



RESEARCH PAPER

**Unveiling the Gothic Dimensions of Memory, Guilt, and Redemption
in Sorayya Khan's *Noor***

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the research is to explore Sorraya Khan's *Noor* through the lens of Gothic studies, revealing its engagement with themes of decay, death, terror, chaos, gender, patriarchy, memory, and identity crisis. Like traditional Gothic literature, *Noor* delves into the uncanny, employing motifs such as mutilated bodies, mystery, revenants, and suspense. By analyzing these elements, the dissertation offers a deeper understanding of the novel's darker themes and the emotional and psychological struggles of its characters. Contrary to existing interpretations, which largely focus on Sajida's search for identity and origins, this study argues that *Noor* is not solely about Sajida or Noor, but rather centers on Ali—his 'sin,' 'silence,' and eventual 'confession.' While many critics view Ali as merely symbolic of West Pakistan's violence over East Pakistan, this research contends that the novel's true focus lies in Ali's personal hauntings. Through a Gothic framework and methodology, the dissertation establishes *Noor* as a unique contribution to South Asian literature, where the Gothic elements serve to critique both personal and political violence, particularly during the Bangladesh Liberation War.

KEYWORDS Gothic Studies, Haunting, Identity Crisis, Revenant, Uncanny

Introduction

The emergence of Gothic as a literary genre established its roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The readers as well as the spectators get mesmerized by the sublime beauty of the dark side of the nature, the ruined castles, and the living-dead souls that haunt and also challenge the very foundation of rationality. The malicious villains, buried histories and secret identities excited the audiences as much as they terrorized them. The Gothic in one way is actually a physical manifestation of one's fears. It is taken as a therapeutic canon to bring one face to face with the darkness inside or outside one's self and confront it. The characters of the Gothic novels are revisited by the past either in the form of some evil force or event or in the form of some demon. Gothic tells the tales of the grotesque violence, the terror, and the modes of survival under hostile circumstances. It constructs the fear of the unknown, the Unheimlich; the "Other", the sins of the fathers, split identities, the grotesque violence, revenants of the past, the question of legitimacy, the haunting geography or space and the pursued protagonist(s).

Sorayya Khan's poignant novel, *Noor* (2003), intricately weaves together a complex tapestry of memory, identity, and redemption, all set against the backdrop of the partition of Bengal. The author explores the profound need for storytelling, emphasizing how these narratives are essential for humanity to create a sense of history, establish roots, and forge an enduring identity. While *Noor* may not be a traditional Gothic novel with supernatural elements, it incorporates many psychological, emotional,

and thematic elements that resonate with the Gothic tradition. The novel primarily explores themes of identity and belonging. The characters in the novel have complex and haunting pasts, which come to the forefront as the story unfolds. This theme of the return of the past and its haunting effects in the present is a common element in Gothic literature. The novel commences with the quote "Your memory gets in the way of my history," which holds a significant position as it disrupts the conventional, linear, and seemingly fixed narratives of history. Likewise, the inclusion of the gothic and uncanny elements serves to question the straightforward perspective of temporal space. Gothic literature often explores the not-so-distant past, a haunting presence that remains inescapable. *Noor* delves into family secrets and tensions, revealing hidden traumas and conflicts within the family. The novel evokes a sense of fear and anxiety. The drawings of Noor are the manifestation of such fear and anxiety, "They [drawings] were windows into another world, far away and distant, which might have ceased to exist without Noor" (Khan, 2003, p.140). The novel explores moral ambiguity and the gray areas of right and wrong, a characteristic often found in Gothic narratives. For example, Sajda's inner turmoil whether to tell Hussain about her secret, Hussain's inner turmoil regarding accepting Noor as his daughter, Nanijan's inner turmoil regarding considering her son as a war hero or a murderer and Ali's inner turmoil regarding the escape from the past or acceptance of his sins. Khan's work becomes a reflection of their collective search for roots and identity in the aftermath of the painful partition of Bengal.

