Politics of Silence and Resistance: A Critical Study of *Noor*

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ABSTRACT: *The traumatic events of 1971 challenged the grand narrative of Muslim identity in the subcontinent. I call it the second partition. Humanity suffered both in 1947 and 1971. In 1947, Muslims were attacked by Non- Muslim population. But in 1917, a predominantly Muslim army committed atrocities in the West Pakistan in the name of defending geographical boundaries of the state. In theoretical terms, it was a contestation between geographies of boundaries and geography of resistance. Sorayya A Khan, in her preface to* Noor, *states that not much is said on this subject in Pakistan. In other words, the state apparatuses in Pakistan chose to remain silent on the subject that revised the discourse of national ideology/identity in Pakistan. In my paper, I have analyzed how the narratives of resistance are silenced to create a simulacrum of state sponsored national unity. Absence reinforces the presence. In* Noor, *Ali, the protagonist brings back Sajida to Pakistan from Bangladesh. He thinks that it would atone for the sins he had committed in East Pakistan as a Pakistani soldier. He never reveals Sajida's Bengali identity to her. And as a surrogate father, he does everything to give Sajida a decent life. But the past returns in the persona of Noor, the child born with Down syndrome. Noor has an exceptional quality to paint. And what she paints becomes a nightmare to Ali. The paintings bring back the memories of a traumatic past that Ali had so carefully silenced. The disability challenges ideological discursivity. My argument is that these paintings serve as a trope to redefine the geographies of resistance which the discursive national consciousness tries to silence. Art defines the geographies of resistance.*

Key Words: Grand narratives, Muslim identity, Discurcivity, Silence, Geography of resistance

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The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 was a fatal blow to the official discourse of national identity. During partition riots, the people belonging to different religions turned to religious bigots. But during the Civil War of 1971, thousands of the Muslims were killed and tortured by fellow Muslims. How could the discourse of identity which paved way for the creation of Pakistan stand firm in these conditions? The creation of Bangladesh was the judgment of history on the failure of the two nation theory. In simpler words, it stated that religion alone cannot be the sole marker of national identity. And any insistence on such a theoretical assumption can pave way for geographical disintegration. But it is interesting to note that there is a conspicuous absence of Muslim Bengal in the official state narratives of Pakistan. Since the choices of theme are always hard for Pakistani writers, hence the tragedy of the second partition even finds lesser space in the literary narratives produced in Pakistan.

The renowned Pakistani historian K.K. Aziz had already noted that in the postcolonial Pakistani consciousness, Muslim Bengal existed in the liminal spaces. He argues that it was almost criminal to exclude Bengal from the textbooks of history taught to Pakistani students. In his canonical work *The Murder of History: A Critique of History Textbooks used in Pakistan*, he observes:

> If I were asked to pick out from all the weaknesses of the textbooks the one most damaging and completely unforgiveable, I would unhesitatingly name the virtual absence of Muslim Bengal. Whether these books were written before or after 1971, they are unanimous in giving Bengal no place at all in the history of modern Muslim India; in a very few causes it is mentioned but put squarely on the outer periphery of the narration, almost at the edge of nothingness. (251)

What Aziz laments is the strategic silencing of the Bengali voice from the mainstream discourse of the official history. It is almost a truism to say that the textbooks of history espouse the national desires and dreams. But at the same time, they can also be helpful in understanding the dominant political structure that creates, circulates and regulates these national desires. Hence, the study of silences and gaps in these books can bring an epistemic shift in understanding the identity politics in the newly born postcolonial states. If Muslim Bengal had been pushed to nothingness in the textbook nationalist imaginary, its separation was inevitable. And to understand this phenomenon of creating and sustaining silences, I argue that literary narratives can help us the best. Sorayya Khan observes:

> History is a narrative, not unlike a piece of fiction. In fiction, the most obvious silences occur in the white spaces between paragraphs or sections on page of a book. It is what happens off stage as our characters and stories move from one point to the next. There are some stories, in fact, where what happens in the white spaces (those formless, shapeless silences filled with possibility) is more critical than anything that is "written". Such silences also exist in the narrative of history— what they are, of course, depends upon who is writing the history. (122)

