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Disability and the Question of Utility: A Reading of Sorraya Khan's *Noor*

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Abstract

In Sorraya Khan's novel, *Noor*, Sajida's third child, Noor, is portrayed as a special child with some ambiguous disability. Her stories emerge subconsciously through her artworks. Her paintings or artworks make Ali, a veteran of the 1971 war, and his adopted daughter, Sajida (originally from East Pakistan, later Bangladesh) confront their pasts which they have willingly or unconsciously rejected. The paper studies Noor's disability and her art and highlights the utility-based treatment that comes from the colonial and patriarchal frame of mind. The paper mainly focuses on the question of utility and disability.

Keyswords: Disability; Utility.

Introduction

Willem Van Schendel in *A History of Bangladesh* notes how in the summer of 1970, there were "immense floods in East Pakistan," and in November, "a cyclone hit the Bengal delta" (124). The most devastating cyclone hit East Pakistan on 12th November 1970, where according to official estimates, "an unimaginable 500,000 people perished in the gale and tidal surges (other sources suggest at least 325,000)" (Schendel 124-25) and the war of independence in 1971 (25 March 1971 - 16 December 1971) killed millions. In (Pakistani-Dutch author) Sorraya Khan's *Noor*, Ali, a veteran of the 1971 war, battered by typhoid in the midst of war, goes back to West Pakistan carrying along with him a girl child, Sajida — "Nanijaan recalled that Ali had once, long ago, described Sajida as an orphan and assigned the cause. *Cyclone*, he'd said, as if her presence could be summed up in a simple word" (Khan 11-12).

In due course, Sajida grows up as Ali's daughter, marries Hussein and

unconventionally stays with her father. For Sajida, her children make her feel grateful, and she feels compensated for the loss that haunts her—the loss of her family and especially her baby brother during the cyclone in East Pakistan. She remembers the regret, helplessness, and sadness as she was rendered disabled—"had she only been bigger or stronger, had she waved her arms and searched for him a few minutes longer, she might have saved him" (Khan 15). The environmental disaster, the Bhola cyclone, happened just before the 1971 War of Independence. During the floods (in August) and mainly during the cyclone which followed three months later, aid from West Pakistan was almost negligible. Shazia Rahman highlights that "separating the cyclone from the war is as impossible as learning about the time without learning about the place" (81).

Sajida in *Noor* gets displaced from her coastal village due to the cyclone and from the city of Dhaka to West Pakistan during the war. War, too, leads to displacement and disrupts the ecological balance. The Liberation War of 1971 was a result of many factors, including the 1952 language movement (to have Bengali recognised as a state language alongside Urdu), Bhotto's advice to Yahya Khan "in the summer of 1970 to forget about the elections" (Schendel 124) after the first general elections for the National Assembly was announced, lack of help from West Pakistan when East Pakistan was hit by a cyclone and rejecting the election results when Awami League won "an absolute majority in Pakistan's 300-seat National Assembly" (Schendel 125). Along with that, resource extraction from East Pakistan was one of the factors. The Yahya regime planned a military attack (Operation Searchlight led by General Tikka Khan, known as the Butcher of Bengal) on 25th March 1971 to quell the Bengali autonomy movement. Rape, genocide, and resource extraction can be read together—violating the land and its people. Pakistani author and critic Tariq Rahman highlights the Pakistani English language writers' "inability to respond truthfully and imaginatively to a great human tragedy [the events of 1971]" (Rahman 227). There has been an uncomfortable silence. If one looks at Pakistani fiction in English, background use of events of 1971 can be found in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* or Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*. Sorayya Khan's *Noor* attempts to break this silence significantly.

Noor also grapples with disability. Sajida's third child, Noor, is portrayed as a child with a disability. Noor's art seems to have the ability to connect the present with the past. The cyclone and the war reappear in her artworks. Her paintings or artworks make Ali and Sajida confront their pasts which they have willingly or unconsciously rejected. The paper reads Noor's disability and her art as essential aspects in highlighting the

utility-based treatment that comes from the colonial and patriarchal frame of mind. Society's and Hussain's treatment of his daughter, Noor, can be linked to West Pakistan's treatment of the Bengali language (the imposition of Urdu), religion (seeing the Bengalis as lesser Muslims), and also the mistreatment of their resources. Critics like Shazia Rahman and Ananya Jahanara Kabir have focused on the question of location/ postcolonial ecofeminism and partition's post-amnesias respectively in their analysis of Sorraya Khan's *Noor*. This paper mainly focuses on the question of utility and disability.