Literature Review

The novel has been subjected to multifaceted analyses, examining the psychological, geographical, and cultural nexuses that underpin the story's framework. From the psychological impact of war, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and maternal trauma to psychosocial studies, *Noor* has been dissected from various angles, revealing hidden layers of its characters and their interconnected narratives. This dissertation, however, embarks on a new journey by casting a Gothic lens upon *Noor*. The novel is primarily recognized as a reflection on the conflict between East and West Pakistan, delving into the lives of different characters while exploring personal and national histories in search of self-discovery. The study, "Schisms in the Psychic Construct of the Characters in Sorayya Khan's Novel *Noor*" by Aasma Iram (2023) places a central focus on how sociopolitical and biological factors influence the formation of an individual's psychology. It draws from Freudian psychoanalysis and Jungian "individuation theory" as key resources to uncover the psychological fragmentation evident in Khan's diverse characters. It explores how the presence of the Mongol child, the trauma of war, post-war psychological distress and homesickness contribute to psychic mutilation of the novel's characters.

Mahmud Rahman, in his article "A Novel of Recovered Memory" (2015), explores the horrors of history by considering the two opening epigraphs. He examines the political stance of the government at the time and the treatment of the common masses toward Bangladesh as a dehumanized race. Rahman draws connections between the 1971 war and the trauma of the 1970 cyclone in East Bengal, revealing the failure of the West Pakistan Government to aid Bengal after the natural disaster. This sense of loss eventually led to the civil war in 1971 and the brutal actions of the West Pakistani army, resulting in the creation of a new land for Bengalis. Rahman questions the presence of guilt in East Pakistan, which is addressed by Khan's characters. However, his perspective primarily portrays Bengalis as victims and overlooks the socio-geographical and political constraints imposed on West Pakistani officials that compelled them to victimize others for their survival.

The central focus of the study, "Maternal Transferability of Trauma and Psychosomatic Nation in Sorayya Khan's *Noor*" (Awan and Sayeda, 2020), is to uncover the treachery and unspoken traumas, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), inflicted upon mothers during periods of violence. This research seeks to reveal the ways in which mothers have been subjected to trauma, undermining the sound psychological foundations of the community and the nation. The essay's primary objectives include defining trauma, examining the societal repercussions of war, understanding how trauma inflicted on women, particularly mothers, exploring how trauma can catalyze the disruption of all aspects of society, and ultimately, investigating how inherited trauma contributes to the birth of a traumatized nation. While, Sadia Riaz Sehole analyzes two South Asian novels, *Noor* and *Ladies Coupe*, with respect to their geographical, psychological, and cultural landscapes. The paper, "Landscape: Psychological, Geographical and Cultural Nexuses" (2014), will explore the psychological connections within the landscape in Sorayya Khan's novel, *Noor*, while also considering the impact of the geographical landscape on the characters' psyche.

The paper, "Topography of Loss: Homeland, History and Memory in Sorayya Khan's Fiction" by Bandana Chakrabarty (2017), delves into the intricate interplay of memory and history within the context of Sorayya Khan's three novels: *Noor* (2003), *Five Queen's Road* (2009), and *City of Spies* (2015). In *Noor*, the backdrop is the liberation war of Bangladesh, while *Five Queen's Road* explores the partition of India, and *City of Spies* delves into the international control over Pakistan, specifically America. Her works grapple with themes of loss, homeland displacement, and the process of rehabilitation. The dominant concerns in her fiction revolve around how individual choices often find themselves overshadowed by the overarching influence of political realities.

"Unveiling Characters Through Colors: A Critical Study of Sorayya Khan's *Noor*" (2019) explores the symbolic interpretation of colors in Sorayya Khan's novel *Noor* and how these colors interact with the characters' psychological states and the environmental settings, expressed through figurative language. Colors play a governing role in shaping the plot, themes, and language by associating them with the complexion of characters and objects. Colors often carry psychological interpretations; for instance, "red" is associated with passion, "white" with purity, "black" can convey mystery and racism, "pink" reflects feminism and girlishness, "blue" symbolizes peace, and "gold" is linked to concepts of aristocracy, prestige, wealth, and sophistication. Sorayya Khan adeptly employs colors to depict themes of massacre, rape, corruption, extortion, and excesses committed by the Pakistani army in her debut novel, *Noor*.