The power to write a textbook is the manifestation of the power to tell or narrate the story of national identity from one's own perspective. And if there is not much more to say on the subject, it can also be interpreted as a conscious political effort to erase that particular incident from the national historical consciousness. Thus if Pakistan has less to say on the tragedy of 1971 (or it does not want to say much), Bangladesh has a lot to say on the subject. Khan further observes:

> History textbooks generally tell us only one side of history. In Pakistan, for example, recent local history textbooks provide a sentence or two on the 1971 crisis that divided the country. Of course, Bangladeshi history books devote much more space to the events and say something quite different about their Independence War. (122)

In theoretical terms, the history has taken the full turn in this part of the dissertation. In the chapter 1, we find how Ahmed Ali was asked by the Hogarth Press to make few changes in *Twilight in Delhi* if he wanted it published in England. Amongst those changes one was to not to use the phrase "War of Independence" to describe the historicity of 1857. Ali observes:

> John Lehmann, then a director of the Hogarth Press, expressed his disappointment at the printer's decision, and suggested that I should delete the chapter and the passages the printers found objectionable. I could not agree to this, as they were the historical portions dealing with the War of Independence (labeled by the British as "Mutiny"). (xvii)

What I have argued here is that the terms to describe a historical process are empty from within. It is the power positions within a discourse that create meanings. In 1857, the British had the power to label the war as mutiny but for the oppressed and marginalized, the war epitomized

shedding off the foreign yoke of slavery. In the same way, the war of 1971 was a mutiny for the West Pakistan military junta but for the people of East Pakistan, it promised liberation from the West Pakistan. After the brief span of thirty four years of Independence, once again the East (Pakistan) was poised against the West (Pakistan). The East West binary remains at the heart of all political and social formations and perhaps, would continue to influence the body politic of not only this part of the world but the entire globe.

On May 11, 2016, Motiur Rehman Nizami (1943-2016), the leader of Jamaat-e- Islami was hanged for war crimes during 1971 in Bangladesh. Some other leaders of the Jamaat were also hanged subsequently. It means that the wounds are still green in the hearts and minds of the people of Bangladesh. A small number of people, belonging to the right wing parties staged protests both in Bangladesh and Pakistan. But it could not dissuade the Government of Bangladesh from executing other convicts. Thus, the cessation of East Pakistan could be a closed historical transaction for the West Pakistan but for Bangladesh it remains the site under constant historical scrutiny. Cara N. Cilano argues that from a Bangladeshi perspective, several significant aspects of the war remained unresolved, including the repatriation to Pakistan of the stateless Biharis still resident in camps in Bangladesh; the unconditional acknowledgement of the mass murder—perhaps even genocide—and rape of hundreds of thousands of Bengalis; and the economic restitution Bangladesh sees as its due for the decades it suffered under West Pakistan's internal colonization of East Pakistan (ix).

From a literary perspective, there is a dearth of writers dealing with the tragic events of 1971. Sorayya A.Khan's *Noor* can be taken as the first novel in English language in which the writer has done a substantial research work to interview the soldiers and families that were directly influenced by the war. And what she had come across is the old saga of human suffering and tragedy. Many of the returned soldiers did not want to speak about the war. They were making a conscious effort to come to terms with the traumatic experiences of the past and live a normal, healthy life. But most of them were failing. Loss of memory is a blessing if it helps you to start afresh. But in case of national tragedy, the historical amnesia can both be helpful and destructive. It can be helpful in fighting the feelings of guilt that history burdens us with. It can be destructive because it puts impediment on the way of critical understanding of the past. My argument is that it is only through facing the ghosts of the past that we can fight them. Sorayya Khan in the essay "The Silence and Forgetting That

Wrote NOOR", remarks:

> Silence and Forgetting need not always be framed in the negative. In some instances and with regards to personal trauma, silence and forgetting might, in fact, be part of a healing process. After all, if you are lucky, there is a life after trauma, and perhaps talking and thinking about other things make this possible. But the dimension of collective silence that I was interested in exploring in my novel is the one that occurs on a "societal" level (122)

Silence and forgetting can possibly help an individual to heal. But silence at "societal" level or at a civilizational level turns to be fatal because it impeded the process of making critical judgments on the past. It nurtures evasiveness. A nation or a community may refuse to learn from the past. Both Aziz and Khan have criticized this tendency in the Pakistani society to remain silent on the cessation of the East Pakistan and trying to analyze the present in a historical vacuity. Thus the historiographical quest is marred by the so called grand narratives of national cohesiveness. In other words, if we unearth the history, we may come across a deformed figure of national identity which may shatter some of our canonized notions about state, nation and identity politics.

