 and *City of Spies* engages with the aftermath of the 1977 coup in Pakistan during which the then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was overthrown in a military coup orchestrated by Gen. Zia ul Haque. The independence of India, the Partition and the Bangladesh war are all violent ruptures in the normal course of life which must lead to a “return” of order. Partition is for both India and Pakistan the catastrophe that brought about mass migration and dislocation and as such is central to contemporary scholarship on homeland, war and history. It has been indelibly imprinted onto the regional consciousness by memories of almost unimaginable violence. Ayesha Jalal, the acclaimed Pakistani-American historian, has named Partition “the central historical event in twentieth century South Asia” (4). She states, “A defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, Partition continues to influence how the peoples and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present and future” (4).

Following the historical chronology of events in the subcontinent I begin with the discussion of *Five Queen’s Road* which narrates the story of a Hindu, Dina Lal, who finds it difficult even to think of migrating at the time of Partition in 1947. Though his wife has misgivings about staying back in Lahore, Dina Lal is adamant about staying on in the house which he had purchased from an Englishman. Home for him is the familiar space, not a line drawn on the map. As a precaution, he divides the house into two parts and invites the family of a respectable Muslim widower, Amir Shah, to move into the “front house” so that Dina Lal could protect his family by staying in the “back house.” *Five Queen’s Road* is based on actual events in Khan’s family history. As a writer, she has always been interested in the relationship between the personal and the political. She says, “I think of myself as having grown up in Pakistan. Pakistan – the place, the people, the history, the politics, the culture – is endlessly absorbing to me as a person and as a writer; all my fiction writing is grounded in Pakistan” (“Five Queen’s Road” 2). Into this Muslim family comes a foreign

daughter-in-law, Irene, who carries the weight of her own history and memories of World War II. Initially Dina Lal and Amir Shah live amicably but soon this harmony is disrupted. Commenting upon the novel Sorayya Khan writes, "In the beginning Five Queen's Road was my Pakistan. The house didn't belong to me, and although it was my grandparents' home, it didn't belong to them either, when I first arrived as a child the inhabitants had already been mired in the war for so long their memories were blurred and no one I knew could accurately recall its trajectory" ("Five Queen's Road" 3). She further says that only two things were worth remembering – "her family had neither instigated nor perpetuated the conflict" ("Five Queens's Road" 3). In the novel, Dina Lal not only purchases this house in Lahore and keeps Amir Shah as his tenant, he also converts to Islam and changes his name to D.L. Ahmed. This house, thus partitioned, is like India partitioned into India and Pakistan. The question "to whom does the house belong" recurs time and again in the novel. When Irene asks, "Whose house is this?" Zafar retorts, "No one's" (65-66). Again, when answering a constable's questions after his wife is abducted, Dina Lal proudly waves his hand to include the vast expanse of the entire grand yellow house, declaring, "And this is my house" (87). This dreadful incident could not make him change his mind about leaving Lahore city: "he was not leaving Lahore, his home, his love, for anything" (89). Janoo's loss is very great for Dina Lal, and her absence is like "lead in his already creaking bones" (149). He has a strong conviction that the afternoon mail will bring him a letter from Janoo (126). In the end, he dies a lonely man without any family as his wife, Janoo, had been abducted and his sons had crossed over to India.

The partition of the house, which began on friendly terms, soon escalates into border disputes; the cracks in the house are symbolic of animosity between Dina Lal and Amir Shah. The house represents the homeland. Just as India and Pakistan became two countries separated by Radcliff's Line, similarly Five Queen's Road undergoes division. Beneath this strange relationship they still care about one another. When Dina Lal is stabbed outside his house, Javid, Shah's son, takes him to the hospital. Similarly, when the Shah's "library" wall collapses in a storm, Lal saves him from injury and death. Just as India was a united country where, with Partition, there was a migration and loss of the homeland, similarly Five Queen's Road, which had once been grand and beautiful, was now in ruins. Thus Five Queen's Road undergoes a process of decay, representative of widespread violence and loss across India and Pakistan. The beautiful gardens of the house are spoilt when a group of car mechanics set up shop on one of the lawns. The house is gradually encroached upon by the car shop mechanics and also a sweeper's colony, and the occupants' long standing animosity reaches new heights.