The article, "A Psychoanalytical Study of Sorayya Khan's *Noor* with Reference to Freud's Traumatic Neurosis" (2023), delves into the horrors of war and their impact on the main characters in Sorayya Khan's novel *Noor*. It does so by applying Freud's concept of traumatic neuroses, which distinguishes between traumatic war neuroses, where the ego defends itself against external threats, and transference neuroses, where the ego's libido is the adversary. This paper is significant because it highlights how depression can transform an individual into an aberration. It also examines the causes of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other post-traumatic reactions, some of which have recently been identified as psychosomatic illnesses resulting from conflict.

By closely analyzing the novel in the context of the Liberation War of 1971 and the contemporary focus on the 'memory boom,' the essay, "Suturing the Memories of the Liberation War of 1971: The Narrative Poetics of Sorayya Khan's *Noor*" (2015), aims to explore the theoretical and textual connections between history and memory. It will trace the shift in analytical emphasis from the historical to the psychological and investigate

how personal memories of public events are integrated into the broader collective memory of the nation-state. It will delve into the interplay of memory and (dis/re)membering by questioning the common assumption that memory provides a comprehensive understanding of an event.

Material and Methods

The methodology for this research involves a qualitative approach, employing Gothic lens to analyze Sorayya Khan's fiction, *Noor* (2003). Through the Gothic interpretation, the dissertation posits that *Noor* is an exploration of Ali's suppressed memories, guilt, and ultimate confession. Noor, a clairvoyant, emerges as a channel for Ali's haunting memories, manifested in her drawings, which act as revenants—figures from the past that are not quite dead, echoing the repressed narratives of her mother and grandfather, Ali, "Sajda saw that Noor's blue was movement" (Khan, 2003, p. 43). That 'movement' turns her drawings into vibrant matter. The narrative showcases Ali's quest for redemption and the attempt to rectify his past actions, exemplified by his possessiveness over Sajda. As the study unfolds, the metaphor of burying the dead (Khan, 2003, p. 166) serves to represent the conscious suppression of traumatic memories, while the notion of unearthing the dead's graves symbolizes the Gothic return of the revenant and their desire to reclaim their history. The culmination of the novel occurs when Ali's sins are exposed through Noor's artistry, leading to reconciliation with the past and a reconnection with their true selves and identities for both Sajda and Ali, "It was as if, with Noor sitting atop of it, Ali's shining piece of marble was a magical place no one else, even sitting on it beside Noor, could hope to reach" (Khan, 2003, p. 63). That 'marble' then symbolizes a window to Ali's traumatic memories which can only be brought to light by Noor.

Results and Discussion

In the partition narratives, the dead do not remain dead but might find means of resurgence in altered manifestations (Botting, 1996, p. 180). Here dead mean the suppressed and silenced memories of the violent past. While the term "return of the repressed" originates from Freud, the focus here predominantly aligns with a Jungian perspective. Jung implies that the unconscious mind operates with intentionality, using symbolic imagery to make unconscious content known to the conscious mind. The violence commonly found in Gothic narratives can be linked to this intrusive influx of the unconscious into conscious awareness. The return dismantles the innate human tendency to artificially define time into distinct categories of "present," "past," and "future." In this multifaceted temporal landscape, spirits and other supernatural entities may be seen as a reflection of humanity's attempt to cope up with the complexities of history. These haunting manifestations symbolize a rejuvenated narrative, one that has the potential to significantly transform our individual and collective self-identities. There is an interplay of fear and memory that leads to a continuous evolution of the suppressed elements, ultimately shaping our understanding of the past and its influence on the present and future. The undead or revenant is an entity of knowledge, emotion, or feeling, that has been submerged or repressed due to its potential to disrupt the established order (Clemens, 1999). Noor's drawings and paintings are the trigger that build up and compel the repressed sins of Ali's past to emerge into the realm of visibility, demanding recognition. When the repressed past resurfaces, it brings with it an aura of foreboding and "uncanniness." This concept aligns with Freud's notion of "unheimlich," signifying something that becomes apparent even though it is expected to remain concealed, "An uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and

reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now thought imaginary" (2003, p. 150).