Noor, the protagonist, is a deformed figure, s special child born with Down syndrome. For me it is interesting to note here that both in Bapsi Sidhwa and Sorayya Khan, the special children (Lenny in *The Cracking India*, Noor in *Noor)* figure as protagonists to critique the traumatic experiences of the two partitions that the people of the subcontinent went through in 1947 and 1971 respectively. I find it important both in strategic and aesthetic terms.

The deformity or abnormality is being used to critique the dominant and the discursive. In other words, the insistence on the linearity of history and identity is challenged through the special children. As I have argued earlier that two different modes of historicity contested each other in defining the discourse of Muslim identity after the "War of Independence 1857". And the existential question still haunts us whether to start our history/ies from the mythological age of India or to begin it with the arrival of the Muslim colonizers in the subcontinent. David Gilmartin in *Civilization and Modernity: Narrating the Creation of Pakistan* comments on the conflict between the religious and the secular version of history and identity in the struggle for Pakistan in the following words:

> For all the vibrancy of ongoing historical debate, historical

> interpretation of partition remains hampered by serious conceptual difficulties. Part of this arises from the fact that historical interpretations of what happened in 1947 continue to be deeply politicized. In both Pakistan and India, interpretations of 1947 are critical to the development of historical narratives that have resonance for debates on national identity in the present. Nowhere has this been clearer than in the ongoing debates about Jinnah's vision of Pakistan…Struggles for Jinnah's mantle have, of course, marked Pakistan's politics for decades with both secular nationalists and supporters of an Islamic state claiming him as their own. (x)

The discourse of secular nationalism is more complex than the religious nationalism because of it is inclusivity. It not only includes religion but also other socio cultural factors such as land, language and cultural traditions. The religious nationalism is exclusivist and in my view also linear. It is exclusivist in the sense that it rejects the role of non-religious factors and conveniently establishes religion as the sole marker of identity. And it is linear in the sense that it starts Muslim or Pakistani history from 712 A.D thereby putting the Pakistani Muslim in a historical vacuity in which they tend to lose the rich historio cultural heritage of the Indus Valley and the syncretic relationship between Ganges and the mighty Indus. The Pakistani identity, in the exclusivist version of history/ies, thus finds itself rooted in the Middle East and not in South Asia. I call this as "deformed historical narrative/s" which is symbolized in the fictional world through child narrators who are physically handicapped. Thus the discursivity is challenged by the abnormality.

Khan in the prologue to the story quotes Agha Shahid Ali saying, "Your history gets in the way of my memory" (Noor n.p.). And then she gives the historical details pertaining to the historical period of 70's. The quote reads as:

> On November 12, 1970, a cyclone hit East Pakistan. One million people died.
>
> On March, 25, 1971, civil war between East Pakistan and West Pakistan began. On December 3, 1971, India entered the war on the side of East Pakistan. West Pakistan surrendered on December 16, 1971. Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, won its independence. Between 300,000 and one million people died. (n.p)

In my view, there is a strategic significance of starting the narrative with some historical facts. And also mentioning the relationship between history and memory brings out the silent spaces which can become sites of creating new understandings/ interpretations of the tragic events. What is the nature of relationship between history and memory? On the surface level, memory helps us in recording the past and interpreting the present in the light of the past. At any given moment of time we are what our memory/ies has/have fashioned us. But creating the past through the dark channels of memory is not opaque and transparent. Recreating the past through memory is to inscribe to the process of creating myth. In other words, we tend to see only those events which suit our ideological position at any given period of history. For instance, in *Twilight in Delhi,* Mir Nihal remembers only those incidents from Indian history which give him a degree of dignity and respect in the face of an overwhelming powerlessness and marginalization in the public sphere. Memory thus becomes another site of anti-colonial nationalism. What I have argued so far is that politically and culturally marginalized group of people or a nation redefines their history memory relationship by adjusting it to the demands of political oppression they experience in the immediate present. And it is precisely at this point, history turns to myth. In other words, mythologizing history is the process in which the "wretched of the earth" give vent to their anti- colonial feelings and emotions. History is thus not a stable site of meaning but a discourse deeply rooted in the collective memory of a people. In this way it remains in the process of constant revision. And non-linearity remains the distinguishing feature of this form of history. Hence there can never be a single version of history but version of history/ies that have been recovered from the human memories. And fictional space is the site where the binary between objective (history) and subjective (memory) is dissolved. Shiba Alam in *Urdu key Numaind Novel Nigaroka Tarkhe Shaor (Historical Consciousness of the Representative Urdu Novelists)* explores the relationship between history and fiction:

History and Fiction are not compatible terms. Their relationship is that of a tree and soil. Fiction is soil and history is tree rooted in it. … A narrative with any subject has a lot to offer to a reader. Also the narrative is period specific. And this period defines the entire socio cultural existence of the reader. In other words, life in its complete dynamic form exists in the fiction. (18 Translation mine)

In the opening chapter, Noor is introduced as Sajida's secret. The child is a secret because the mother, Sajida knows the exact moment when Noor

is conceived. And at the time of conception, Sajida feels as if her relationship with her past has been revived. The moment of conception becomes a metaphor for the past and present coming together. And in the narrative, the special moment is immediately followed by a vision of an adolescent girl—twelve or thirteen by the likes of her curves—hovered above a wooden chair (10). The opening chapter has an eerie quality about itself. And it feels as if Sajida had been going through a mysterious experience or a vision which is blurred when the girl calls her Ammi (11). I interpret this vision and mysteriousness as a comment on the mysteriousness of the relationship between history and memory. In reviving our past, we are confronted with visions which at times are clear and at times blurred. Explaining the nature of this experience further, Khan observes:

> The force of what was said stunned Sajida. It evoked a private set of memories she had relinquished one by one over time like offerings left at a temple for needy gods. How, as a very young child of five *and six*, she had screamed for her own mother one terrifying night when a wall of water snatched her baby brother from her arms and then swallowed him, along with everyone she loved in the world. (Emphasis original 11)

Sajida's vision creates an organic relationship between the public and private history. Her personal loss of the entire family in the cyclone and the birth of Noor in the Pakistani hospital connect the public and private. In many of the postcolonial narratives, family serves as a trope for exploring the theme/s of anticolonial resistance and the relationship between the public and private history. In the text under consideration, the so called complete family of Ali, the surrogate father of Sajida serves the purpose of delving into the complex ideological configurations of the relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan. The fictional narrative thus becomes an alternative to the official silence maintained by the state of Pakistan in the wake of 1971. Cara Cilano contends that in the absence of accurate and satisfying historical and official recounting of the war, literary narratives become an important part of this transmission process (26). Hence through the figures of Noor and Sajida, we can recount how war in 1971 redefined the ideological standpoints propounded by the founding fathers in 1947.

Noor is a call from future and has some magical qualities as a special child. Sajida thinks that the child will bring back her past which always remained, unclear and unspoken. During the period of pregnancy, she

comes across strange visions and dreams. Khan employs magical realism to penetrate into the dreamy world of Sajida. In one of these states of dream, the name of Bangladesh is mentioned:

> Sajida's dreams grew more vivid than they had ever been. She pictured the landscape of East Pakistan—Bangladesh now—and her long ago childhood in greens, each different from the last: rice paddies, banana leaves, palm trees, limes, fishing boat sails. Pregnant and in her waking life, the rose bushes on the patio came alive… (15)

The dreamy East Pakistan has all the exotic and mysteriousness of the Orient. It is an idyllic landscape where the serpent of modernity had not yet entered. And it is also important to note here that this idyllic landscape is the part of private memory. Sajida was adopted by Ali when he was fighting in Dhaka in 1971. He found her alone on a road when the Pakistani convoy was on its way back to the garrison. As a child, she remembers that she lost her entire family in the cyclone and she was left alone. The rest of the family history remains buried in the inaccessible debris of the past which is brought back to life through the special child Noor. Hence before her birth, strange things started happening with Sajida. She even thought of General Zia's daughter (A special child). Khan observes:

> During this time, Sajida could not help but recall General Z's daughter. As a rule, Sajida, did not keep up with politics. But she and Hussein, who was only a year older, grew up with General Z's daughter in their midst… She was a fat child. Although the child could not speak, legend had it that she had powers to see into her father's guests, make judgments about their loyalty and estimation of their lies. (16)

