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**RESEARCH PAPER****Echoes of the Unheard: Reimagining Colonial History in *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali*****<sup>1</sup>Azher Khan \* and <sup>2</sup>Dr. Sonia Irum**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines how contemporary women writers from South Asia are challenging traditional historical narratives by excavating and reconstructing silenced feminine perspectives, with a focus on *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* (2019) by Uzma Aslam Khan. Employing Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction, the study analyzes Khan's narrative strategies in reimagining colonial history through a feminist lens. The study argues that Khan's work resurrects neglected historical narratives and enhances readers' historical awareness by inviting critical engagement with the construction of historical knowledge. By skillfully interweaving fact and fiction, Khan expands the boundaries of traditional historiography, incorporating postmodern dimensions into her exploration of political and historical themes. The study demonstrates how Khan's novel gives voice to subaltern experiences, particularly those of women within the context of South Asian colonial history, challenges dominant discourses, and fosters a more complex historical consciousness.

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**KEYWORDS** Colonial History, Historical Consciousness, Historiographic Metafiction, South Asian Literature, Subaltern Voices

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**Introduction**

The canon of South Asian Anglophone literature has been predominantly male up until the 1960s and 1970s. While male authors like R. K. Narayan, V. S. Naipaul, and Salman Rushdie gained global recognition, female writers from the region remained largely in the shadows. However, the decades after 1960s witnessed the rise of a small yet influential group of women writers who began to carve out their own space in the literary world. Authors such as Anita Desai, Attia Hosain, Kamala Markandaya, and Bapsi Sidhwa demonstrated exceptional proficiency in English and brought forth a distinctive perspective that set them apart from their male predecessors and contemporaries. These pioneering women chose to explore themes that resonated with their unique experiences as South Asian women, thereby introducing fresh narratives and perspectives to the literary canon (Lau, 2002, pp. 15-16). This shift not only diversified the voices in South Asian Anglophone literature but also paved the way for upcoming generations of women writers to explore and question conventional historical and cultural narratives.

The rewriting of history has emerged as a significant literary trend in South Asian Anglophone literature since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The movement is characterized by authors reimagining historical and mythological narratives from female perspectives, challenging patriarchal structures, and giving voice to previously marginalized characters. As a result, it has significantly contributed to reshaping perceptions of South Asian

women's roles in history and contemporary society, both within the region and globally (Lau, 2002, pp. 18-19). Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* (2019) serves as a recent example of this trend, demonstrating how contemporary writers uncover and reimagine historical narratives, particularly those centered on women's experiences. This paper aims to examine the broader trend of rewriting women's history in South Asian fiction in English and analyze Khan's novel as a case study within this literary movement. In her novel, Khan expands the boundaries of traditional historiography by skillfully interweaving fact and fiction, incorporating postmodern dimensions into her exploration of political and historical themes. The study focuses on how colonial history has been reframed in Khan's novel, how it represents the voices of the subalterns, women in particular, critiques dominant discourses, and fosters a more complex historical consciousness.

### Literature Review

The landscape of South Asian Anglophone literature has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades, with women writers emerging as powerful voices in reshaping narratives of identity, history, and culture. While the tradition of women writing in South Asia finds its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with figures like Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, and Kamla Das, the literary movement truly flourished in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with writers, such as Anita Desai, Bharti Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, and Bapsi Sidhwa, increasingly using English as a tool to reach both domestic and international audiences (Jussawalla & Weagel, 2016, pp. 1-2). These women not only challenged patriarchal norms within their societies but also confronted the lingering effects of colonialism, creating a unique intersection of postcolonial and feminist perspectives in their works. As Lau (2002) observes, "For South Asian women writers, the negotiation is not only with language, but also a negotiation of a space for women writers, to write, rewrite, re-define, re-name, and re-invent, in a traditionally and proudly patriarchal society and culture" (p. 23). This dual negotiation has resulted in a rich and complex body of literature that continues to expand the boundaries of traditional narratives and critique established historical and cultural paradigms.