The house, Five Queen's Road, is portrayed like a character in the novel. Just as the political and social climate of Lahore changes overnight so does this

house. Dalrymple, in an article “The Great Divide: The Violent Legacy of Indian Partition,” writes: “Across the Indian subcontinent communities that had co-existed for almost a millennium attacked each other in a terrifying outbreak of sectarian violence – with Hindus and Sikhs on one side and Muslims on the other – a mutual genocide as unexpected as it was unprecedented.” He further suggests that today both India and Pakistan “remain crippled by the narratives built around the memories of the crimes of Partition.” In *Midnight’s Furies*, Nisid Hajari, who has written a history of Partition and its aftermath, states that “Foot caravans of destitute refugees fleeing the violence stretched for fifty miles and more.... Within a few months the topography of South Asia had changed irrevocably” (24).

There is much in common between *Five Queen’s Road* and Manto’s short story “Toba Tek Singh.” Both deal with the aftermath of the most unprecedented and barbaric events in the history of the subcontinent, that is Partition, and the madness that accompanied it. Since Dina Lal lived in Lahore before Partition, he considers it to be his homeland; similarly, the concept of homeland in the short story has strong emotive nuances, an intense rootedness in the place he has lived in and known all his life. The birth of a new country is totally irrelevant to him. Bishan Singh is confined to a lunatic asylum and all of a sudden the repatriation scheme includes the lunatics as well. Bishan Singh’s family has left for India but he is unable to understand where Pakistan is located. All he remembers and recognises is the hamlet of his birth, Toba Tek Singh. But when he is forcibly sent away, he collapses on the border, caught between two countries. The story ends with Bishan Singh in no man’s land between the barbed wire fences. Just as Bishan Singh cannot understand why he is being uprooted from his homeland, similarly, Dina Lal refuses to leave Lahore. Even the manner of Dina Lal’s death has a similarity with that of Bishan Singh. Dina Lal was found “lying in the narrow crack between the two mattresses of his bed” (192). Both the works offer a critique of the “vivisection” of India.

Noor, Sorayya Khan’s debut novel, written prior to *Five Queen’s Road* takes history forward to another division – the partition of Pakistan, effected through the Bangladesh war of 1971. Ali, a Pakistani soldier, brings home a young girl of “five-and-six” (57), Sajida, whom he and his mother, the latter affectionately called Nanijaan, raise as their own. It is again a novel where history and memory coalesce. The year 1971 is etched in the collective consciousness of Bangladeshis, Pakistanis as well as Indians. In “Bangladesh Untold Facts” Shariful Haq Dalim writes, “For Bangladeshis 1971 was the year of blood and tears, for Pakistan deep humiliation and for the Indians of triumph” (23). 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.” It is estimated that the devastating cyclone killed a million people and about three million died in the war. Khan believes that history is a narrative no different than fiction and adds that history textbooks tell us only one side of history.

Silence and forgetting, believes Khan, are crucial to war and if we honestly understood the experiences of war we would not send our soldiers to “obliterate” people on the other side and upon their return accept them back into our families as fathers, husbands, sons, brothers and uncles. It is this silence and forgetting surrounding the 1971 war that prompted Sorayya Khan to write her debut novel *Noor*. In this connection, she writes, “I believe we are all complicit in the history which unfolds around us and that we bear some responsibility to stand up for it” (“Silence and Forgetting” 1). Since the dimension of collective silence operates on a “societal” level, Khan took up the challenge of writing *Noor*. As 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).

