



Historicity of Text and Textuality of History: A New Historicist Analysis of Sorayya Khan's *City of Spies*

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Abstract

Literary works are informed by the historical context. This is vividly traceable in the Pakistani fiction writers who re-enact history in more truthful way. The present study intends to explore the historicity of text and textuality of history in Sorayya Khan's *City of Spies*. It highlights the reconstruction of traditional history through Khan's art of writing back of the history of Military coup in the mould of new historical scenario. The text traces the events of 1970s coup through a young protagonist's perspective. The research objectives are: to explore the historicity of text and textuality of history and to trace out the new historicist aspects of *City of Spies*. While using the qualitative research paradigm, the researcher applies theoretical lens of Louis Montrose derived from *Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture*, to the textual analysis of Khan's text. The research findings endorse that the text is history-oriented and proffers an alternative vision of history. The study is significant for future research to interpret literary text new historically.

Keywords: History, Historicity, Textuality, New Historicism, Pakistani Writers

1. Introduction

History is supposed to be linear, single, unified and objective representation of events and reality (Tyson, 2014). Historical texts are interpreted through the socio-political and cultural consciousness of a particular time period in order to verify their accuracy. The official version of history is always biased and in its interpretation it cannot be taken as truthful because historians manipulate it. Today, history cannot be considered to be authoritative. Political powers influence the production of history. In contrary to this, literature presents more truthful histories as it is based on human experiences and profound observation. The literary history is more authentic than the state sponsored documented history. Literary texts offer a fair ground for the real interpretation of historical facts. In the state sponsored history facts are exploited and twisted but literary history contains power enough to subvert the official version. History is time specific and presents a record of human activities in the past. It is ingrained in political structures. South Asian writers are interested in borrowing history in their works. Sorayya Khan in her idiosyncratic way makes use of history and politics in her novels. She explores the lives of individuals within the backdrop of historical events. In order to understand Khan a deep awareness of Pakistani history is required. Her novels are the fictional explorations of Pakistani history. Her narration of historical events in fiction has cultural significance. Her novels deal with the lives of individuals in the larger structures of politics and history. She tells the stories of Pakistani families to see the effects of 'internal dynamic' and 'external forces' on them. Though Khan lives in America but no one can claim that she does not live in Pakistan. And it is due to her realistic depiction of historical events in her works. In *City of Spies* she foregrounds the history of national and international importance of 1970s.

Khan having lived in Europe and Pakistan writes from multi-ethnic perspective. The settings and thematic contexts of her fiction deal with Pakistan's intricate and complex history. Pakistan and her history have a deep influence on Sorayya Khan. Although she left Pakistan earlier and has geographical displacement but her fiction shares a deep interest and concern with Pakistan. Presently living in America, she creates a sense of past and her relationship with her homeland through her fiction. Her fiction is about the politics, history and culture of Pakistan. The issue of representing the history of Pakistan is central to her writing. Her fiction is historical in nature. The novel of this study and her other two novels are brimmed with historical allusions tracing the actual past. Noor traces the trauma of war of independence of 1971, while *Five Queen's Road* deals with partition. Khan weaves her texts through the power of memory, memories personal and collective through which her characters remember and recall their past. Khan has a deep concern for politics and history. Hence, her novel can be called political and representative of what she calls personal is political.

1.1. Research Questions

- How does the author historicize the text and textualize the history in *City of Spies*?
- How does the text of *City of Spies* bear the aspects of New Historicism?

1.2. Research Objectives

- To explore the historicity of text and textuality of history
- To trace out the New Historicist aspects of *City of Spies*

2. Literature Review

Shah (2015) in *Crash of Civilizations* examines that since decades historians have been interested in exploring the transfiguration of Pakistan under Zia's regime and have tried to locate foreign influences that assist in consolidating his regime resultantly military and state entanglement with extremists and world superpowers. There are so many novelists who have attempted to discover the meaning of life under the dictatorship of Zia. As Muhammad Hanif in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* presents the story of Zia's assassination in comic and satiric manner. Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea* also projects the effects of Zia's callousness on the inhabitants of Karachi. The combined aspects of both the novels resonate in the pages of Khan's *City of Spies*. She opines that *City of Spies* is quite different from Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* as Khan's work is established in place and time. Shah writes that protagonist Aliya's observations and thoughts work as instruments to probe into

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issues of Pakistan. Shah claims that Khan has tried to 'depoliticize the personal' through her story. She considers it as an attempt to subvert the power structures by means of finding hope in 'power of communication'.

