

**TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND BELONGING: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NOOR BY  
SORAYYA KHAN**

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**Abstract**

*This research paper looks into the narrative techniques applied by Sorayya Khan in her most acclaimed work, Noor(2003), examining the author's use of magical realism as a literary technique in order to highlight the major historical issues of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). The various complexities encountered by a Postcolonial nation-state, i.e., one's cultural heritage, human experience, and identity are being highlighted in the work. Through a close reading and an in-depth study of the text, this study reveals how Khan's use of magical elements, such as the protagonist's capacity to dream her parent's past memories, her extraordinary artistic skill, fulfils the notion of magical realism by complicating the boundaries between real and the supernatural. By examining the interconnectedness of dreams, memories, history, and personal narrative, this research demonstrates how magic realism in Noor enables a meticulous study of themes such as; sense of belonging, displacement, dislocation and the search for an identity and meaning in the Postcolonial era. This study further contributes to the fields of Postcolonial studies, literary theory, and memory studies, offering insights into the ways in which magic realism can be studied to illuminate the intricacies of human condition.*

**Keywords:** Magic realism, Postcolonial studies, Literary theory, Trauma studies, Memory studies.

### **Introduction**

Sorayya Khan's *Noor* is a groundbreaking work of fiction in the realm of English literature well known for its potential of blending the socio-political complexities of postcolonial nation with the dream-like visions of magical realism. She gains a remarkable achievement by incorporating magical elements into the historical and cultural narrative, thereby confronting the conventional narrative structure while presenting a unique and an all-engaging reading experience. Khan does not limit her writing style to the direct unfolding of the war narrative, on the other hand, she applies magical realism as a narrative technique in order to introduce the extraordinary. Thus, the author's application of magical realism turns out to be an essential part of the narrative.

The extraordinary elements in the texts such as the power of retrocognition, which means, the supernatural ability to perceive past incidents, the supernatural ability of a child suffering from Down's syndrome are the extraordinary writing skills of Sorayya Khan which is ever-engaging. In the text, the exceptional child 'Noor' born with down's syndrome carries the power of retrocognition since childhood that gradually unfolds the unknown and hidden past of her parents. It serves as a metaphorical representation of the multifaceted nature of the revolutionary war that took place in 1971 East Pakistan. The combination of historical and the supernatural challenges the generally accepted norms of storytelling and also gives room to allegorical elements. Here, magical realism serves the purpose of a literary device hinting at the larger, deeper meaning lying below the surface level of the narrative.

Magic realism, magical realism, or marvelous realism is an outstanding genre of fiction writing and art where the fantastic and the real lie side by side. The magical stays grounded to the real world while hinting at the underlying elements of reality that is metaphorically represented. The term was propounded by Franz Roh, a German historian, photographer, and art critic in the year 1925, whereby he described the surrealist paintings of the German art form as magical realist. In literature, namely, the Columbian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez with his work, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and the Indian-based British novelist Salman Rushdie with his work, *Midnight's Children* (1981) are prominent for first applying the writing technique in their respective works. They combined the supernatural and the realistic elements in their fiction in order to either satirize the government or bring out the hypocrisies of their society. Following their writing style, many postcolonial novelists found it interesting and at the same time useful in

focusing on the postcolonial issues of the nation. Maggie Ann Bowers, a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Portsmouth, UK, in her research on *Magic(al)Realism* (2007), states that “magic(al) realism holds immense political possibilities in its disruptions of categories.” (23) This is what grabs the attention of various readers while focusing on the postcolonial literary narratives. And Sorayya Khan’s *Noor* is one such text where the author indirectly hints at the political aspects of the postcolonial nation while applying magical elements.

*Noor* is based on the author’s childhood experiences and recollections of Pakistan’s disorderly and unstable state. Her characters bring out the socio-political confusions of the period during the war between East and West Pakistan. The characters do not experience nostalgia, on the other hand, they bring out the trauma experienced due to the unsettling and painful condition of Pakistan. The exceptional child Noor’s paintings are so realistic and moving that the readers can directly connect to the incidents that took place during the war of East Pakistan, such as, the violent ocean during the cyclone, and the corruption, carnage, rape, exploitation, and mass graves witnessed during the war. There is not much information about the East Pakistan war, only a passing reference as a public revolt is being mentioned as we look into the history textbooks. While the official history fails to acknowledge the reality behind the liberation war of East Pakistan, perhaps it is only Noor upon whom we can rely on. Although suffering from down’s syndrome, Noor has a supernatural capacity to unfold the historical facts while breaking the prolonged silence. The supernatural dreams and visions and the extraordinariness in Noor’s drawings reveals the realistic happenings of the past while unfolding the historical facts. Thus, Magical Realism serves as an aesthetic way of representing the absurdity of the Bangladesh war, resulting into the Partition of East and West Pakistan. Partition Granting Noor, the extraordinary power to look into the past lives of her parents and drawing the exact scenes of the traumatic memories of the cyclone of 1970 and the war succeeding it in 1971, gives us a detailed account of the historical moment. Magical realism becomes a machinery that works in deeply penetrating into the psychology of the characters. The unique talent of Noor brings onto the surface the internal conflicts of the characters, namely, her mother, Sajida and grandfather, Ali and the impact of their personal narratives on the broader cultural landscape. While enriching the reading experience, magical realism allows the readers to connect with the characters on both a physical and psychological level.