With the revival of the suppressed, long forgotten past through the images drawn by Noor, Sorraya Khan calls upon the desire and need to re-explore the partition narrative. The metaphors of disfigurement and defacement in the paintings convey a pathos of uncertain agency in which a phantom subject is conjured up, who is a victim of some historical or cultural catastrophe. The revival of the past is the sign of voicing the silent victims of violence. Hence, the haunting memories re-appear as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt, to re-explore, re-interpret and exorcise the historical account of the making of Bengal. When the post-partition individuals attempt to repress and forget a distressing past, often by selectively focusing on a more idealized version of historical events, there exists the intriguing possibility that, perhaps on a subconscious level, they are implicitly preparing for the resurrection of that which was once buried. Such phenomenon can be seen in the character of Ali. When Noor's drawings and paintings started getting more depth and maturity, he knew that it is the matter of time when he had to reveal the whole truth. The circle around him became tighter and tighter so and so forth that he had no choice but to confess his crimes. His ultimate confession and Sajda's forgiveness is what led him towards the path of salvation and redemption.

The repercussions of horrific events are far-reaching, impacting all individuals involved. This extends beyond just the direct victims; it encompasses the perpetrators of these acts, those who assist or turn a blind eye, even if they harbor inner feelings of remorse. This trauma affects every segment of society deeply, preventing a return to a state of normalcy in regular civic life. This distress is transmitted to subsequent generations, meaning that the children bear the consequences of their parents' actions. The disability of Noor is one such metaphor. Martha Stoddard Holmes, a Victorian disability literary scholar, points out that Gothic texts don't simply include disabled characters; they actively use disability to create their effects. Although, Noor does not evoke revulsion in the novel as Holmes depicted but there is the presence of fear. It is the fear which is present more in the reader than the characters. While reading the novel, the reader is trapped in an unending fear regarding Sajda's identity, Noor's uncanny description, Ali's sin, the gory details and the haunting past of Bangladesh. The uncanniness develop in the novel from the start with the description of Noor through Sajda's narrative, "Her long hair, an electric combination of oranges and pinks, was thick like a rope and waved gently over one shoulder and then the other...Although the girl's characteristics were other-worldly, they were familiar to Sajda" (Khan, 2003, p. 10). Even in the end when everything resolves, the description of Ali's entering the room, falling down and making the gurgling sound like the blotted dead cow, again create the aura of uncanny. Unlike Holmes and other writers who talks about disability under gothic studies, Noor is not a metaphor of a revolting "other" but the only source to express and address the bottled-up narratives in the making of Bangladesh. Hence the drawings are the representative of the cultural trauma that alienated the characters from an earlier familiarity with stable notions of one's origin and home while giving rise to greater anxieties and uncertainties about identity, loss, and remembrance.

The paintings of Noor can be termed sublime, invoking both beauty and terror. It is the terror of such repressed past from which escape is impossible. Ali tried to escape from that unending fear by getting himself a new house, "...Ali had fortified the inner sanctity of his room with rooms on all sides" (Khan, 2003, p. 53). It seems that Ali has confined himself inside the four walls. For Ali, war was a matter of life and death, not a way to save his country. There is no patriotic spirit behind that war in which he was

ordered to kill his own people, own nation. Even when Nanijan asked about it, he said that he killed his fellow Pakistanis without seeing and it was only through the sightlessness that he was able to kill them (Khan, 2003, p. 177). Ali's escape from the war and then his war memories can be clearly understood in the light of Rivers's "The Repression of War Experience".

...many of the most trying and distressing symptoms from which the subjects of war neurosis suffer are not the necessary result of the strains and shocks to which they have been exposed in warfare, but are due to the attempt to banish from the mind distressing memories of warfare or painful affective states which have come into being as the result of their war experience. (Rivers, 1918, p. 173)

So in the end what the specters of the past demand is not the suppression of memories or silence of the oral histories, but a remembrance. To cope-up with the dead, the perpetrator has to live with his sins and to achieve the autonomy and identity, the victim has to live with the trauma. This is the ultimate price that Sorrayya Khan's characters have to pay for survival. The notion of stability can never be achieved as history is fragmented, linear and biased and does not hold stable grounds.