Chishty (2015) praises Sorayya Khan as a 'moderately seasoned writer' who has the potential to present things 'vividly with a marked linguistic clarity'. The political perspective in *City of Spies* works as a framework and the names of political leaders lend the novel peculiar interest regarding country's political history. Chishty attempts to show that most of modern South Asian fiction is replete with political bifurcation. She acclaims Khan also employs the same approach in her fiction but her technique is fascinating and invigorating. Similar to Bina Shah's *A Season for Martyrs* and Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone*, Khan's *City of Spies* echoes enthralling political climax. Khan's novel also tackles anti-American tensions arising in Islamabad the capital city. She explores the issue of identity crisis of the protagonist who is half-white and appreciates Khan's handling of story. She further examines patriarchal strains present in Pakistani society. Cilano (2013) discusses that literary texts are fragments of imagination. She presents how the texts permeate the past and contribute in bringing the present. She presents how the imaginative aspects project the future and help in developing a sense of belonging. *City of Spies* has accounts of several national and international historical events which cause ethno-national conflicts and tensions. Waterman (2015) in *Where Worlds Collide: Pakistani Fiction in the New Millennium* surveys seven contemporary Anglophone Pakistani novelists including Sorraya Khan. He writes the novels of these writers deal with the issues of history, culture and identity. In Waterman's opinion the stories these novelists describe are the stories of individuals and the families, the stories of pain and sufferings and these stories are told in the background of the story of Pakistan. In the foreword of the book, Muneeza Shamsi writes that the writers which are discussed in the book weave a web of the public and the personal. She asserts that behind the political scenario their stories echo 'moments of conflict, triumph and self revelation'. Waterman explores the fictional representation of the personal, political, memory, past and traumas within the framework of rich cultural and political history of Pakistan.

Anam & Khan (2023) in *Cultural Hybridization and Political Upheaval in Khan's City of Spies* examine the impact of political turmoil on diasporic communities, with a particular focus on its role in shaping cultural identity, hybridity, and conflicting loyalties. They argue that diasporic communities experience a sense of estrangement and encounter competing allegiances due to their inability to fully assimilate their cultural heritage into their novel surroundings.

Chakrabarti, B., (2017) in *Topography of Loss: Homeland, History and Memory in Sorayya Khan's Fiction* explore the interplay of memory and history in the three novels of Sorayya Khan Noor (2003), *Five Queen's Road* (2009) and *City of Spies* (2015). The study explores the violence of history. He writes that Khan is not concerned with chronological histories, her work centre-stages individual actions and the causes and effects behind them. He finds that loss of the homeland and the process of rehabilitation are all dominant concerns in her fiction. He maintains that Individual choices are overpowered by political realities.

Farid et al. (2021) in their research article *A Critique of American Supremacist Politics in Cold War in Sorayya Khan's City of Spies* investigated the representation of America City of Spies with the assumption to trace some possible connection between American intervention and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the context of Pakistan's politics. They argue that the American intervention in Pakistani politics and its indelible impact on the domestic and international scenario had made the country a virtual battleground for the superpowers of the world. Hussain et al. (2022) in their research article *Reconstructing Identity: Self-fashioning in City of Spies by Sorayya Khan* analyzed the reconstruction strategies of identity as adopted by Aliya, the protagonist of the novel. They examined the self-fashioning of her and factors that promote it and identity crisis, drawing upon Greenblatt's theory of self-fashioning.

Aftab & Yousaf (2022) in *Exploring City of Spies: Aliya's Experience of Zia and Post Zia Pakistan* see Pakistan's history as unstable political system with military coups, an essential theme in the works of Pakistani fiction writers. They view *City of Spies* as a critique of Zia's military regime and political allegory of Pakistan's past and its Post-Zia future.

3. Methods and Materials

3.1. Theoretical Framework

New Historicism is an approach to literary criticism and literary theory which takes into account the time, place and historical conditions in which a text is composed. It does not consider a literary work as an isolated piece of work. It is a contextual approach to literary criticism and literary theory appeared in 1980s with the publication of Greenblatt's influential text *Renaissance Self Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. It emerged as a reaction to ahistorical tendencies of New Criticism which ignores the social and political conditions of the production of literary texts. It relies on the Post-Structuralist theories of discourse and Marxist theories of ideology. The implications of New Historicism extend from social, cultural and historical to the economic and political contexts. Veeseer argues New Historicism erodes the boundaries which separate history, anthropology, art, politics, literature and economics. It regards both literary and non-literary texts equally and considers them the product of historical forces. Louise Montrose describes new historicism's post-structuralist and deconstructive linguistic turn and historical tendency in his famous phrases "the historicity of text" and "textuality of history".

Louis Montrose, in *Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture* claimed that New Historicism deals with the "textuality of history and the historicity of texts." While "historicity of texts" refers to the "cultural specificity and social embedment of all modes of writing", the rootedness of a text in the social-historical, political and cultural ambience of its production, "textuality of history" refers to the fictionality and constructedness of history, which Foucault in his archaeological approach to history as archive, explicates, arguing that old historians erase and even out all inconsistencies, contradictions and discontinuities of actual history and develop a coherent and consistent historical narrative, complying with the dominant ideology of the state, There is no such thing as objective history, because history is a narrative, which, like language, is produced in a context and is governed by the social, economic and political interests of the 'dominant groups/institutions'.