In her text, Khan has employed the girl child Noor suffering from down’s syndrome with a purpose. With the supernatural or God-gifted drawing skill, she becomes the site of historical

artifacts. The exceptional child with supernatural ability to draw realistic paintings gives rise to the surreal nature of postcolonial circumstances. Noor's extraordinary artistic skills function as a literary device that were "windows into another world, far away and distant, which might have ceased to exist without Noor". (117) Once Noor drew a multicoloured painting of "a beautiful, calligraphic version of one word: God". The "Allah" seemed miraculous to Nanijaan and she believed that "Noor's drawings were invocations to God." (49) The authors application of magical realism not only focuses on a new side of war narrative but also motivates the postcolonial authors to analyse and embrace the captivating possibilities of magical realism. By applying magical realism, Khan combines the mundane life of a domestic household with the supernatural, giving an extraordinary touch to the historical narrative.

The surrealist paintings of Noor draw out the pain and suffering of her parent's long lost or the forgotten fragments of the essential part of their lives that define who they were and what was their relationship to the broader concept of nation. The novel gradually moves backward from the dry land of the present-day Islamabad, Pakistan (then West Pakistan) to the green and beautiful landscapes of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Contributing to the field of the dominant psychology model of trauma in literary criticism, Michelle Balaev in his famous essay "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" (2008) suggests that "Descriptions of the geographic place of traumatic experience and remembrance situate the individual in relation to a larger cultural context that contains social values that influence the recollection of the event and the reconfiguration of the self." (149) It spreads awareness about the tragic disaster of Bhola cyclone of 1970 that shook the East Pakistanis to the core while playing havoc and displacing them. Soon after the disaster in 1971, the West Pakistan government sent military coups to execute illegal power upon the East Pakistanis, (the intellectuals and locals, alike) who raised their voice against the unfeeling government in favour of the helpless citizens. Noor's paintings were movement, describing the beauty of landscapes while heading towards the absurdity of the war of East Pakistan resulting into the Partition. The abstract brush strokes turned out to be the factual recordings of the bloodshed and carnage of war.

Set in the backdrop of the liberation war of East Pakistan, struggling against the colonial regime of West Pakistan, the text revolves around the exceptional child protagonist, possessing a supernatural potential to draw the suppressed memories of her mother, Sajida and grandfather, Ali. The colours splashed onto the canvas revive the past incidents of her parents who were grappling with the trauma of identity crisis. The pictorial representation of the harrowing violence executed during the colonial suppression of East Pakistan forces them to relive the past

while addressing the present. In their research “Apolitically Political Epic” (2022), Nayab Sadiq et al. opines that “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.” (483) By employing an exceptional child Noor, the author brings out the unspoken truth behind the East Pakistan war while granting agency to the marginalized section in order to resist the grand narrative of the colonial government as in the case of Sajida as an East Pakistani. The text gives us a detailed account of the period of 1971 East Pakistan war where Ali, as a soldier, served the colonial orders of West Pakistan. In order to suppress the East Pakistanis protesting against the indifferent colonial government, West Pakistan applied illegal power, not sparing the innocent. After returning home battered by typhoid and the brutal war experiences, Ali feels disturbed and disgusted towards the acts enacted, whereby he chooses to stay silent regarding the unspeakable acts during war. But later on, with the effortless paintings of his granddaughter Noor, he recounts each and every detail behind his roleplayed during the war. Beginning with the cyclone paintings, Noor reawakens the past lives of her mother, Sajida and grandfather, Ali. For Sajida, like several East Pakistani victims, the cyclone triggers the underlying trauma of the loss of her entire family to the sea. While Ali could gather the memories of the beautiful, green landscapes of East Pakistan monsoons and the violent sea that engulfed their (East Pakistanis) lives, at the same time acknowledging West Pakistan government’s ineffectiveness towards them. These contrasting and conflicting pasts of the victim (Sajida) and the perpetrator (Ali) gives us a deeper understanding of the colonial perspective.