While the pioneer male authors have made significant contributions to South Asian fiction in English, women writers occupy a unique position due to their experience of being 'doubly colonized,' a concept that underscores the intersecting oppressions they face as both colonial subjects and women (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007, p. 66). This dual marginalization has necessitated a distinctive approach to historical reimagining in their literary works. Women writers have had to navigate not only the complexities of post-colonial identity but also the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures, leading them to adopt specific literary techniques that challenge and subvert traditional narratives. These authors employ writing as a tool to "deconstruct and reinterpret aspects of the historical process which have previously silenced or been closed to their female subjects" (Heilmann and Llewellyn, 2007, p. 2). Strategies of subversion, deconstruction, and reconstruction have become essential tools in their literary arsenal, enabling them to break the silence imposed upon them and retell history from their unique perspectives (Malik, Junejo, & Shaikh, 2022, p. 85).

Within the postcolonial contexts, women writers occupy a unique position, which has been widely recognized by scholars for its potential to simultaneously challenge both colonial and patriarchal narratives. According to Elleke Boehmer (2005), "[N]ative or subaltern women were, as it is called, *doubly or triply marginalized*. That is to say, they were disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also of race, social class, and, in some cases, religion, caste, sexuality, and regional status" (p. 216). This multifaceted

marginalization often become the driving force for crafting narratives that are particularly subversive and innovative. Ania Loomba (1994) further expands on this concept by drawing connections between various forms of human domination, including “patriarchal control, state power, parochialism, colonialism, and racial prejudice” (p. 33). This interconnected view of oppression underscores the complexity of experiences depicted in postcolonial women’s literature. Kartak (2006) emphasizes the gender-specific nature of colonial domination, particularly in its control of female sexuality, and notes that “women writers portray how their protagonists resist patriarchy or colonial oppression covertly from within the system rather than overt political resistance or imprisonment depicted more commonly by male postcolonial writers” (p. 3). Spivak’s (1988) essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” brings attention to the complexities of representation for postcolonial women. While making it clear that subalterns’ voices cannot reach the ears of the privileged, Spivak argues that “the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (p. 287). Mohanty’s (2003) “Under Western Eyes” further complicates the discourse by critiquing Western feminist approaches to non-Western women. Mohanty cautions against the “production of ‘Third World Woman’ as a singular monolithic subject” (p. 333), emphasizing the need for a cultural-specific understanding of women’s experiences in postcolonial contexts.

The colonial period and its immediate aftermath served as a rich backdrop for several female authors from South Asia, providing a canvas to explore complex historical narratives through a feminine lens. Mumtaz Shahnawaz’s *The Heart Divided*, posthumously published in 1957, is one of the earliest English novels by a Muslim woman from the subcontinent (Mehmood, 2019, p. 116) that challenged prevailing notions of patriarchy by portraying strong female characters actively engaged in the political movements of their time. The novel strongly contests the misconception of women as passive observers of history. This tradition of reimagining historical narratives from a feminine perspective continued with later works, such as *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) by Attia Hussain, which reflected the dramatic social changes experienced by women during pivotal political events. The novel presents the story of a young Muslim girl as she navigates life beyond the restrictions of “purdah” during the turbulent period leading to the independence of Pakistan and India. Likewise, Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* (1991) presents a distinct perspective on the Partition through the lens of a young Parsi girl, offering both a feminine and minority viewpoint on this crucial historical event.