The Question of Utility and Disability

To read a novel like *Noor*, one has to understand the location's geography, history, and politics. In her interview with Cara Cilano, Sorayya Khan stresses the importance of location. She says, "Location is important to me. That's how I see, that's my lens. When I'm thinking about narrative, it springs from location…" (Khan 217). Khan talks about "historical memory and political reality that binds us together" (Khan 221), and she presents the trauma of 1971 as a collective trauma. The trauma of the cyclone can also be seen as a collective trauma in the novel, which casts a "long shadow" (Butalia xviii) upon the characters. Ananya Jahanara Kabir notes how "Noor, who can remember things she neither experienced nor witnessed, becomes the embodiment of postmemory, or the inexplicable transmission of one generation's trauma on to another, and its South Asian variation, post-amnesia" (65).

To discuss the idea of utility and disability, in the context of Pakistan before 1971, "two-thirds of Pakistan's foreign exchange was earned in East Pakistan—mostly through jute exports—but much of it was diverted to West Pakistan." (Schendel 136). There had been exploitation of resources and the East Pakistanis also began seeing themselves as "second-class citizens" (Schendel 138). The Bengalis of East Pakistan were also considered lesser Muslims and hence, lesser human beings, symbolically attributing disability to them. Douglas Bayton highlights how the concept of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them..." (36).

Sajida's identity as a Bengali remains ever-present in the novel. From the moment she arrives in West Pakistan, she has been referred to as black or almost black or "kohl-ki-larki" (Khan 9). The prejudices against Bengalis are also portrayed in the novel as portrayed by Kamila Shamsie in her novel *Kartography*. As a little girl, when Sajida whispers, "Alhamdulillah"

Nanijaan's (Ali's mother) "first thought was, *Where did she learn that?* Before the thought was complete, she was ashamed. East Pakistanis, Bengalis, were Muslim, too, she knew. But somehow hearing the words spill from the child's mouth made it true for Nanijaan as it hadn't been before" (Khan 61). The 'othering' also gets manifested in the numerous jokes on Bengalis that Ali tells Noor—"Bengalis are such cowards, God help them, they turned to the Indians for help! What does independence mean for a Bengali? Not having to be told to wash his hands after having a shit" (Khan 118) or "Bengalis are so stupid they can't appreciate what they've been given" (Khan 119), or "Why are Bengalis so weak?" He answers, "Because they can't tell rice from grass!" (Khan 118). The difference is seen as 'inferiority' which highlights biological racism (that sees the 'other' as disabled) which also justifies subordination, giving an 'inferior' label to differences. Ali feels the urge to tell Noor that her mother is a Bengali as he announces, "Your mother—she's really from Bengal" (Khan 120) as if he does not entirely believe that and needs to assert her identity in order to make it real.

The novel also depicts how racism, sexism, and environmental exploitation coexist. Violence against women is portrayed through the depiction of rape and sexual violence by West Pakistani soldiers during the war. Nanijaan's experience of domestic violence also gets highlighted in the novel. Shazia Rahman analyses how "the instances of violence against women in the novel create a strong indictment of West Pakistani patriarchy, while the characters of Sajida and Noor balance the depictions of Bengali women's suffering" (103). The women's bodies are ab(used) and are thus rendered disabled. Disability can be physical or a socially engineered category, which can also be read symbolically. From a post/colonial perspective, "the scarred, unfree body of the colonised slave became a disabled body" (Grech 9).

The medicalisation of disability, as Jennifer C. James and Cynthia Wu highlight, "defines disability merely as a physiological impairment—a source of individual misfortune or the unnatural product of a biological 'accident'—and thus avoids considering the implications of 'disability' as a discursively engineered social category" (3). Noor's disability can be read as both real and symbolic. The doctors come up with different names that can describe Noor's disability—Mongoloid, Down Syndrome, Autism, Rett Syndrome, Asperger's Syndrome, Martin-Bell Syndrome, among others. Nanijaan's question, "What do doctors know of love?" (Khan 21), highlights the importance of unadulterated acceptance.