Guided by the supreme power as her name suggests, Noor is able to draw the past scenarios of her parents’ life that helps them in revealing and releasing themselves from the burden they had been carrying so long. The extraordinary and expressionist paintings of Noor not only help Sajida (the victim) and Ali (the perpetrator) in order to identify themselves while giving meaning to their existence, but also symbolises the fate of children like Noor, who are the true manifestation of a traumatized nation. “Trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity”. (Balaev149) The narrative reinforces the notion that the extraordinary behavioural patterns of Noor metaphorically reveal the unspoken history of East Pakistan. Since birth, Noor’s body begins to transform and Ali observes the changes taking place in her physical appearance that turn out to be the reflection of the war babies he witnessed during the East Pakistan war. Later, the abnormal behaviours of Noor like, the cries exhibiting excruciating pain, her indifference towards physical injury, and the dissolving of deep moans at the sound of running water, is the symbolic representation of the inner struggles of her parents. The disabilities,

distortions and abnormality in Noor also mirrors the psychological distortions of her traumatized parents. The extraordinary paintings become a metaphorical lens through which Khan analyses the complexities of identity, belonging and the impact of political forces on individuals.

The opening pages of the text hints at the underlying trauma of the mother (Sajida), who somehow knew that “Noor was Sajida’s secret”(1). Since the night of Noor’s conception, Sajida feels something extraordinary about the baby and she knew that Noor would be different. Sajida dreamt of a magical apparition of an adolescent girl of about twelve who seemed to be strange and “other-worldly”. “Although the girl’s characteristics were other-worldly, they were familiar to Sajida”, and “she recognized the visit from her future.” (2) The amalgamation of ‘other-worldly’ and ‘familiar’ is the essential characteristics of magical realism. Since the age of one, Noor miraculously drew outstanding pictures of the ocean that Sajida recognises to be the Bay of Bengal, giving her a hope in digging out her past. Noor’s drawings of the fishing boat of Sajida’s father and the violent sea waves revive the cyclone, thus restoring Sajida’s history. Likewise, the gruesome war paintings evoke Ali’s past as a soldier, indicative of his participation in the historical phase of East Pakistan, thus giving meaning to his deprived and dejected past. The gruesome and violent past of the cyclone memories of Sajida and the brutal memories of Ali cannot be contained in the confines of their mind. These are the uncontrollable memories that keep on haunting the victims and the perpetrators, resulting into depression and trauma. “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individuals past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on.” (Caruth 4) The novel is scattered with the destruction, violence and suffering caused by war. With the help of Noor’s paintings of the cyclone, the tin barrels on the dusty road of Dhaka, the red river Sitalakhya and Tasveeren, a collection of Ali’s street surveillances in East Pakistan shocks Sajida and Ali and with their own triggered memory they are able to visit and revisit the far-off land of East Pakistan and reimagine the incidents of the past.

Ali tries to get rid of his war experiences by suppressing the horrible memories of the war, unknown of the fact that it has to be released. It is only Noor who triggers his traumatic memories of the Bengali women victims of East Pakistan brought into the cantonments and the absurdity witnessed and executed by him. He remembers the brutal exploitation of Bengali women on the streets by his own troop members just for fun. He reminiscences a woman whom they (Ali and his troop) called Auntie, suffering from both physical and mental injury. He recollects the pits dug in order to bury the rotting corpses, blindly gun firing on the villagers, and

the death of his drivers and various such incidents that hints at the hypocrisy and recklessness of the West Pakistan government that grew due to their (East and West Pakistanis) linguistic and cultural differences. West Pakistan failed to acknowledge the East Pakistani's belonging to the pure land of Pakistan as they resided along with the Hindus. Now after several years, living in the comfort of his house and family while inspecting at the pictorial representations of his own acts, the memories become clear and throws a new light to his life.

Several years later, upon Sajida's enquiry about the war, Nanijaan (Ali's mother) feels the urgency to know about the war. At this point, the author insists that "she had questions. They could not be answered by books, intricate maps or anything else she might read. Something entirely different was demanded. . . . What did Ali *do* in East Pakistan? What did he *see*? What did the boy *find* so far away?" (146-147) When being continuously interrogated by Nanijaan about his role in the war, Ali straightaway rejects her accusing stare answering; "I didn't do anything to them that they didn't do to us first" . . . . "We were fighting for our lives. Not for you. Or this country. For ourselves." (149) In order to justify his acts as a survival strategy and retaliation, he echoes the officials of the West Pakistani government whose orders he used to follow. Noor's paintings challenge these justifications of the horrors of war as she paints the incidents Ali has hidden since the day he returned from war.