South Asian women writers have consistently explored the complex interplay between traditional cultures and Western influences introduced during colonialism, creating narratives reflecting women’s multifaceted experiences navigating these intersecting worlds. Anita Desai exemplifies this exploration, in her novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980), through the character of Bim, an educated Indian woman grappling with the tension between her Western education and traditional family responsibilities. This theme of cultural negotiation spans generations in works like Anuradha Roy’s *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008), which depicts the lives of women amid India’s shift from colonialism to independence. Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* (2009) further broadens this scope, examining the impact of major global events on women’s lives from World War II to the post-9/11 era. While many contemporary writers focus on the ongoing effects of colonialism, including economic exploitation, cultural imperialism, and shifting global power dynamics, others delve into pre-colonial history to recover and reimagine women’s roles in ancient South Asian societies. For instance, Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) retells the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* from a woman’s perspective, blending ancient storytelling with contemporary feminist sensibilities. Similarly, Bina Shah’s *Season for Martyrs* (2014) interweaves centuries of Sindh’s history with recent political events, demonstrating how historical narratives continue to shape contemporary experiences.

These diverse approaches highlight the rich tapestry of South Asian women's literature, which consistently challenges, reinterprets, and expands our understanding of history, culture, and women's roles across time.

It is within this rich tradition of South Asian women's Anglophone literature that Khan's narrative emerges as a significant contribution. Her novel stands out for its ambitious attempt to recover silenced histories through fiction. The novel chronicles events during the 1930s and 1940s on the Andaman Islands under British colonial rule and the brief Japanese occupation in World War II. It highlights a lesser-known chapter of South Asian history, focusing on the Indian prisoners exiled to the Andaman Islands by the British. The central story revolves around Nomi Ali, a young girl born to convict parents on the islands, providing a unique perspective on the historical period. The novel explores postcolonial themes including war, identity, power, loss of culture, and the struggle for freedom, all through a distinct feminine perspective. Khan uses a blend of historical truths and her imagination to craft a rich, layered narrative. The book fits nicely into the trend of rewriting women's history in South Asian fiction in English, offering insight into a little-known chapter of colonial history from the vantage point of its female characters.

### Material and Methods

This study adopts an intersectional theoretical approach to analyze the selected novel by Uzma Aslam Khan. While Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction serves as the central framework, critical concepts from postcolonial theory, particularly drawing on the works of Homi Bhabha (1994) and Gayatri Spivak (1988), provide tools to examine the multifaceted nature of Khan's novel. Hutcheon's theory is relevant to examine Khan's narrative techniques in problematizing historical knowledge and employing self-reflexive storytelling. According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafictions are "novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5). The definition pertinently applies on Khan's work. The theoretical lens also allows for an exploration of how Khan's novel "install[s] and then blur[s] the line between fiction and history" (Hutcheon 113). Accordingly, Bhabha's notions of "hybridity", "Ambivalence", and the "third space" offer valuable insights into Khan's portrayal of the Andaman Islands as a site of cultural intersection and negotiation. These concepts help in understanding the complex identities of Khan's characters, who navigate between different cultural influences and power structures, which Bhabha refers to as the "third space of enunciation" (Pourgharib and Asl, 2022, 1660). Spivak's idea of subaltern and her provocative question "Can the subaltern speak?" offer a critical lens to examine the representation of marginalized voices, particularly those of women characters in the novel. By integrating historiographic metafiction and postcolonial theory, this study aims to analyze how Khan's novel engages with and subverts conventional history of the Andaman Islands during the colonial era. This approach not only highlights the novel's contribution to postcolonial literature but also offers insights into the broader implications of utilizing fiction in recovering silenced histories and challenging dominant historical discourses.

### Results and Discussion

#### Reimagining Colonial History

*The Miraculous* significantly exemplifies how fiction can play a pivotal role in historical reconstruction, particularly in the context of postcolonial narratives. Khan's narrative approach aligns closely with Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, which self-consciously blends historical facts with fictional elements to

interrogate the nature of historical knowledge and representation. Through her narrative choices, Khan implicitly questions the construction of historical narratives. The novel's very title, with its juxtaposition of "miraculous," "true," and "history," prompts readers to consider the nature of historical truth and role of storytelling in shaping our perception of the past. The title immediately signals the novel's engagement with the complexities of historical narrative, affirming Hutcheon's assertion that historiographic metafiction "refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity" (p. 93).