Noor also stands for gendered 'othering.' Hussein loved his family, and he was deeply in love with Sajida. However, when his second son was born, the patriarchal mindset could not be suppressed—"Hussein repeated, in question form, the doctor's words, *larka*?, as if he were uncertain of the gift bestowed on him twice in a row" (Khan 13). As Hussein anticipates a girl child when Sajida becomes pregnant again, he states, "She'll have her hands full with the two boys" (Khan 14). This hints at the gendered utility-based treatment that women are subjected to.

The disabled body is not useful for the imperial project. From the point of view of capitalism, utility is not associated with a disabled body. Hussein tries to cope and even thinks that he would overcome his aversion towards Noor's disability—"He reminded himself that his daughter had not been asked to be born, that she had been willed into life" (Khan 22), but he struggles. Society's response and insensitive comments make things worse. Some people wanted to know about the medications for such a strange affliction. Some comments like "Can't you get rid of her?", "My sister's son is in a home for drug addicts. Maybe they have room there. I'll ask her for you", "Send her to a village. They know how to deal with them there" or "It's a girl, yaar. God is merciful. He didn't land you with a boy like that" (Khan 23). Partition came as a shock to many people. People were not prepared and found it difficult to accept. Hussein discarding his family can symbolically be read as West Pakistan's 'disability' to accept East Pakistan. Sajida, too felt it was her responsibility to tell Hussein of the revelation she had when Noor was conceived (that Noor would be different) but she could not trust his ability to understand. She had kept it a secret, and she blamed herself for it. Sajida had the time to accept Noor, unlike Hussein.

Hussein wanted a daughter who would "as much as possible, duplicate his wife, her laughter and beauty. He'd always adored Sajida, and he wanted another manifestation of her in this world. Greedy, perhaps, he thought, but that's the way it was" (Khan 24). That is the reason why for him:

> the ones that concentrated on her sex upset Hussein the most. In fact, his sadness was greater because the child was a girl. He had two boys, each perfect and whole, but even before the second one was born, he'd wished for a girl, a child who would take longer to grow out of his love, a child who would not tire of his unconditional adoration… (Khan 23-24).

He also held himself responsible for his daughter's condition as if he had failed his child. He turned away from her and Sajida; and even refused to look at Noor's drawings (which he saw as manifestations of the unformed, inadequate, disabled body). Those paintings had no value/ utility for Hussein. Hussein even tried to discard, reject, and demolish her paintings.

Hussein's destruction of Noor's paintings and Noor miraculously reproducing them precisely as they were symbolically show nature and the oppressed country's power and might. The idea of greed, the question of utility, and the inability to accept difference echo West Pakistan's treatment of East Pakistan. Hussein depriving Noor of his love can be seen as a metaphor for the deprivation faced by East Pakistan. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's book, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, provides a framework for reading disability as a metaphor, situating "disability, like gender, sexuality, and race, as a constructed category of discursive investment" (2).

Like Sajida, Noor becomes a misfit (like East Pakistan becoming a misfit in the Pakistani national discourse). Unlike Lenny in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* where, "Lenny's triple difference—she is a Parsi in a predominantly Muslim and Hindu community, she is a girl, and she is crippled by polio—all make her an outsider in the community, but as a child she is protected by it…" (Innes, 153), Noor seems more strongly linked with everything associated with East Pakistan, the war, and the climatic catastrophe. War, poverty, climate crisis and pollution too create forms of disability that are environmentally induced (stiker 121-89). We cannot know if Noor's disability is environmentally induced. However, Noor's link to East Pakistan/ Bangladesh becomes manifest in varied ways.

For instance, Noor's association with water, where the sound of water comforts her when she enters into a crying spell links her to that location. Noor's constricted space and she limiting "her universe to the house or draw herself borders within its confines" (Khan 35) can also be seen as a metaphor for borders. She begins to "fear lines: of walls that marked the property, the doorways she was forced to pass under, the cracks on the brick walkways…" (Khan 42). The fear and obsession can be read metaphorically as emerging out of the consequence of colonial discipline or regimentation. This can also represent limiting gender roles, where a woman's freedom is curtailed in a patriarchal society. Noor's dislike and fear of hospitals (Khan 153) can be read as a symbolic manifestation of the trauma of war. Noor was also numb to physical pain, which can be seen as

a disability and also as a metaphor for the numbness that descends upon the victims of war (here, victims can be the one who is victimized and also the perpetrator)—"Noor did not feel excruciating pain after suffering a severely broken bone" (Khan 39).