Khan describes General Zia and his daughter before Noor is born. Sajida, the mother does not know that Noor will be born as a special child with Down syndrome. Since Noor, as the child protagonist would connect the past with present, hence mentioning Zia's regime becomes both strategically and artistically important. What defines the state of postcolonial Pakistan is its constant ideological and political manipulation at the hands of Pakistan Army. Sajida's East Pakistan turned to Bangladesh in 1971 when the country was in the grip of General Yahya's dictatorship. And the country continues to remain in the iron grip of Pak Army when Sajida conceives Noor. Two important conclusions can be

drawn from this fictional fact. Firstly the movement of history in Pakistan remains cyclic. Secondly, the colonial power hierarchies have been replaced by the indigenous ones mainly controlled by the Pak Army.

Dictatorship is another form of colonization with the difference that the oppressors happen to share the same skin capital and cultural traditions as that of oppressed. Furthermore, the problem of indigenous colonization/dictatorship can also be theorized in the historical terms. My arguments is that the "deformed narrative of history" that I have erstwhile described as starting from 712 A.D. had left the people of Pakistan in a historical vacuity. In the *Heart Divided* by Mumtaz Shah Nawaz, the Shaikh family insists on tracing its national history in the arrival of Muslim colonizers in 712 A.D. How to reconcile the indigenous mode of living with the Arab culture remains a dilemma with this linearity of history. Hence a vacuum in the nationalist imaginary regarding the configurations of the indigenous identity has been created. The Pak Army claims to fill this vacuity by asserting that it would protect the geographical as well as ideological boundaries of the Pakistani nation. The postcolonial Pakistani identity had to delink itself from the mythological past of India. M.Ali, "In Search of Identity", in *Dawn Magazine* 7 May 2009) notes:

> Since the beginning Pakistan has been confronted with the monumental task of formulating a national identity distinct from India. Born out of a schism of the old civilization of India, Pakistan has debated over the construction of a culture of its own, a culture which will not only be different from that of India but one that the rest of the world can understand.

As argued earlier, this desire for creating distinct Pakistani identity has resulted in creating the civilizational and historical vacuity that the Pak Army promised to fill. Hence during Martial Law regime, Indian threat was arguably presented as a fatal one for the sovereignty and solidarity of Pakistan. Thus in the opening part of the novel, the mentioning of two military dictators has a theoretical significance for the reader. It provides the context of the history in which the text of the indigenous identity is to be examined and explored through fictional lens.

Family as a trope questions the efficacy of various grand narratives of history, identity and power hierarchies. The domestic space, thus, could be a reproduction of national desires and also a mode of critiquing it. "Ali's sector" where Sajida had been living as part of the readymade family of Ali, brings back memories of the past and also questions the possibility of

national integration. The novel also explores the theme of a grand reconciliation with a traumatic past. Sajida, a Bengali child adopted by a Pakistani soldier, is brought to Ali's sector in Islamabad to start afresh. In my view, the family in its present form symbolizes the ideal/imagined Pakistani identity in which Bengali nationalism is not pushed to liminal spaces in nationalist imaginary. Sajida remains at the centre stage throughout the text. Different generations occupying the same domestic space represent a new form of nationalism which accommodates the cultural changes but does not compromise its anticolonial stance. In the same way, in *Noor,* Khan explores the possibility of fostering a national integration between East and West Pakistan by bringing the orphan Sajida in the domestic space situated in West Pakistan. In this context, Ali's sector becomes the space which may or may not have the possibility of national integration. It also offers the possibility of re/defining Pakistani identity in the changed historical conditions. Cilano observes:

> Thus, a focus on the family in nationalist discourse, especially on female alternatives to the mother figure, may provide a way to think through issues associated with nationalism, including how/whether cultural continuity can be achieved and, in the specific case of Pakistan, in what ways the nation can conduct a just integration after 1971. (44)

The idea of national integration fails as the newly born girl, Noor happens to be "a special child" suffering from Down syndrome. What she reminds Ali is war that he had been trying to forget for the last many years? He had seen children like Noor, a shade from black, in the hold of death. When Noor's face collapsed into what it would be, he leaned closer and, strangely, recalled something of the war he had seen (31). Thus the birth of Noor becomes a metaphor for the traumatic past Ali was desperate to come to term with. Noor, the daughter and Sajida, the mother share a degree of ignorance so far as remembering of the past is concerned. Her adult life is defined by the love and affection she had received by her surrogate father. But she does not remember anything of the past violence. The arrival of Noor, as the special, child opens up the possibility of reviving the past. In other words, the effort to forget the past is thwarted through a biological act of reproduction, the birth of a daughter. Theorizing the significance of the daughter figure as the site of contestation of nationalist discourse/s, Elleke Boehmer comments:

> In relation to the national son, the self-defining inheritor of the post- independence era and the protagonist of the nation shaping

> narrative, the female child is a –if not the – non subject with the national family romance. Revealingly, if paradoxically, given that her self- determination has been in principle achieved, the daughter figure in the postcolonial narrative that inscribes the new nation is, if not subordinate, peripheral and quiet, then virtually invisible. (106)

The daughter figure, in other words, is not properly represented in the postcolonial fiction. And her marginalization to the periphery is strategically important because it maintains the dominance of patriarchal narratives of nationhood. Thus the nationalist imaginary is defined by discursive patriarchal power distribution in society. I argue that postcolonial power distribution in Pakistan follows this theoretical model. I further argue that the martial law regimes in Pakistan represent this discursive patriarchal power structure which not only marginalized women but also other sections of society. In *Noor,* Khan challenges this discursivity by introducing Sajida and Noor as two daughter figures which disrupt the peaceful world of Ali's sector. Hence their relationship with Ali, the ex-army man should be viewed as challenging the hitherto canonized idea of nationhood. When Ali looks at Noor at the time of her birth, he is reminded of the war. Khan observes:

> Ali, in an earlier life and another land, had seen children like Noor, a shade from black, in the hold of death. When Noor's face collapsed into what it would be, he leaned closer and strangely, recalled something of war he'd seen. The soiled maternity ward, new blood drying upon old, the sticky sweat of desperate work, evoked a moment in his other life. Although outside the day was dry and cloudless, Ali smelled a flooding pit of mud and he heard rain, unforgiving streams falling in deafening sheets. (31)

In my view, Ali's first encounter with Noor represents the dialogic engagement between two power positions. Ali represents the patriarchal nationhood epitomized in his role as an army officer, and Noor represents the feminine voice, "the marginalized other" that challenges the discursivity by reminding Ali the war he is eager to forget. The war transformed Ali as he willingly abstained himself from being the part of atrocities committed during war times. Once again, as explained in the previous chapter, the female body becomes the site of contestation of different forms of nationalism/s. As a soldier, Ali was also deputed to bring Bengali women for his officers. These women were raped and tortured to death. Ali vividly remembers one of these scenes:

> *I stood guard by the door. The noises were quieter than usual, but still, I heard furniture being shoved to one side, chairs overturned, the crash of breaking glass, perhaps not a window, but a glass. The officer spoke a few times, but the only fragment I understood was* Jivai Pakistan. *Long live Pakistan. Eventually, there were hints of rushed grunts, no sound whatever from the woman.* (182 emphasis original)

The quoted paragraph is important in terms of politics of identity, language and power. The victim is a Bengali woman being raped by a Pakistani army officer. At the time of partition, Muslim women were raped and tortured by non- Muslims. And the oppressors felt a sense of national pride in raping the women belonging to the "other community". But in the text under discussion, both the oppressor and the victim belong to the same religious community. And the officer feels the sense of national pride while raping the Bengali Muslim woman. Moreover, the sense of pride is expressed through Urdu language. It problematizes the linearly defined two nation theory which sees Islam and Urdu as the centre of national cohesiveness. Urdu language serves more of a tool of suppression than that of liberation and emancipation. And Islam as a religious discourse does not intervene in the process of traumatizing the women belonging to "the subject nation". The rape, both in literal and symbolic terms, forecloses the possibility of any dialogic possibility between West Pakistan and the rising tide of Bengali nationalism in the words of McClintock, "Women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politics as its boundary" (354). Thus the mutilated body of the victim symbolizes the beginning of another national boundary which refuses to accept Islam and Urdu as the sole markers of national identity. The commanding officer asks Ali, "Your turn" (182). But he refuses to rape the girl. When forced, he tries but fails. The description of the victim is gory when the commanding officer leaves the room. Ali describes it:

> *I was alone with the girl, my pants still down. I took a few steps towards her. She was ripped and pried open, the implements used to do this, the scissors, pens, a metal ruler, speckled with blood, lying to her side. The nib of the fountain pen was missing. She was shaved between her legs. I could see her opening in the blood.* (183 emphasis in original).