Khan's novel performs crucial work in historical recovery by illuminating the largely overlooked history of the Andaman Islands during the colonial period and World War II. This aligns with Hutcheon's observation that historiographic metafiction "reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge" (p. 89). The novel brings to light the experiences of Indian prisoners exiled to these islands by the British, a chapter of history that has received little attention in mainstream historical narratives or literature. Khan's motivation for this historical recovery is evident in her interview statement: "I looked for true histories of the penal colony, but found hardly any. What I did find, unsurprisingly, was told from a male gaze. Though women were also exiled because their removal carried a particular social and sexual stigma, in these sources, not a single woman prisoner was named" (Grimay, 2022). By focusing on these overlooked narratives, Khan recovers and reimagines a history that has been doubly marginalized - both in terms of its geographical location and its focus on women's stories.

Khan's strategic use of naming conventions serves as a powerful tool to challenge traditional historical accounts and underscore the constructed nature of historical knowledge, resonating with Hutcheon's notion that historiographic metafiction "problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge" (p. 106). The characters Aye and Zee, bearing names that are mere letters devoid of cultural significance, symbolically represent the extremes of the alphabet and, by extension, the spectrum of colonial experience. This naming choice highlights the dehumanizing effects of colonialism and the erasure of individual identities. Similarly, the nameless female Prisoner 218 D embodies the anonymity forced upon many colonized subjects, particularly women, in historical records. The protagonist, Nomi, stands out as the only central character with a recognizable name. The character of Shakuntala further illustrates the power dynamics of colonialism through her changing surnames. Her surname changes from Das to Vas after marrying a Portuguese man, and finally changes to Best upon marrying an Englishman. This progression suggests that Shakuntala only gains significance when associated with a British name. It reflects the social and cultural implications of colonial rule, where adopting Western names and customs often led to increased social status or recognition.

Khan presents diversified and often contradictory viewpoints on historical events, demonstrating a key technique of historiographic metafiction. As Hutcheon notes, "there are only truths in the plural, and never one truth" (p. 110), Khan's polyphonic narrative questions the idea of a singular, definitive historical truth, prompting readers to reconsider history as a constructed interpretation of the past. Each character of the novel offers a different lens to view the events on the Andaman Islands. Nomi's perspective brings to the forefront issues of family dynamics and identity under oppressive conditions. Khan's choice to center the narrative on Nomi Ali, a young girl born to convict parents on the islands, is a powerful narrative strategy for rewriting history. This perspective allows readers to view the events through the eyes of someone simultaneously an insider and an

outsider – born on the islands but marked by her parents’ convict status. Using a child narrator in historical fiction is not unique to Khan’s work. The same technique is used by Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *Cracking India*, which uses the child narrator to recount the events of Partition. Ambreen Hai (2000) notes, “The child narrator serves as both witness and participant, offering a seemingly innocent yet perceptive view of historical events” (p. 390). Khan’s use of Nomi similarly allows for a fresh perspective on the colonial experience in the Andaman Islands. Prisoner 218 D’s perspective, however, offers insights into the adult convict experience, providing a stark contrast to Nomi’s childlike observations. Khan uses this narrative thread to explore the brutal realities of the penal colony and the psychological impact of imprisonment. By contrasting Prisoner 218 D’s experiences with Nomi’s coming-of-age story, she creates a tension that underscores the generational impact of colonial punishment. Shakuntala’s character further enriches the narrative, serving as a bridge between the convict community and the colonial administration. Her role as an educated woman within the colonial system places her in a complex position, echoing Spivak’s (1999) concept of the “native informant” – simultaneously empowered and constrained by her role in colonial structures (p. xi).