Noor: Countering Disability

Sajida knew when her third child, Noor, was conceived and she links the child to a place, to her past, "like the brief feel of a distant place she might have visited when she was a child" (Khan 1). She saw a vision of her daughter, a daughter who would be different and who would bring colours to her life. The child's beauty, grace, and innocence can symbolise the lost place that lingers in Sajida's memory. Sajida's past has "forever lingered just beyond her touch" (3), and Noor throws *light* on Sajida's past. After Noor was conceived, 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, sails of fishing boats" (Khan 6). She experienced a heightened sense of awareness. Noor brought colours to her life like never before. The landscape (of East Pakistan) came back to Sajida— "Concentrating, Sajida thought she could make out the shape of the family hut she'd once lived in, the thatch of straw above the door that threatened to fall, the brown puddles on the floor during the monsoons…." (Khan 11).

Noor came into the world "calm and self-possessed" (17). Hussein felt as if the baby wanted to share something important just after moments of being born, and for Ali, Noor brought back memories of Bangladesh:

> 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 the 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 the day was dry and cloudless, Ali smelled a flooding pit of mud and he heard rain, unforgiving streams falling in deafening sheets. It was the roar of the monsoons, the dreaded season which stole his sleep every year… (19)

Ali gave up praying and gave up meat after returning from war. His mind could not suppress the memories of atrocities, killings and rape. Food con-

sumption patterns are primarily gendered and meat-eating is predominantly associated with male (power or patriarchy). This act of giving up meat can be seen as a protest against violence and discrimination or it can be seen as an act of repentance. Carol J. Adams defines the "sexual politics of meat" as "an attitude and action that animalises women and sexualises and faminizes animals"; it is also "the assumption that *men need* meat, have the right to meat, and that meat eating is a male activity associated with virility" (4). Noor, like Ali, grows up to be a vegetarian.

Noor was born with a gift of colours and was "devoted to the vastness and complexities of colors" (Khan 27). Nanijaan believed that Noor's drawings were invocations to God. When Noor starts painting blue on paper, it has a strange effect on Sajida:

> …Sajida saw that Noor's blue was movement. Impatiently, she waited for Noor's drawings, examining and discovering a different pulse in each. Sajida could almost see ripples of water running away from the edge of a beach. She could feel the sweltering days and hear the grind of her father's fishing boat against the sand banks in the Bay of Bengal as it was pushed on land. More than anything else, she could make out fishing nets swimming and bending below the blue of Noor's crayons. (Khan 28)

Noor's artwork, the shape of a boat on paper, takes Sajida back to her childhood memories when her father and uncles used "fisherman's boat" (Khan 74) and brought home fish from the Bay of Bengal. Noor describes it as "fishboat" and "Sajida recognized the similarity of her daughter's word, 'fishboat,' with 'fisherman's boat,' a word she'd heard used many, many years before in a different language—Bengali—which she'd long since lost" (Khan 74). Noor brings back the memories of the cyclone to Sajida. Sajida remembers the water "as high as the hills…" (Khan 11).

Noor becomes obsessed with that painting and draws it again and again, culminating in a dream where she sees "a tree with two fingers that rose into the heavens, a boat drenched in silver nets perched in the shadowed crook in between" (Khan 74). Upon waking, Noor feels the grains of "sand between her toes" (Khan 74), and she begins scrubbing her feet. An hour later, "the boat in Noor's latest drawing was brimming with dead and rotting fish" (Khan 75). Dreams and visions play a vital role in the novel as they interestingly touch upon reality. Sajida's communication with her dead mother through her dreams also has real consequences. She learns how to sew because of her dreams, where her mother gives her "sewing

advice" (Khan 5).