Ali's art gallery consisting of Noor's drawings and paintings serves as a historical artifact. Ali realises that after all his past has been excavated and is available for everyone to see and he felt a sort of relief in it. Overburdened with the unspeakable brutality of war not only fractured Ali's psyche but also dissolved his real identity as one of the war veterans in the distant land. One after the other, Noor excavated his whereabouts as a war veteran and provides him strength and an inward eye in order to accept his identity and past life. "It occurred to Ali that Noor's drawing was a manifestation of what he'd locked away so carefully years ago in the cabinets of his mind" (141). Their private memories are made public, for everyone to analyse and understand the colonial discourse that dominated the East Pakistani citizens. The paintings turn out to be the recorders of the snaps and snippets of the various facets constituting the war that eventually turn out to be the historical account. "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims." (Herman 1) Ali's gallery turns out to be the memorial of war as if a historical museum that contains the historical records of war fought and won. But not limiting to the numerical facts, but also generating a familial recognition of the victims of war. The victims were not just faces and bodies but they were family members like Ali's mother, Nanijaan and his cousin who

died at a young age. By creating the domestic and familiar relationships with the victims, the author restores their identity and history.

Looking at the clear images drawn by Noor, of the vague dreams of her past, Sajida revisits her past and is able to secure a part of her identity. And this is where she feels the urge to investigate about the whereabouts of her past, serving as a historical account. Sajida's fading memories of East Pakistan is being safely secured by the paintings of her daughter. Brought to Islamabad, West Pakistan at the age of five, Sajida lives an ambiguous identity and she tries hard to figure out how she ended up in West Pakistan. "The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all." (Caruth 17) The East Pakistan drawings of Noor help Sajida in recollecting the fragments of the dreams and nightmares of East Pakistan. It is only with the help of Noor's drawings that she remembers her roots and origins that she belongs to East Pakistan and her entire family is lost in the cyclone. She laments at the thought of losing her baby brother to the sea whom she held tightly during the cyclone. She remembers her days in the relief camp and also recollects being carried by Ali and brought to West Pakistan. The paintings caused an urgency for Ali and Sajida to talk about the period during the war. It also forces Ali to speak about his and his troops gun firing on the innocent villagers of East Pakistan who attacked them while they were digging a pit in the raging storm. This shocking revelation that she was one among them at the gunpoint makes her realise her true past. Ali's story helps her release from the doubts she held since her childhood days in Islamabad and she realises "the story of her beginning. She recognized it was different now from the one she's carried with her since she was the girl of five and six." (218)

Thus, the text presents a narrative where the stories of the victims and the perpetrators converge and collide, while creating history. Both Sajida and Ali react in different ways at the paintings depicting war. Sajida finds meaning to her vacant life only after getting the knowledge about the war. On the other hand, Ali realises what he actually had done and witnessed in the war and that it will continue to take place inside his mind until he dies. Both the stories of the victim's and the perpetrator's side brings out the deep-seated trauma suffered by them. The main characters who were traumatized due to the crisis and war have wounded psyche, which thereby contribute to their postwar traumas. And by documenting such experiences provide safest outlet to the trauma while constructing a traumatized nation.

### **Conclusion**

Sorayya Khan uses magical realism in order to represent the unrepresented history of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) from an insider's view in a community where memories of the past have been either blurred or erased. The author employs the extraordinary child with great artistic talent, creating various paintings of war and the victims of war, with the purpose of creating a communal memory. Having an outstanding mental capacity and a supernatural drawing skill, Noor becomes the curator of the memories of her parents. Thus, by safely recovering the past memories of real victims and perpetrators of the war survivors, Khan restores the national history of the marginalized. Giving room to both the ordinary and extraordinary in the text, such as, Noor's clairvoyant vision, her realistic paintings and her frequent nightmares, the historical and cultural backdrop of the postcolonial nation is projected.

The real-like nightmares of Noor drawn onto the white sheets are the true representations of her parent's traumatic past. The pictures encountered by her parents forces them to face their past and introspect while restoring meaning to their, otherwise vacant lives. With the help of Noor's supernatural talent, Khan very skilfully captures the essence of a nation that is ever-evolving. A nation that is still struggling to attain an identity after the departure of the colonial rule. The exceptional child emerges as a pivotal character who helps in unfolding the hidden past of her parents, evoking a sense of loss and at the same time a recognition of one's roots. The revelation of the suppressed memories digs out the buried historical facts behind the liberation war of East Pakistan, thereby interweaving the personal and the political. The dream visions visualized by Noor and drawn onto the canvas are both captivating and thought-provoking. The readers cannot neglect and move ahead looking at the art gallery of Ali. The pictorial representations are the suppressed trauma of the main characters; i.e., Sajida and Ali. With her extraordinary ability to dream and imagine the past memories of her parents, she exposes the unspoken secrets of war and grants the opportunity for others to analyse and understand it.

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