



Double Liminality and Double Marginality in Muslim Women's Narrative: An Investigation of Uzma Aslam Khan's the Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali

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ABSTRACT

Liminality and marginality are among the striking postcolonial issues. The concept of liminality, particularly in the postcolonial context, has been theorized by Homi K. Bhabha and he takes it as a third space where a character is neither connected to the old place nor the new one. The study investigates Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* the dwelling of the titular protagonist female character who faces dual liminality and dual marginality. The novel, set in the picturesque Andaman Islands circa 1936-42, has been analyzed using postcolonialism as a general framework whereas the two striking issues such as liminality and marginality with double intensity have been explored. The objectives of the study are the evaluation and depiction of doubly colonized subjects located in said islands. The findings highlight the hardships faced by the subcontinental prisoners, especially women who were brought to the far-off islands during the British colonial period. The control over the Andaman Islands has shifted from British to Japanese and then from Japanese to British. Thus, the residents of the islands and the prisoners have been facing the same hardships and troubles. Nomi Ali, the daughter of Haider Ali belongs to a non-prisoner family but has to face double liminality and double marginality. The study is significant because it highlights the female narrative voice from the part of history less spoken/written of.

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1. Introduction

Indian sub-continent has a colonial history and this region experienced subjugation, exploitation and marginalization by the colonial powers. Several postcolonial writers are seeking to reveal the darker corners of colonialism through the creation of a counter-narrative. Postcolonial theorists are addressing relevant topics such as subjugation, exploitation, marginality, and liminality by problematizing and/or theorizing each of these issues. Homi Bhabha, one of the major theorists of postcolonial studies, theorized some postcolonial issues such as liminality and marginality. The colonized, according to Bhabha, have to face marginalization and live in the liminal space or third space (Bhabha, 2012) where he is neither part of the local community nor of a foreigner.

Pakistani and Indian writers try to highlight the suppression, exploitation and marginalization faced by the locals during the colonial period. Uzam Aslam Khan is one of the Pakistani Anglophone fiction writers who has propagated the anti-colonial stance through her literary contribution. In this study, her seminal work *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* is explored with respect to double liminality and double marginality. The researcher intends to explore the position of the colonized people in Bhabha's terms such as liminality. In addition, the study focuses on the extension of the concept of liminality and marginality – double liminality and double marginality. The objective of the study includes the location and

positionality of the people, particularly, the female characters dwelling in such an area that is colonized twice by two foreign nations, the British and Japanese. The research question for the study states, 'How far Uzma Aslam Khan, as a Muslim woman writer, has successfully portrayed women's double liminality and double marginality in *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali*?'

The study aims to shed light on issues related to liminality and marginality, particularly when it comes to times and regions that have historically been left unexplored and/or under-discussed in academic circles. A major contribution of this study is taking into account the narrative voice of female characters, particularly those under double colonialism, namely the Andaman Islands.

2. Literature Review

Ahmed Ali, among men and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) among women, are pioneers who established the Muslim narrative from the Indian subcontinent. Particularly, 'the pioneering honor goes to a Bengali woman, Rokeya', ((Malik, 2004) who published in 1905 a short story, *Sultana's Dream*, whereas, 'Muslim fiction in English assumed prominence with the publication of Ahmed Ali's 1940 nostalgic novel *Twilight in Delhi*, it was not the first work of fiction written in English by a Muslim' (Malik, 2004). Then another Muslim woman fictional writer 'Iqbalunnisa Hussain published *India* the first novel written by a Muslim woman (Malik, 2004). This is how Muslim narratives from Women appeared and the list of women writers included writers such as Attia Hosain, Mena Abdullah, Farhana Sheikh, and Zaynab Alkali. In contemporary times, there appears rather a long list of writers such as Sara Suleri, Muniza Shamsie, Kamila Shamsie, Uzma Aslam Khan, Saba Imtiaz and Fatima Bhutto etc.

Khan (2022), *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* is a political novel. It is a novel about pain, loss and systematic exploitation and resultantly in the islanders and the prisoners. She is appreciated worldwide for she has touched the neglected part of Indian history. Uzma Khan 'engages with these ideas through specific stories with a definite history and particular geography' (Osama, *scroll.in*). She is given credit for unveiling the history and events of such a region of the Indian subcontinent that has been colonized by two nations – the British and the Japanese. Women during colonial periods have been doubly colonized and their position historically, 'has been marginalized' (Frances, Fitzpatrick, Koprivnikar, & McCauley, 2020).