The stories of this war, Khan admits in “The Silence and Forgetting that wrote *Noor*,” terrorised her and she wanted “to study the effects of war in the theatre of a family” (124). She could not reconcile herself to the fact that they who had perpetrated horrors on others could easily slide back into society as easily “as if they’d been away on a hiatus, a vacation of some kind” (124). These soldiers could return to their families as they were all people with pasts and histories and memories that collude in ways that let them survive. Khan was nagged by the question, “How can people move on after witnessing or participating in the horror of the war?” (125). Thus she made a trip to Bangladesh and she witnessed that the topography of the land was defined by the 1971 war: “Each traffic roundabout appeared to hold a remnant of the war – a captured tank, a downed Air Force plane, other recovered war machinery” (125). For the arduous task of penning *Noor*, she interviewed soldiers who had fought in the 1971 war. She found out that there existed a similarity between tsunami survivors and such soldiers who had participated in the war. Though “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” (“Silence and Forgetting” 5). When Khan landed in Bangladesh to embark on her research, the humongous question before her was how could she chronicle misery. She says, “I fell back on the landscape, the topography of the country and the stories I’d been told” (“The Sound of Conversation” 194). She took up the job of the artist who makes “loss comprehensible to others, to discover in the loss, what is shared by the audience and therefore, to explore the shared loss in all of us” (“The Sound of Conversation” 193). Although there is a lot of literature on the 1971 war, very little of it has come from Pakistan.

Noor oscillates between East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), where the past of the protagonists is buried, and West Pakistan, where they are living at present. The novel examines how war changes the lives and the “psyche” of the people. During the 1971 war, Ali, a young West Pakistani soldier, finds a child of “five and six” [sic] wandering bewildered along a pavement in Dhaka. Ali decides to bring this orphan child, Sajida, to Islamabad and raises her as his own daughter. After his return, Ali, like almost all soldiers, never speaks of his participation in the war. He believes, “his story, the sum of horrible details” is “neatly stored away” (63) and is best confined to silence. It is a story of violence and defeat. Ali’s mother, Nanijaan, too, never questions him about the past. Sajida finds a saviour in Ali as he has given her a life of love and security. As she was very young in Dhaka her memories of her childhood are bleak and remote, and she faintly remembers her fisherfolk family which was lost in the devastating cyclone.

When Ali returns home with Sajida, he asks her to call him her father, gives up meat and God, and takes a scalding bath to cleanse himself of his sins. Soon after, he closes the wartime chapter of his life. Sajida grows up in his house, loved and doted upon alike by Ali and Nanijaan. She gets a new family in Pakistan with Ali as her father and Nanijaan as her grandmother; it is an odd family, with a bachelor father and the girl’s relationship to his mother converted to a maternal rather than grandmotherly kinship – Nani instead of Dadi. It is a family with colour differences and different cultural heritages. Eventually when she marries Hussein, Ali insists that Hussein live with them. As time goes by Sajida becomes the mother of two young boys. When the novel opens, Sajida is expecting her third child, who is the child after whom the novel is titled. Noor, meaning light and brightness, is afflicted with Down syndrome. Hussein, who had loved his boys, is unable to accept his daughter’s abnormality, whereas for Sajida, Noor is endowed with something mysterious and magical. The child is also possessive about her space and almost throws her father out of the bedroom.

On her first birthday when Noor is gifted a box of crayons by Nanijaan, she proceeds to colour the sheet of paper blue, ignoring all other colours. Sajida appreciates the pictures, seeing in them memories of the ocean of her childhood days, whereas Hussein throws away those sheets “in the garbage” (31). It is a surprise for the family that “Noor was not chewing on the crayons or tearing the paper-wrappings from them as her brothers had done at her age” (29). Very soon Noor establishes that “her affinity for crayons and paper was not an accident” (30). Noor exhibits a strong aptitude for using colours, inspired by a kind of extraordinary clairvoyance. Her drawings reveal forgotten and even lost fragments of personal memories of her mother and her grandfather, Ali. Though Noor’s own father, Hussein, had rejected and discarded her, she proves to be a special child who is, in fact, “a connection between her mother and her

grandfather and their hidden past" (56). Ali's past was locked in "his head a wall-sized cabinet of drawers that could be nailed closed" (59). Initially Noor's drawings are only pages and pages filled with the blue colour. But one day Sajida recognises that "Noor's blue was movement" (31). When she examines those drawings carefully, "Sajida could almost see ripples of water running away from the edge of a beach" (31). Sajida's past is brought back by Noor's drawings "her father's fishing boat against the sand banks and also the fishing nets swimming and bending below the blue of Noor's crayons" (31). Khan has made use of the flashback at the structural level in her narration. Hence the novel moves back and forth in time.