Noor's painting startles Sajida. She stares "at the dead, rotting fish in silver fishing nets that she had seen as a child wound around a tree" (Khan 74). Noor refers to Sajida as a "snake-girl" (Khan 76) and asks if Sajida is scared. Sajida lies about it, fearing to see how her past and present are coming together. She wonders why Noor has omitted this detail (Sajida in a tree) in her detailed pictures. Years later, Noor reveals that she did not want to draw Sajida scared.

When Noor paints a picture of a bloated buffalo—"every inch of the paper was covered with color. This time it was brown, exactly the right brown-black of the mud after the cyclone, and the buffalo sank in it" (Khan 80), Sajida sees herself as a young girl in the painting—"Her small hand disappeared into the buffalo's monstrous body" (Khan 80). She also saw an outline of a baby in the corner of the painting—"*The longest of lashes*, Sajida noted, eyes drawn perfectly closed" (Khan 80). Sajida remembers the brutality of the cyclone, the cyclone tossing and turning her and Sajida losing her grip on her brother. She remembers holding on to a dead buffalo.

Noor's painting also makes Ali think about his time there. It brings back memories of the monsoon of East Pakistan—"the images of torn, upside-down trees and shattered boats, were drawn from an odd perspective, as if from above rather than *inside* the scene. Yet there was a special mist of gray that ran across the picture—so certainly, Ali knew at first glance, that of East Pakistan's monsoons" (Khan 84). East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) is a vulnerable location "forever unlucky in the mouth of the Bay of Bengal" (Khan 85).

For Ali, Noor's menstruation brings to his mind the memories of the no-breasted women in East Pakistan and how they saw blood between her legs. Noor dreams of a river when she starts menstruating—"Red like the river" (Khan 113), she says. Ali is reminded of the river—"The one behind the officer's house, the darkness of it, in midday, the brightest of afternoon suns spilling from the sky" (Khan 115). The river was dark, with dead bodies floating in the muddy water, and the "river changed color. Pale. Pink, sometimes" (Khan 124). Noor paints the river—"Half the river was pink, the other half gray" (Khan 126). The painting brings back Ali's memory of "...burying the no-breasted woman. The river, cumbersome, almost heaving in its downward flow...a swarm of crows, thousands of them, wings flapping in a loud hum as they circled lower and lower, in unison, above the stinking water of the river" (Khan 127). He remembers

the name of the river— Sitalakhya. Ali realises what confronting his past would mean, but strangely he also feels relief.

Noor's painting of a pyramid of tin barrels—thirty-six of them—brings back Sajida's memories of touching empty hot barrels as a child in Dhaka. Cyclone had turned her into an orphan and a refugee. Sajida sees that "in Noor's drawing, there was a smudged imprint on the wall and greens behind the brushstroke. It took Sajida only a minute to see beyond the brushstrokes. She knew what had been there. *Joi Bangla*, Hail Bangladesh" (Khan 106). She could now think about the place, the war, and the cyclone and connect the dots where Noor's drawings become "windows into another world, far away and distant, which might have ceased to exist without Noor" (Khan 106).

Noor also makes a painting in the form of a booklet. She binds it. When Ali asks, Noor says, "*Tasveeren*" (pictures). When she let the booklet flip open, page by page, "a camouflaged jeep bounced on a road before veering off, and tumbling over, the driver lying in his blood in the middle of the road. His passenger, in fatigues, a rifle to his side, bent down to tend to him." (163). Ali is shocked because he recognises himself in the man with a rifle tending to his driver in East Pakistan. Ali starts confronting his past, embracing the healing process, and he includes Noor in his healing as he talks to her about the war. He then begins a conversation with Sajida, which has been long due. Ali realises that he was talking to himself all these years; it was one-sided and that these one-sided conversations were not enough.

For Ali, Noor's drawings unpack what he has stowed away with his scalding bath after homecoming. Ananya Jahanara Kabir notes that "the gridded and geometric architecture of Islamabad and 'Ali's Sector' suggests the suppression of secrets through the imposition and maintenance of discipline as memory's straitjacket" (66). Noor makes Ali revisit the atrocities of the war (the killing, the mutilation, the rape). Nanijaan confronts him with questions, and Sajida's final confrontation makes him come to terms with himself. Ali rushed into war, conceiving it to be an adventure of a lifetime. He considers, "After he landed in East Pakistan at the Dhaka airport, it took one day before he asked himself, *this is my country?*, another day to know he wasn't fighting for Nanijaan or, for that matter, any family. On the fourth day he felt like a mercenary" (Khan 167). He missed home, and in the end, he fought and killed just to save himself.