*The Miraculous* stands as a powerful challenge to official historical narratives, particularly those shaped by colonial perspectives. By focusing on the stories of marginalized individuals, Khan provides a counter-narrative that complicates and often contradicts official accounts of the period. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) argues in *Provincializing Europe*, the task of postcolonial historiography is to “write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it” (p. 43). The novel’s emphasis on the Andaman Islands as a penal colony directly counters idealized depictions of the British Empire. Khan contrasts official discourse, like the British politician’s portrayal of a “prisoner paradise,” with the stark realities endured by convicts and their families. This tension is exemplified in the novel’s citation of the Home Secretary to the Government of India: “The amenities and conditions of life and health of the terrorist prisoners in the Andamans are superior to those obtaining in the Indian jails... The punishment is not imprisonment but only banishment from home. It is a prisoner paradise” (p. 90). By detailing the brutal conditions of life for the island’s inhabitants, Khan exposes the violence underlying colonial rule and highlights the erasure of such stories from mainstream history. This erasure is poignantly reflected in Nomi’s question: “How could these islands be a haven from violence, after all that happened here, after all that had still not been seen, or redressed?” (p. 368).

The novel’s depiction of the gendered nature of colonial oppression is crucial, particularly within the context of the Andaman Islands’ penal colony. The author’s focus on female convicts and their experiences addresses a significant gap in historical scholarship, where narratives about women in the infamous Cellular Jail are notably scarce. Khan reveals in an interview: “For the next two decades, I looked for true histories of the penal colony. The little I found made brief references to women also being transported, without naming a single one” (Chambers, 2022). This omission is either due to the stigma associated with women’s imprisonment, with families fearing the label that “the women who go there are polluted” (Khan, 2019, p. 216), or due to authorities deliberately excluding their names to conceal the atrocities committed against them. The novel also highlights the differential treatment of women prisoners, who were often viewed as more morally corrupt than their male counterparts: “The women are of a more criminal type than the men. They are murderers of the most abandoned nature and obviously addicted to lustful excesses. There is a distinction between the murder committed by the woman and the murder committed by the man” (p. 22). Regardless of their crimes, women prisoners were treated with specific humiliation; their section of the jail was derogatorily called “Randi Barrik, the Barrack of Whores” (p. 86). This stereotyping

extended beyond female prisoners to women who were not convicts but had accompanied their husbands. These women were stigmatized simply for being associated with the infamous 'Kala Paani' land. A conversation between Nomi's mother and aunt highlights this fear:

'Every woman who crosses the sea is fallen, Fehmida,' said Aunty Madhu. 'I am no fallen woman, and neither are you. Nor will our daughters be, nor our daughters-in-law.' 'Yes, but you know it, and so do I. If a day comes when we are free to go home, no one in India will know the difference.' (28)

This social stigma persists in South Asian societies, where returning female prisoners often face rejection from their communities and families, making it difficult for them to rebuild their lives socially and economically.

### Navigating the Third Space

Khan's novel intricately engages with postcolonial themes, particularly the enduring effects of colonialism on both individuals and communities. The Andaman Islands serve as a 'third space,' in line with Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity, where colonizers, Indian prisoners, settlers, and Indigenous Andamanese interact. Bhabha (1994) describes this space as "the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (p. 38), and Khan's depiction reflects this dynamic, emphasizing the complex processes of identity formation under colonial rule. Nomi's struggle with her place in the islands' social hierarchy exemplifies Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity, which generates something "new and unrecognizable" through negotiation of meaning (p. 211). Prisoner 218 D embodies this hybridity, occupying a liminal position between the colonizers and the colonized, her interactions reflecting colonial power's ambivalence, as Bhabha notes, "split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (p. 107). The novel's portrayal of the Indigenous Andamanese, especially through Loka, underscores their marginalization and the tensions between cultural preservation and assimilation, further highlighting "the ambivalence of colonial discourse" (p. 85).