Commenting on the psychological meaning of the drawings, Sehole says, "The recurrent image of water becomes an image of both destruction as well as redemption" (68). The blue colour of the drawings makes the characters confront their suppressed past in order to fill the void within themselves. Water is also symbolic of the destructive cyclone which struck East Pakistan in 1970 and in which Sajida's family and millions of others had drowned. It also reminds Sajida of the "wall of water" that ripped her apart from her family. Sorayya Khan has made use of the dialectics between forgetting and remembrance. She considers memory both as a cultural and a genetic category. Scientists have recently confirmed that genes can pass down memories of our ancestors to us. In an article titled "Memories Pass between Generations," James Gallagher says, "The experiences of a parent, even before conceiving, markedly influence both structure and function in the nervous system of subsequent generations" (1). Dr. Brian Dias, one of the researchers, told the BBC, "Transgenerational epigenetic inheritance might be one mechanism descendants show imprints of their ancestors" (2). Genetic memory is not an entirely new concept. In 1940 A.A. Brill quoted Dr. William Carpenter who wrote thus: "We sometimes have a peculiar example of the possession of an extraordinary congenital aptitude for certain mental activity which showed itself at so early a period as to exclude the notion that it could have been acquired by the experience of the individual" (2). In a pioneering book, titled *Mystery of the Mind*, Wilder Penfield refers to three types of memory. Firstly, racial memory which is equivalent to genetic memory, secondly, memory associated with "conditioned reflexes" and thirdly, "experiential memory." The two latter kinds of memory could be applied to "habit or procedural" memory and "cognitive or semantic memory." Whereas in "genetic or racial memory," the concept of a genetic transmission of sophisticated knowledge well beyond instincts is necessary to explain how gifted children can know things they never learned. In scientific literature the concept of "biological memory" or "genetic memory" suggests that human beings have the ability to pass on important survival information in the genes.

Noor's paintings begin to decipher Sajida's past and gradually also Ali's story of what he had seen and gone through during the war. Ali as a soldier of

West Pakistan had brutally killed men and violated women, but he does not remember how many. Her drawings demand that Ali unlock his past, his war-secrets; even Nanijaan questions him. Both Sajida and Ali are tied together by the horrifying circumstances of the war. As Noor grows older she begins to draw other scenes – for instance, a fishing boat and fishing nets in addition to her cyclone drawings. The images that emerge bring to life a forgotten past of separation and death. “Wrapped like a snake in a tree high above the swirling waters, young Sajida had survived near rotting fish in torn nets when the rest of her family had perished” (167). Noor’s surrealistic drawings moving beyond the visible, vividly convey to us sights, sounds, smells as well as sensations of the past, as Noor persists in her merciless questioning of Ali:

But what did you do in the war?
 Noor persisted, playing with the cracked plastic of the bucket.
 Fight people.
 Why?
 Ali couldn’t remember. (183)

He had gone to East Pakistan with the heartache of a broken love affair. Later he was not sure any of the things he had been told had ever rung true to him. As Ali remembers, “Killing wasn’t nearly the worst of it” (59). Thus, the cruelty of the war is thrust upon us by Ali’s memories.

Ali, who had built a new house for the whole family, “had fortified the inner sanctity of his home with rooms on all sides in the same way that he’d fortified himself against marriage” (39). His mother, Nanijaan, knew that her son’s choice of house spoke to the “dark secrets all men of war shared” (39). When Ali was twenty-three he went to war and when he returned to Islamabad “nine months later, battered by typhoid and the staggering facts of the war, clutching a child of five and six, in his arms” (56), Ali was a changed man. When Ali was flying to East Pakistan he saw that “East Pakistan was beautiful. Lush and green the way West Pakistan never was even during the monsoons” (93). When he landed in Dhaka he found, “Dried mud was preserved in the most unlikely of places –tops of trees, airplane hangars, tin roof of the barracks” (94). When Sorayya Khan arrived at Banda Aceh after the tsunami of 2004 she found the topography of the place (even two years after the tsunami struck) very similar to a war-torn region: destroyed homes, battered landscape, barracks-like housing, devastated families. The war of 1971 had a similar effect.