Noor's drawing in pencil—"A cluster of troops stood in messy rows…

One officer was drawn in more detail than the others. He stood in the front row…" (Khan 179) seems to record facts from the past and Ali would search for details in them, about himself. The detail of the drawing that caught Sajida's notice was that Ali was wearing knee-high boots. He stood in ankle-deep mud, the mud in East Pakistan that bound Ali and Sajida once. Ali remembers he has been ordered to dig a mass grave for enemies along with other soldiers—"A pile of bloated corpses lay at the edge of a shallow, sunken pit" (Khan 189). As they bent on their job, it started raining, and the pit became a pond. Some soldiers started throwing corpses into the pit. As a lone group of people were seen making their way toward the pit, the gunmen became alert. A child was seen running behind this group. Ali and his troops started shooting at the Bengalis as "the dance of death was choreographed that war afternoon" (Khan 194-5). The child started tugging on the dead bodies and cried out the name 'Mukhtiar.' They left the job unfinished and returned to their base. Ali explains to Sajida how he had felt removed from the war, not believing in it. Ali got typhoid from that stinking hole and returned home. This also highlights how exploitation of the ecology brings diseases in its wake.

The revelation, in the end, comes from Sajida. She felt she could not breathe. In East Pakistan, Sajida said, "There *were* trees there" (Khan 196). War and its effect on nature get captured in the word "*were.*" She reveals, "The girl…"…"That name. Mukhtiar. He was her baby brother", that Sajida "was there" (Khan 197). Sajida repeats to herself, "first came the cyclone...and then, a few months later, the swirling pit of war" (Khan 199). She realises that her father could have killed her. Sajida's adoption by Ali remains morally ambiguous (abduction, rescue, or atonement). Later, Ali considers the case. He believed that "his intention was to help the child" (Khan 172) but later realises that he has done that for himself. He wanted to make amends, that this was an act of atonement.

As for Hussein, he finally realises his mistake, and that realisation is brought about by Noor's painting, where she draws "a side profile of a man's shoe" (Khan 87). This brings back memories of good times to Hussein, and for the first time, he does not feel the urge to destroy her painting. He carefully puts it in his briefcase. He wonders, "Of all the diagnoses that were offered for Noor, none suggested that she might know more than anyone else, much less that she might know what others had forgotten" (Khan 90).

Hussein finally looks closely at his daughter and how she resembles his wife; this moment of realisation becomes important when Hussein has a

vision of his family—"Whole, like a tree" (Khan 93). He cries and apologises. Such an apology did not come from Pakistan; as Shaun Grech puts it, "the colonialist...does not like to apologise" (7). Shazia Rahman in *Place and Postcolonial Ecofeminism* also writes about this lack of apology. The colonialist also does not like to accept differences, as Sajida accuses Hussein—"You could not allow her into your life, because you believed that if you did it would reflect *your* weakness" (Khan 96). Hussein finally sees the power in Noor's art and accepts "his destiny in Noor" (Khan 180).

Conclusion

The dream of 'golden Bengal' made the emergence of Bangladesh possible in 1971, as Noor says, "I like dreams" (75). Noor helps Sajida connect the dots in her mind as Sajida cannot trust her memories. Sajida was a child, and naturally, she could not comprehend the meaning of war or understand that there was a war. The dead bodies floating in the river Sajida saw as a child were from the war. She realised that later. The cyclone was in November, and she was rescued "from the side of a Dhaka road by Ali" (124) in June. There was war. In Dhaka, "...in March and April, she'd seen corpses floating in the muddy river" (124). War leads to toxicity that changes the landscape. There is the consumption of fossil fuel, deforestation, generation of toxic waste, and destruction of human and non-human life forms. The exploitation of land and water bodies, in the form of deforestation, waste generation, and dumping of dead bodies in muddy pits or the river, disturbs the ecological balance. Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, highlights the unseen effects that climate change and war can cause over time and space, which he refers to as "slow violence" (2), where "war deaths from environmental toxicity demand patient, elaborate proof. Spikes in renal collapse; infertility; leukaemia; testicular, brain, and breast cancers; and clusters of infant malformations are harder to link to war's technologies than a bullet through the head" (211). Although we may or may not link Noor's disability with war, we cannot deny her unconscious connection with it, manifested through her paintings.