The Japanese occupation of the Andaman Islands further complicates the ambivalence of the local population. It confuses their allegiances, as illustrated by Zee's question to her sister Nomi: "Mama sides with the British, Baba, whose side are you?" (Khan, 2019, p. 4) Caught between two powerful forces, the locals fail to recognize that they are merely exchanging one form of colonization for another, naively viewing the Japanese as saviors from British rule. Their status becomes one of multilayered hybridity and ambivalence. The Japanese themselves represent a form of hybridity, being Asian yet operating as colonizers. This complexity is captured in a conversation between Nomi, Zee, and their father: "They are Asian, like us... 'Nobody cares about us.' 'The British have left. We are free.' 'We are not free. We are now under the Japanese'" (p. 3). As a colonial power, Japan implemented its own systems, using brutal methods to instill fear in the population. Zee's execution, which traumatized his family, particularly Nomi, was intended as a warning to others. The Japanese's cruelty, however, was not limited to the Indian population, as shown by the execution of Mr. Martin, the British deputy commissioner, who was condemned for conspiring against the Emperor of Japan (p. 186). The novel also highlights the continuity of colonial collaboration through Dr. Singh's remark: "The Japanese will help us attain freedom and keep us together. They deserve our cooperation" (p. 182). This reflects the deeply ingrained subservient mindset of native elites, who, having cooperated with British rule, now aligned themselves with the Japanese. Regardless of the

ruling power, Indians were continuously exploited under the pretense of protection and security.

### Unearthing Silenced Feminine Perspective

*The Miraculous* stands as a powerful example of how postcolonial literature can recover and reimagine histories that have been marginalized or erased from dominant narratives. Central to this recovery is Khan's narrative strategy of foregrounding the experiences of the local population, particularly through the female characters. By doing so, Khan engages directly with what Spivak terms the "subaltern" – those who have been historically silenced or spoken for by others. As a young girl born to convict parents in the Andamans, Nomi embodies this subaltern perspective. Her observations and experiences provide insights into the complex power dynamics at play in the colonial and wartime Andamans, offering a counter-narrative to official histories that often prioritize the perspectives of those in power. Khan gives voice to those who have been silenced by both colonial and patriarchal power structures, as one of her characters remarks: "Our struggle is two-fold. To free ourselves from imperialism as much as domestic slavery." (p. 214) Spivak (1988) argues that "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (287). Her statement highlights the double marginalization faced by women in colonial contexts. Khan's novel can be seen as an attempt to address this double marginalization and provide a platform for these shadowed voices to emerge. Prisoner 218 D, a former freedom fighter who killed a British police officer, also embodies Spivak's concept of subaltern, a marginalized subject whose voice is systematically silenced by dominant power structures.

Throughout history, women's contributions have often been marginalized or undervalued by patriarchal societies. Traditionally confined to domestic roles, women were nonetheless frequently pushed into performing 'masculine' tasks when necessary. Khan's novel vividly portrays this duality: "The factory was built by women. At one time, they laboured alongside male prisoners, clearing the jungle and building roads. Now they were kept indoors" (p. 26), highlighting both the exploitation of women's labor and the arbitrary gender roles in colonial contexts. The novel also delves into women's involvement in the freedom movement, where their roles were generally supportive, as one character notes, "We do not sit all day. We recruit. We collect funds. We carry letters. We organize strikes. We put up posters" (p. 216). However, the text also exposes the harsh realities faced by women who sought more active participation in the struggle. Those who expressed a desire to engage in violent resistance alongside men were starkly reminded of the potential consequences:

Do you want to get sent to the Andamans? . . . You know that as women, we must look for quieter ways. They send us, too. The government, the media, even the men who fight – none will speak of what happens to women who cross black water . . . The women who go there are polluted. (p. 216)

This excerpt highlights the intersecting oppressions of gender and colonialism, where women faced not only the threat of imprisonment but also the deep-seated social stigma associated with "crossing black water" to the Andaman penal colony.