The blood bath, Ali witnesses, makes him impotent for the rest of his life. He never marries and loses the sense of purpose in his life. It is important to note here that the memories of a traumatic past also create a senses of

belonging and nationhood. And the Bengali narratives of nationalism depended much upon the theme of common suffering and marginalization. Such gory scenes described above have become a part of Bengali historio national consciousness. In anticolonial politics, such narratives play a significant role in silencing the contradictions and fissures inherent in the imagined monolithic national identity. In the presence of "the common enemy" other socio political differences rooted in indigenous cultural psyche are conveniently put aside (in the first chapter, I have argued that in the presence of the British, Mir Nihal erases the socio cultural difference between Hindus and Muslims, thereby creating a linear narrative of monolithic Indian identity). Thus the present marginalization coupled with the past suffering creates a popular discourse which turns history into myth. Fact and fiction are fused together. And both the victim and the perpetrators know that they cannot change it. Ali is burdened with a sense of guilt and he knows that he cannot come to terms with it. He cannot change anything. He remembers:

> *Later, the sweeper came to fetch the woman. I accompanied them to their quarters. She walked without noise, her face still without expression. Perhaps she'd been spared, after all, I remember thinking. She'd taken leave of her life: her body, her husband, her young child. Her soul was already dead, safely warm and wrapped in a peaceful place. I envied her that place. Shameless, right? I knew what I'd done. I could never change that.* (184 emphasis in original)

Ali experiences an existential void at the death of the soul of the victim. And the angst is aggravated by the painful awareness that he lacks the necessary power to change anything. As a mere pawn in the hands of history, he had been left alone to fight his own ghosts. I argue that Ali, at this stage in the narrative, symbolizes those who have nothing to do with staring a war. They are the victims who have nobody to punish except themselves. And Ali feels that he is being punished from the inside. Thus the novel could also be taken as a critique of war politics irrespective of its immediate historical backdrop. In a conversation with Noor, he is again faced with the dilemma of reconciling with the absurdity and vacuity created by the war. In a long conversation with Noor, he ponders over his stay in East Pakistan as a soldier. He remembers:

> Now, he wasn't certain any of the things he'd been told (except the fact about Indians) had ever rung true to him. That Bengali's, dark and stupid, not *really* Muslims, didn't deserve their own

> country, their own leaders. What he did remember had an order to it, like fact books on formations. After he landed in East Pakistan at the Dhaka airport, it tool one day before he asked himself, *this is my country?*, another day to know he wasn't fighting the war *for* his country, another day yet to know he wasn't fighting for Nanijan or , for that matter, any family. On the fourth day he felt like a mercenary. (215)

Ali's ambivalent feelings question the process of interpellation. By interpellation we mean the mechanism that produces subjects in such a way that they recognize their own existence in terms of the dominant ideology of the society in which they live (David Macey 203). In other words, before sending the troops to war, they have to be interpellated. They are to make believe the autonomy of their subjectivity by hiding the fact that they are always and already the product of ideology (Macey 203). Ali subverts the process by questioning the dominant ideology of the inferiority of Bengalis. In an epiphanic moment, Ali feels disillusioned about the entire ideological configuration of the war. He discovers that he was not fighting either for his country or immediate family—the dominant motifs in war. Like all other wars, it was purposeless and the main agenda remained hidden behind the dominant state ideology. By calling himself a mercenary, Ali exposes the emptiness of the state driven narrative of national identity. He refuses to consider Bengalis as an inferior race, and in open defiance to the state narrative adopts a Bengali girl as his daughter.

Conclusion:

My research has led to me to conclude that the official narratives of national history tend to silence the fissures, paradoxes and contradiction in the discourse of national identity. For this purpose, the history is rewritten to suit the imagined ideal of a national self that serves the purpose of fostering the feelings of patriotism among the masses. This "deformed history" is challenged in the text through Noor, the protagonist born with Down syndrome. Though she cannot learn to read or write yet through the special ability to paint, she brings back the traumatic memories of the past that the state of Pakistan symbolically represented through Ali wants to forget. Thus, her physical deformity challenges the state sponsored discourse of national ideology and gives voice to those who have been forced to be a part of national amnesia.

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