When Noor draws oil barrels “stacked like a pyramid against the dirty white of the wall” after visiting Hussein’s factory, Sajida is amazed. Noor’s drawings become difficult to discern. “They were windows into another world, far away and distant” (117). Sajida reminisces that when she wandered from the house and walked the road in Dhaka, “a mountain of tin barrels stood against a

wall. They were... a medley of blues, whites, greens, reds" (119). Later in the novel when Ali sees the drawings of the river into two parallel streams – half pink and the other half grey, it occurred to him that "Noor's drawing was a manifestation of what he'd locked away so carefully years ago in the cabinets of his mind" (141). He understands that "his past had arrived" (141). Both Ali and Sajida are forever joined by "a pit of mud at the beginning of the monsoons in a land more than a thousand miles removed from the shadows of the Margalla Hill" (218) where they and Nanijaan "became family." In the article "Memories Never Die," Vinita Nangia Dawar argues that memories do not die and they "stay within us as well as surrounding us" (1). We may try not to think of them and cast them away, yet "bits and pieces of memory remain suspended where we were" (2). Dawar goes to the extent of declaring that our DNA is but "memories carried from our ancestors to us" (2).

Khan believes that the sounds of silence associated with war are a threat to the family and West Pakistan's soldiers should be reconciled with society and then only can a personal healing process begin. The story of the family is ultimately the story of Pakistan. Hence Khan in *Noor* shows how a child with seeming indifference towards the origin of traumatic experience helps a family repossess it in another form, that of art. Just as Ali brings home Sajida, an orphan, gives her love and a home in West Pakistan and thus purges himself of his guilt in the war that he had participated in, Yasmin Saikia narrates the experiences of Kader Siddiqui, Bangladesh's most highly decorated freedom fighter:

When he and his wife visited the hospital as part of their civic duty, the helpless face of the little infant girl was unforgettable to them. Seeking permission of their two teenage children he and his wife decided to adopt the baby. For him it was immaterial whether she was a Bihari, or Bengali, Muslim or Hindu as he admitted, this human gesture has made him whole again, the ghosts of the war that had haunted him are now at rest. Recognising and celebrating the humanity of a stranger, the baby, he finds himself a human capable of responding to his human needs and that of another, and he finds peace. (286-87)

Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2009) also has the Bangladesh war for independence as its backdrop. Despite her diasporic distance from Bangladesh, Anam constructs herself as a Bangladeshi author and her fiction contributes to a Bangladeshi national narrative. She traces the history of the birth of Bangladesh through the history of a family and its neighbourhood. She records a portion of history by looking back home. In the opening pages of the novel she gives the reason for the occurrence of this war:

West Pakistan is bleeding us out. We earn most of the foreign exchange. We grow rice. We make the jute and yet we get nothing – no schools, no hospitals, no army. We can't even speak our bloody language. (29)

But while Tahmima Anam is interested in the political causes of the 1971 war, Sorayya Khan is concerned about the impact of violence on human lives – individuals, families and communities. If Anam emphasises the power of familial love, *Noor* dramatises the first step towards healing and forgiveness that can follow the expression of traumatic and painful memories and experiences “after all the years of silence” (190). Pakistan’s history from 1947 to 1971 was marked by political instability and economic difficulties. Since 1947 itself, frictions developed between East and West Pakistan which were separated by more than one thousand miles of Indian territory. Linguistic, cultural and ethnic differences also contributed to the estrangement of East Pakistan from West Pakistan. Both Sorayya Khan and Tahmima Anam look homewards to present a different side of the war. The inability of a defeated Pakistan to squarely confront its own history and take charge of the injured psyche of its prisoners of war who still lived in their traumatised and non-heroic world led to national amnesia which *Noor*, the child, seeks to break. *Noor* has also foregrounded the simple kindnesses that appear in the aftermath of the war.