In the novel, Sajda is portrayed quite submissive. She had no say when Ali brought her from Bengal. She had no say when Ali refused her going to Hussain's house after marriage. She did nothing when Hussain decided to leave her because of Noor's disability, and when he came back and asked forgiveness, she immediately forgave him. Although, her actions can also be depicted as an attempt for survival but it also strengthens the paper's argument regarding Gothic interpretation where women are often presented as the damsel in distress. It can also be interpreted as her desire for "home" which is essentially a nostalgic yearning for a central place where life is characterized by goodness, happiness, and peace, free from fear of her dead mother's voices (Khan, 2003, p. 14). On the other hand, Nanijan acted as a consummate grandmother, "having the time, energy and love to spare for her grandchildren that she feared she'd run short of when she was raising her own children" (Khan, 2003, p. 17)

Conclusion

The novel has been researched by multiple angles but still leave room for more critical studies like Gothic. The genre is not much celebrated but fits completely with the narrative of *Noor*. Gothic incorporates themes of external and internal conflict regarding human relationships, gender, patriarchy, nostalgia, memory and identity crisis. *Noor*, like Gothic literature, focuses on elements like decay, death, terror, chaos, abnormality, oppressed women, mutilated bodies, mystery, other-worldly creatures, revenants, suspense and fear. *Noor*, as Sajida's extension, bears the burden of the haunting memory. *Noor*, though devoid of pain, cries that mirrors the undead who, incapable of feeling pain, vocalize their torment through cries, howls, and haunting presence. The memory, lost and forgotten but still intact, finds voice in the form of Noor's drawings, "She had drawn what Sajda had forgotten" (Khan, 2003, p. 142). Hence the drawings are like revenants, dead but not dead; "still lifes" (Khan, 2003, p. 66). They are the living dead; eyes wide open and clouded, their bodies naked and limp, dumb and expressionless.

Noor is the "artiste" of Ali's suppressed memories. The sheets and sheets of blue crayon and it's "movement" highlights Noor's stream of unconscious memories of the forgotten past of her mother and suppressed past of her grandfather, Ali, "It was Noor who brought cyclone back for Sajda [and Ali]" (Khan, 2003, p. 103). The drawings have become the stark, scattered reminder of his sin. Even the howling and desperate cries of

Noor symbolize the undead narratives. Ali's desire to have a bigger and better house, personifies his escape from the confinements of memory towards freedom, "He imagined his story, the sum of horrible details, so neatly stored away, he'd done away with any reason to retrieve it. Ever. And that was how Ali had planned to return to life" (Khan, 2003, p. 77). Also, the replacement of dead birds with living ones (Khan, 2003, p. 60) or cleansing himself from mud and blood, putting hands on his ear to muffle the memory, running or washing his hands highlights his suppression of real memories and replacing them with new happy ones. But there were cracks on the wall that represent the cracks in Ali's 'safe' arena. The repressed revenants take revenge on Ali by appearing, time and again, in Noor's paintings. He needed to tell the tales, to utter his "confession" for his true redemption and also for the dead to find peace, for the sake of normalcy. Sajda is his false redemption which he doesn't want to let go even after her marriage. He wants to own her as one owns the enemy's belongings after war (Khan, 2003, p. 92). By saving Sajda's innocence, he tries to rectify the woman's innocence that he served in a platter to his commander for rape. For Ali, the closure occurs when he has confessed all the 'sins'; when his sins come to light (Noor). Similarly, saving Noor and keeping her despite of her husband's indifference, can also be seen as Sajda's redemption. She lost her brother in the cyclone. She let go of his hand. She couldn't save him as she was only a child but with Noor, she takes a firm decision to protect her, protecting the second chance God has given her. Both Sajda and Ali then reconcile with their past and in the process reconnect with their true self and identity. In the end, birds shredding their feathers and having new ones concludes the story on positive note of 'second chance' by letting go of the past and making space for new memories.

Recommendations

While Ali's role is central, a more detailed examination of other characters like Sajida and Noor could yield a more nuanced understanding of how trauma and memory affect different generations within the novel. Comparative studies between *Noor* and other postcolonial Gothic texts could provide insight into how the Gothic genre is adapted in different cultural contexts, particularly in relation to themes of historical violence and collective memory. Further research could explore other themes in *Noor* that have been overlooked, such as the role of gender and patriarchy within the Gothic framework, to provide a more holistic understanding of the novel's critique of societal structures.

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