The novel powerfully illustrates how the price of independence was disproportionately high for women freedom fighters, who faced not only physical danger but also the threat of social ostracism and psychological trauma. The author pointedly observes, "Have you noticed that when men want freedom, the conversation is about the nature of action, violence or non-violence? But when women want freedom, the conversation is about the nature of women, natural and unnatural?" (p. 217). This



observation highlights how women's participation in anti-colonial movements was often framed differently and subjected to additional scrutiny. The novel goes further, attempting to explain and justify women's participation in violent resistance against British occupation. Through Prisoner 218 D's act of killing an English officer, Khan presents a provocative perspective: "She did what she did to turn the question on them. Why did they do it—steal a land and its people, rape and torture them, ship them to alien shores and confine them within their own?" (p. 221). This passage not only humanizes the act of resistance but also forces readers to confront the brutal realities of colonial oppression that drove such actions.

The story of 'comfort women' is another dimension of forgotten history that Khan reconstructs in her novel. As Yaqoob (2019) notes, "it is one of the most painful and agonizing episodes within this novel: these women are displaced from their native cities, raped, tortured, and, in the end, killed within a bombing directed at the brothel" (p. 97). The system of 'comfort women' was planned and implemented by the Japanese imperial regime during World War II across the Asia-Pacific region. Jayanta Das Gupta mentions that "an estimated 2 lakh women were forced into sexual slavery by the conquering Japanese army" (qtd. in Biswas, 2014, pp. 813-814) in areas including Korea, China, the Philippines, Malaya, and the Andaman Islands. Despite contemporary denials by Japanese politicians and officials, historians have provided substantial empirical evidence confirming the existence of the 'comfort women' system (Nishino, Kim, & Onozava, 2018). It is, however, important to note that the British had already practiced bringing women to the penal colony before the Japanese occupation. Biswas states, "Females were brought forcefully to these colonial societies to develop intimacy with civilians as entertainers, entertain petty officers and soldiers as prostitutes, or to have marital relations with convicted prisoners in Penal Settlement in Andaman" (p. 803). These women, known as 'imported women,' fell into two categories: prisoner brides who volunteered to come and non-prisoner wives accompanying their incarcerated husbands. Khan novel illustrates this practice: "ordinary women prisoners were brought here to marry men. The British took a tour of women's prisons on the mainland, looking for prisoner brides" (p. 27). Regardless of their initial status, these women often had no choice but to settle permanently in the Andamans after their or their husbands' sentences were completed. The text further reveals the grim reality of these women's lives: "Among the latter were a small number of English wives, as well as women from prisons in India, Burma, Ceylon, Mauritius, and Benkulen who were prostitutes before they arrived and would be prostitutes after they left" (pp. 53-54). This highlights the perpetual cycle of exploitation these women faced, with their status remaining unchanged even after their release. Perhaps the most tragic aspect of this history is the fate of women abandoned by their convict husbands. Upon completing their sentences, many men returned to mainland India and their families, leaving their Andaman wives to suffer in isolation (Biswas, p. 813).

### **Constructing Historical Consciousness**

Khan's use of fiction as a tool for historical reconstruction goes beyond merely retelling past events. Her novel fosters a historical consciousness that connects the past with the present, encouraging readers to engage with history more actively and creatively. This approach prompts reflection on how historical forces continue to shape our world today, whether in the ongoing impacts of colonialism, the treatment of marginalized communities, or how we memorialize the past. Khan cautions against treating her novel as a 'remote' history or a concluded past: "I mean, look at us today. We never freed ourselves of fascism. Women's bodies are still a battlefield. Children like Nomi are still caught in the crossfires. The lives of people from the Global South are still being erased"

(Chambers, 2022). Through this lens, fiction becomes a powerful tool for raising historical consciousness about the gaps left unfilled by traditional historiography.