Noor's artworks enable the characters to come to a kind of reconciliation as they instigate conversation between the characters. The crippling effects of war and trauma are eased through Noor's paintings. Their conversations enable them to accept themselves for what they are and also accept each other. Just as Sajida cannot have the audacity to forgive elements of nature (which took away her family), her forgiveness of Ali and Hussein, too, cannot be complete. She questions if it is possible to forgive and forget.

However, there is a kind of acceptance, which comes with love, and love, Sajida realises, "could be more exacting than anything she'd believed" (Khan 99). Sorraya Khan's novel questions if it is possible or ethical to move on without confronting the past, if forgetting is possible or if being unable to forgive is a 'disability', if forgetting can amount to denial or if remembering is a responsibility. In *Partition: The Long Shadow*, Urvashi Butalia contemplates that perhaps, "…the real moving on will come when we are able to work on these histories together—across countries, across class, across caste and across gender" (Butalia xviii). Sorraya Khan's novel initiates this idea of working on histories together, across boundaries.

The ambiguity and arbitrariness of borders become a disturbing fact. Nanijaan replies to child Sajida's question about why Pakistan was two in its east and west wings by saying that before Sajida was born, "the borders had been drawn quickly and carelessly like lines in a child's drawing" (Khan 174). A few days later, Ali pronounces another name for the east wing, i.e., Bangladesh, where the location, East Pakistan, magically disappears. Sajida's mind simply translates its meaning—home for Bengalis. As Sajida grows up, she realises this to be her first geography lesson. Noor paints a "charpai, a shawl flung across it" (Khan 149) just before Nanijaan dies. Sajida recognises what it means, and Ali "could make out his mother, lying on the charpai" (Khan 149). Noor writes her first two words, "o-v-e-r-t-h-e-r-e" (Khan 149). When Ali tries to explain to Noor that these are two words and not one, Noor cries and says that, "her grandmother was in one place, not two" (Khan 149). Ali realises that Noor's "grasp on life-and death—surpassed his own" (Khan 149)—that these borders and boundaries are constructs in our minds.

Noor's final art on herself (the last image in the novel) is evocative of nature and the oppressed country's beauty/ wonderment and power. It is a picture of celebration, of acceptance. Noor starts mixing colours—"When she found the right balance of color" (Khan 201-202)—she mixes that with Sajida's cosmetics—red blush, powders, blue eye shadow, glitter. Noor paints herself; she paints her hair. On her face, she applies "lip liner, lipsticks, blush, kohl, eye shadow, and lastly, the special glitter" (Khan 202), transforming herself into "a doll" (Khan 202). She sways "to an invisible pulse of music" (Khan 202). When Sajida sees her, she is reminded of the vision she saw when Noor was conceived. The description of that vision and Noor's image is the same, "an apparition transformed into life" (Khan 203). Like in her vision, Noor throws the mug into the mirror and calls out "Ammi!" in a high-pitched voice, "registering an urgent, all-consuming need for her mother" (Khan 203). The breaking of the mirror can sym-

bolise the breaking of silence and the breaking of image. Hussein and Ali find them (Sajida and Noor) covered in paint, cosmetics, and glitter. Noor and Sajida "shrieked with laughter" (Khan 204), displaying the ultimate triumph of nature, their bodies merging in an embrace, empowered with knowledge and recognition of the past.

This beautiful sight reminds one of Ali's descriptions of East Pakistan—"East Pakistan was beautiful. Lush and green the way West Pakistan never was..." (Khan 84), but it is also vulnerable. Sajida and Noor look beautiful and vulnerable as well. Ali "dropped to his knees" (Khan 204). The gesture suggests apology, supplication, prayer, or atonement. Ali prostrating before them makes him embrace what he has suppressed all along—the pain and the trauma. His groan fills his house. Sajida locks arms with her father interlocking their shared histories, narrations, and memories.

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