The portrayal of women is one of the prominent features of Uzma Aslam Khan's fictional works. All of her novels revolve round the women who defy the odds 'whether it is Malika, a carpenter's wife in *The Story of Noble Rot*, Prisoner 218 D in *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* or *Amal*, an archaeologist and her blind sister, Mehwish, in *The Geometry of God*' (Mansoor, *academis.com*). She has presented women with a spirit to fight against all the odds. The researchers have been taking into account the various roles of women (characters) but the present study will talk about such a space where the female characters face double liminality and double marginality.

Uzma Aslam Khan, a narrative voice, represents Muslim women because takes into account such delicate issues regarding the identity and positionality of women under colonial rule. Liminality as a tool for analysis has been used by research such as the liminal identity of the protagonist of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) by (Kahf, 2009) has been explored using it as a tool (Alkarawi & Bahar, 2013).

The view of liminality that Victor Turner and Homi Bhabha developed has been used to explore literary works, but liminality and marginality remain an area of interest to explore in greater depth. Therefore, the present study focuses on the exploration of double liminality and double marginality with reference to Khan's *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali*.

3. Conceptual Framework and Research Methodology

Issues such as liminality and marginality have been theorized by Homi K. Bhabha. According to Bhabha, liminality indicates 'the space or position of characters that could dwell in a third space' (Iqbal, 2021, p.183). Thus, the third space (aka liminal space) is such a position where a character loses his identity because he is neither part of a community or culture nor that of the other one (Iqbal et al., 2018). But, if the local people have to bear more than one

group or foreigners then they have to undergo the experience of marginality and liminality more than one time. The novel under discussion chronicles the colonization of the region by two European nations such as the British and the Japanese. The study takes the text as a Muslim woman's narrative and aims at exploring the text through postcolonial lenses. Moreover, the study explores double liminality and double marginality.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Uzma Aslam Khan's novel *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* is a fictionalized account of colonial history from the perspectives of those marginalized in the dominant discourses (Khan, 2022). The novel tells a tale of human suffering and misery and gives voice to the most vulnerable, powerless, and forgotten characters of our historical past. It describes how the imperial regime exercises its power through violence and oppression and by exploiting the powerlessness of the colonized people. The text highlights the atrocity, brutality, torture – both physical and mental – and tyranny of the Imperial powers in the form of the colonial administrators of a starfish shaped jail established by the British at Andamans Island.

The novel is set in the Andaman Islands which were under the colonial control of the British and later the Japanese as a prison – particularly for political prisoners- based on facts. The novel consists of two categories of characters; the local borns and the prisoners. The story opens on the morning Japanese soldiers arrive on the archipelago in 1942 and it ends when Britain's rule in India ends; it oscillates throughout the better part of 11 years from 1936 to 1947; its plot includes the events after a political prisoner known only as 218 D is brought to the island till the end of British rule. From the local-born people, there are two teenage children: Nomi and her elder brother Zee, and their father, named Haider Ali, is sent to the Islands as a convict; their mother is thus obligated to follow him and settle on the Island. The other critical native character is Aye who is of Burmese origin. Prisoner 218 D is from the second category and the author has not mentioned her name throughout the text intentionally. The local characters experience the brutal rule of the various occupiers. Female characters, particularly Fehmida (Nomi's mother) and Shakuntala (Paula's mother) have to be vigilant to protect their family from the brutalities of the colonizers. Moreover, they are supposed to keep their vegetables, hens and animals secure from the colonizers' hunt. During the Japanese colonial occupation, a Japanese soldier has to face embarrassment at the hands of Zee during an incident on the street involving a chicken and Zee, therefore, must flee or suffer dire consequences. Aye witnesses horrible atrocities while working for the jail's superintendent and he becomes a spy to help Loka steal a skull and 218 D to escape from the prison. Nomi Ali and her family survive miraculously but have to face a tempest in their lives. Prisoner 218 D is introduced in the text when Zee and Nomi have come to witness the new batch of prisoners arrive on the S.S. Noor, the ship that transported prisoners from the mainland to Andamans Island. 218 D is a political prisoner and when she becomes more unbearable when joins a hunger strike in the prison. Ultimately, she escapes and welcomes Nomi and her family on another island.

4.1 Double Marginality

Though Andaman Island is infamous for the brutalities faced by prisoners in general, men and women alike, it is the women who suffer the most. Women prisoners face the worst situation because they meet the challenge on various fronts. Back in India, women are denied their rights, the reference to which can be found in the discussions in the group of the defiant women while at the Islands they are rationed as comforters (sex workers) to the army officers. Women want freedom: freedom from foreign occupation as well as domestic control. Women want recognition because not only their services but also their capacity to act is seen with suspicion, that is why Kajal has to assert that 'when men want freedom, the conversation is about the nature of action, violence or non-violence [...] when women want freedom, the conversation is about the nature of women. (Khan, 2022).