Khan’s third novel *City of Spies* (2015) again takes up a young girl as a central character and in this case she is both the observer and narrator. Aliya’s narrative covers crucial years of Pakistani history that includes Gen. Zia’s coup, Prime Minister Bhutto’s hanging and the burning of the US Embassy in Islamabad. Khan, who had seen a more tolerant society when she was young, is disturbed to see Islamabad (her hometown) become a mess of a city. Aliya, the child protagonist, convinces the readers how “we are defined by the wars we have lived” (1). The background is the fickleness of peace in the political arena. Her father is a diplomat with the UN in Europe and has been deputed to his homeland with his Dutch wife, Irene, and their children. The novel has autobiographical undertones. Daughter of a Pakistani father and a Dutch mother, Aliya’s narrative carries within it Khan’s autobiographical background, for her mixed parentage also comes from a Pakistani father and a Dutch mother. Whenever Aliya is asked the question of where she is from – where does she belong – she variously answers Austria (the land of her birth), Holland (maternal affiliation) and Pakistan (paternal affiliation). Every day at school she faces animosity for not being either white or from a full-fledged Pakistan family. “What was I anyway? Half Pakistani? Half Dutch? Half Austrian? And did my accent, the generic one, American schools cultivated, make me part American, regardless of my protests?” (104).

The pandemonium in Aliya’s “half-half” mind is constantly reflected in her thoughts. She knows very well that her world comprises two universes but she

realises that learning Urdu, her native tongue, may help “decide which universe I wanted to be in and when” (42), although furtively. Once when she discloses to her grandfather that she can speak Urdu, he outrightly declares, “You always did. It’s in your blood” (132). Identity is a major issue in the novel. Who one is in Pakistan is a question that is explored here. A similar feeling has been narrated by Sayantani Dasgupta who recalls growing up in an almost all White, Mid-western American suburb, where she was one of the few “brown” girls. Growing up among an “ocean of blonde hair and blue eyes,” her feelings about her appearance, she notes, were “particularly low” (121). In her first ever interview on Curious Fans Club, Sorayya Khan notes that she herself rather enjoys her “half-half” status. She states that her interest in writing stems partly from being half-Pakistani and half-Dutch, an identity that has provided her with an “outsider’s” perspective in two cultures; this made her comfortable as an observer, a necessity as a writer. The autobiographical burden of the writer – a mixed heritage, a move to Pakistan as a young child, growing up in 1970s Islamabad and also attending an American school – are mentioned in the novel.

Khan has acknowledged that besides many similarities between Aliya and herself there are many differences as well. Aliya is shown as an eleven year old whereas Sorayya Khan was seventeen in 1979 and had already left Pakistan for further studies. The events that occur in the novel are a reconstruction of past history as Aliya’s present, and are fiction. *City of Spies* narrates the story of dislocation which raises questions of national belonging. Aliya believes that “being white is... being whole” (12). Her mother has turned “brown” by being “married to [her] father... though, of course, you couldn’t tell by looking” (13).

As the novel progresses, one happening that encroaches upon Aliya’s life is the death of the little son of their family retainer Hanif, who dies in a hit-and-run accident; the driver responsible for the accident seems to be close to her family. This tragic incident is the central pivot of this novel. She is guilt ridden because she feels had she known the Urdu language she could have communicated with Hanif more. The culprit for causing this accident is Anne Simon, the mother of Aliya’s best American friend. She had behaved in her personal life just as the American government behaved in the world, doing whatever they wanted without suffering any consequences. Aliya says that “Knowing who’d killed Hanif made the spaces in my life fall into each other like collapsing sand dunes” (77).