Khan's novel powerfully explores the systematic erasure of history and memory by colonial powers, recognizing this as a crucial mechanism for maintaining control over colonial territories, narratives, and knowledge production. The novel reinforces this theme through examples: "[He] reminded her that the Japanese had destroyed all records of their occupation, and destroyed many of the jail records, too. After the British reoccupied the island, they had taken away whatever they could find" (p. 365). Another instance is: "The smell of burning paper and crushed flowers at the memorial were also a reminder that there were those who never got to share their story, who never got to say the words" (p. 367). The passages highlight the layered nature of historical erasure, with multiple colonial powers participating in destroying and removing records. The description also underscores the human cost of historical erasure, pointing to the countless untold stories lost to colonial oppression.

Khan employs a creative approach to historical reconstruction in response to the deliberate gaps in the official historical narrative. Through her protagonist Nomi's exploration of the rubble left after Japanese bombardments and the British departure, the novel engages in imaginative archaeology. Nomi pieces together some fragments of documents:

There were scraps in English that had not entirely faded. On one she found written, the matter of . . . public interest, I assume. She decided the missing word was 'great.' On another, the decision we have most reluctantly . . . take. The missing letters, she decided, spelled 'felt obliged.' (p. 365)

This act of filling in the gaps serves as a metaphor for the novel's broader project of historical reconstruction. By blending historical facts with imaginative interpretation, Khan's work not only highlights the deliberate erasures in colonial records but also proposes a method for reclaiming and reimagining lost histories. While historians have attempted to rewrite the history of the infamous Andaman Islands relying on the scattered archival sources available, their own observations and research, and interviews with the local people (Venkateswar, 2004; Sircar, 2021), Khan uses fictional narratives to fill the voids, where archival documents may be silent or biased.

Throughout the novel, there is a tension between history as a static, dull subject and as a living, dynamic force that necessitates action in the present. In the novel, Khan gives voice to fictional characters, highlighting the limitations of traditional historiography. It also serves as a feminist critique of how women have been historically treated in colonial societies and how historiography has been predominantly a male endeavor. The author poses a significant question: How might our understanding of history differ if more women had been among its earliest chroniclers? Khan's novel suggests that a female perspective would likely have highlighted the inequalities, injustices, and oppression women have endured throughout history. While the number of women with experiences similar to those in Khan's work remains unknown, it is clear that such narratives have been conspicuously absent from mainstream historical accounts.

## Conclusion

*The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* makes a substantial contribution to South Asian Anglophone literature's efforts to rewrite colonial histories from marginalized perspectives. Khan's work aligns with the broader trend exemplified by authors like Bapsi

Sidhwa and Amitav Ghosh, who use fiction to challenge dominant historical narratives and recover erased voices. However, her focus on the often-ignored history of the Andaman Islands distinguishes her work, drawing attention to a neglected chapter of South Asian history. This approach mirrors Chakrabarty's notion of "provincializing Europe," which decouples history from Eurocentric frameworks and centers peripheral narratives (p. 42). Khan's novel achieves this by spotlighting a geographic and historical space frequently overlooked in colonial and postcolonial discourse. Through historiographic metafiction, she engages with the complexities and limitations of historical knowledge, echoing Hutcheon's observation of the "postmodern challenge to history," which focuses on how we interpret the past today (p. 19). In this, her work parallels Rushdie's concept of "imaginary homelands," where memory and imagination reconstruct history (p. 10).

Through her characters, Khan implicitly advocates for an alternative, female-centered historical model that amplifies silenced stories. As Terry Eagleton suggests, the literary text often acts as a "reversal and resistance of history," (p. 72) which is evident in Khan's reimagining of historical narratives. Her novel critiques the rigid authority of canonical history while contributing to the postcolonial feminist project of resisting both colonial and patriarchal legacies. Yaqoob notes that Khan's narrative "reveals the deep impacts of the toxic imperial vision of erasure of culture, indigenous lifestyle, and ideologies of reformation and appropriation" (p. 103). In this sense, Khan's fiction, despite its tragic trajectory, offers the implicit hope of redemption for its female characters, through the eventual triumph of their side of the story finally heard.

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