The Indians conquered the Island and pushed the indigenous towards the forest; the British conquered India along with the Islands, which pushed the Indians, who, in turn, pushed the indigenous even further. So much so, that the mutual fight between Britain and the Japanese forces make them flee the main Island and take refuge in a remote one. The indigenous people are not allowed space and are pushed with every new adventure but still they are voiceless in the novel. Their voice does not find a place in the narrative of the novel which certainly is a blemish of it. The local islanders were marginalized irrespective of gender

and age group. 'Long walk up to jail is considered the hardest step' for a male prisoner and 218 D (being a female prisoner) has to do it step-by-step along with men (Khan, 2019).

The local Andamanese could never enjoy a peaceful and prosperous life under the control of the British and the Japanese control. They were leading a miserable life so much so the author showed them with half-covered bodies, 'Aye had rarely seen an Andamanese fully dressed' (Khan, 2019). There was a sheer violation of human and women's rights. Women among the locals and the prisoners were harassed sexually. The novel states that the women prisoners in greater numbers first 'put in Randi Barrick, the Barracks of Whores, to separate them from men and the parades were abolished' (Khan, 2019). Women out of prison cells, living in the suburbs were found missing. In the 1920s 'public women were being slipped from the mainland, for guards' (Khan, 2019).

Japanese took control of the Andaman Islands in 1942 and they started administering the region in their way. They too started taking away the local women. Shakuntala 'once learned that soldiers came to one of the huts in Marriage town, to take away two girls. (Khan, 2019) The author has shown the women, both the islanders and the prisoners, facing marginalization and exploitation. The marginalization continues even when the Japanese occupied and controlled the region. Hence, the locals and the prisoners have to face double marginality.

4.2 Double Liminality

The issue the novelist seems to neglect is the neglect of the indigenous voice. The novel is certainly written from the perspective of erstwhile united India; however, it forgets about the voice of the indigenous people when it voices the concerns of Indians. Indigenous people are always in the liminal space on the Island, though they are the ones who own it.

While the indigenous people occupy the liminal space, they do not pose to possess any identity as well. There is only one indigenous character of some importance. All the indigenous characters are known by a single name Michael. Their only identity is the dress they wear. Sometimes different characters wearing the same shirt are hardly recognized by Aye, Nomi Ali's friend, with whom they communicate so often.

Three characters of the novel such as Shakuntala, Nomi and 218 D face double liminality. Shakuntala went to Andaman Islands 'as the wife of an Englishman' (Khan, 2019) and she continued to stay there even after her husband's death. Thus, she became a liminal character, while the English occupied the Islands as she was neither the British nor the Indian. After the Japanese controlled the region, she became a vital character to whom the Japanese came closer. Therefore, it can be said that Shakuntala faced double liminality.

Nomi Ali being the daughter of Haider Ali has been living in a liminal space because she intended to lose her Muslim identity so that her family might get protected from the Japanese and British tyranny against her brother Zee. Japanese 'banged on' Aunty Madhu's house to arrest Zee (Khan, 2019). Nomi's name (Nomi) was taken as a Japanese word by the Japanese language teacher at the school (Khan, 2019). Earlier Nomi and all of her school fellows were taught the English language whereas Sir Saha was trying to make them learn and speak the Japanese language. They were asked to repeatedly say '*Genki desu. Ogenki desu ka?*' (Khan, 2019) Nomi became fluent neither in English nor in Japanese. She became a liminal character. Moreover, neither the British owned Nomi's family nor did the Japanese; the British killed Nomi's brother Zee and the Japanese picked Nomi with all the members of her family from Aberdeen and left them to be drowned in the river. Thus, Nomi Ali faced double liminality.

The third character who faced double liminality is 218 D. She escaped from the prison cell during the British colonial rule over the Andaman Islands. 218 D remains an unnamed character throughout the novel but the local people who encounter her after she escaped, named her according to the local language. She was given names by the people such as *Ineny-Lau, Kwalakangne and Lohaye*. Thus, she remains a liminal character because she faces an identity crisis during the British and Japanese rule over the Andaman Islands.

5. Conclusion

The study explores the striking issues of postcolonial studies and literature in intensified forms such as liminality and marginality. The study is qualitative in nature and the selected text has been explored using the global Muslim narrative as a framework whereas Bhabha's view of liminality and marginality have been used as tools for the study. The study finds that Pakistani writers are contributing to establish a narrative to counter the global western narratives. Besides, Muslim female writers are playing their role to establish Muslim discourse to represent women's perspectives. In addition, Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* has the elements of liminality and marginality in greater depth and degree. Moreover, the characters such as Nomi Ali, Shakuntala and 218 D are the victim of double liminality and double marginality.

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