Aliya takes a long time to understand that learning a language is only one aspect of the power of communication. She starts learning Urdu and begins to think of herself as Pakistani. A riot which results in the burning of the American Embassy brings about a fissure in the relations between the family and Sadiq. Her views about the riot are:

I was suddenly reminded of Klackers, the game of two balls suspended on a string. When one ball hit the other, the klick-klack sent it careening. Countries were connected to each other the same way, which made our world a very scary place. (208)

The violence and tragedy that occur in Aliya's surroundings are a microcosm of the tumultuous political landscape of Pakistan. For instance Bhutto is overthrown by the military, newspapers have no liberty now and all mails arrive opened. There is a curfew-like situation everywhere and Islamabad is teeming with spies: "No one knew what they were really doing since most of them were assumed to be spies" (116). At the close of the novel, Pakistan has been transformed into a chaotic land. The former Prime Minister has been hanged, the first death in a long line of murders in Pakistan's political landscape, and General Zia takes over the reins of the country's legal and political system. Aliya is of the view that "My story and the story of my country were woven into one" (221). The novel depicts how even the children of a country are affected by the political upheaval there.

Aliya's ethnicity forces her to face a world of contradictions in her search for identity. Is she Pakistani or European? Is she fair or is she brown? It is a story of her emotional and cultural growth. She is taken aback when she sees American children insulting Pakistani children and even spitting on them from the windows of their school bus, which is actually a game for the American children. The incredible acts of racism by her schoolmates shock her. Spitting is an obvious metaphor for the developed world's disregard for and insults towards the underprivileged innocent people in poorer countries.

When we have novels written from a child's point of view the narrative tends to focus on psychology and the elements of fear, distrust, curiosity and compassion become dominant. Aliya has the ability to enter the trauma felt by the parents on the boy's death, though she takes a long time to understand the estrangement between husband and wife. The demarcations between power and powerlessness are sharp enough but she is unable to comprehend the silences of the adult world or the nature of political compromise. But it is through Aliya's suspicion and prying eyes that the reader is compelled to see the loss of freedom at a political level. Aliya, like Lenny in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, is an innocent witness to the callousness of the violence of Partition in 1947. Lenny is dominantly in the company of servants and is an eavesdropper. Aliya is curious and behaves as a young detective and her sympathies are with those at the receiving end of violence. But the claustrophobic atmosphere of the *City of Spies* is overpowering, pointing out the loss of freedom at both political and moral levels. An advantage of having a child narrator is that it allows the telling of the story through a different lens, and offers a quicker path into the emotional heart of the narrative. This point of view can offer a quicker path

into the emotional heart of the narrative. Both Sidhwa and Khan have made a conscious effort to deliver a child's voice, which allows readers to suspend disbelief and enter into the story. Both Aliya and Lenny are astute beyond their age, yet both the authors have skilfully portrayed the questioning nature of the child and dealt with serious subjects subtly.

An element of claustrophobia pervades all the three novels through a variety of means. In *Five Queen's Road* it is the house, in *Noor*, the surrealistic paintings and in *City of Spies* the national space is under siege. Shrinking spaces of identity, homeland and freedom mark this topography of loss. There are images of fortification in all three of them: In *Five Queen's Road*, Dina Lal's house with the dining table against a wall, acting as a barrier; in Ali's case he has "fortified the inner sanctity of his home with rooms on all sides in the same way that he'd fortified himself against marriage" (39) and in *City of Spies*, Islamabad has become a mess of a city compared to what it was in the 1970s when it boasted of clean and wide roads. It is a city under invasion as an endless range of security barricades are built. Not only the physical space in the city, but also the lives of the characters in the novel have become claustrophobic. Newspapers are banned, mail is opened before delivery, and Islamabad is under surveillance.

Sorayya Khan believes that it is only through words, both written and spoken, that understanding and consequent forgiveness can be achieved. In *City of Spies*, Sorayya Khan emphasises the possibility of a reconciliation through communication, hence the stress on language. The city may be full of spies and people may make errors but they are also capable of forgiveness and surprising humanity. Working with history, she consistently focuses on relationships and a move towards peace, as Ali's composite family indicates. I conclude the paper with a reference to an interview Sorayya Khan gave to *Prothom Alo*, a Bangladesh newspaper: "The way we write ourselves and our memories make our histories. We have a responsibility not to be silent, not to forget, to ask questions, to demand that our histories and our memories reconcile in peace" (2).

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