3.2. Historicity of Text and Textuality of History

New Historicism in the interpretation of a literary text places the text in its historical context. New Historicists consider that history can only be perceived through written texts. So, it is essential to put the text of *City of Spies* in its historical context. The text has prologue, epilogue and postscript. In the prologue of the text Khan writes:

Currently, we all live the War on Terror, an endless war that will outlive our children. But the war of my story, the war we shared long ago, whether we knew it or not, is the Cold War. And Pakistan, unluckily lodged far from the US and close to the USSR, was but one playground where both superpowers spread mischief. (Khan, 2015, p.1)

The text echoes the crucial political historical events of 1970s. The national and international historical events that happened in 1970s form the historical background. The internationally dominant ideology of that time was Cold War while nationally it was dictatorship. And presently, the both paved the way for War on Terror which seems to be never ending and plagued Pakistan. Printer and Leffler (2005) write that Cold War remained a political center for forty five years. Actually, it was the entanglement of two superpowers US and Soviet Union and their foreign politics which not only affected their own societies and institutions but also the domestic and foreign policies of other nations. After World War II there developed differences in the economic and political ideologies which led US and Soviet Union to indulge in Cold War. One communist and the other capitalist divided the world into two blocs. America expanded her influence in Eurasia for strong economic base, controlled the overseas base systems and maintained her monopoly of atomic weapons. US and Soviet Union's strategic arms race dragged the world to conflicts. There grew international tensions as the other nations also sought to develop their nuclear programs but America wanted to lead them. The crisis in Iran, Turkey and Greece caused to weaken the position of West in Middle East which had its special significance for its oil reserves. The world powers had their eyes fixed on Iran due to its petroleum reserves and world's finest oil refinery. Behind Iran crisis there were political and economic motives of the two superpowers. Turkey having control over the straits between Mediterranean and Black seas and was serving as a defense of Middle East. To gain access to Middle East, America tied relation with Britain. The two superpowers for their vested interests interfered in the internal affairs of the other countries. America through Marshall Plan gave aid in monetary terms to many western countries and gained their favor against Soviet Union. Leffler writes:

After the Second World War five developments shaped the international system: great power rivalries, changes in the technology of warfare, transnational ideological conflict, reform and reconstruction of the world capitalist system, and movements of national liberation. Events in each of these areas affected one another, accentuating tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, generating an arms race, polarizing domestic and international politics, and splitting the world into military and political blocs (Leffler, 2010, p.12).

Traditionally, history is considered to be objective single and unified representation of events and reality. The socio-political, linguistic and cultural understanding of a period contribute in determining the interpretation of a historical text. Today, in the era of postmodernism, history is no longer considered to be authoritative as New Historicists tend to re-examine history and believe in subversion and subjectivity. They are of the opinion that, "there is no single history, only discontinuous and contradictory histories" (Selden, 2004, p.189). Montrose is of the view that all the texts are part of the history. Social practices form the culture of a particular time period and the literary text exhibits the history of that period. Sorayya Khan in her literary fictions presents the history of particular time period which help the readers to reclaim the history of that period which in Montrose's phrase is "historicity of texts". In order to examine "the historicity of text" it is necessary to explore the historical context of *City of Spies* which shows that to a great extent the text is embedded in social, cultural and political context. The protagonist Aliya's memories and observation are the lens which provide a thorough understanding of the past through textual traces. Khan retrieves the past and the history of the era of 1970s. Her novel as Datta calls, The author, whose previous books also incisively and empathically deal with Pakistan at other crucial times of its life (1971 in "Noor", 2003 and 1947 and its aftermath in "Five Queens Road", 2009,) spins the same magic in this near-autobiography, which straddles both the genres of coming-of-age and politics, while finding some uncanny resemblances with current day events (Datta, 2015, p.1).

In New Historicist conception literary text is embedded in society and culture hence, author and the literary creation both are cultural artifacts. (Veese, 1989). To them, society and culture shape author who in turn produces literary text so, text has bearing of author's life. The New Historicist study suggests the importance of the author's biography which considers that the text is cultural production. The biographical context helps to explore the relation between the author and the text. *City of Spies* is a novel which corresponds intimately Khan's own life because there are some reflections of Khan's own life in it. In the novel Khan reflects her own experiences which she gained during her stay in Pakistan. Although it is fictitious work but there are many similarities between Aliya and Khan that it seems as if Aliya is Sorraya Khan. Khan like Aliya is a daughter of Dutch mother and Pakistani father. Khan was of the same age as that of Aliya. Like Aliya Khan also ends up living in New York. Khan like Aliya is witness of tumultuous era of Zia's dictator regime. Khan in her research article *The Silence and Forgetting That Wrote Noor* acknowledges that she was a child of nine living with her family in Vienna, Austria at the time of 1971 War and she came to Pakistan along with her family in summer of 1972 as her father wanted to serve his country. So, there is parallelism between Aliya and Khan. Aliya in the prologue says, "... he'd shifted us all to the new capital, Islamabad... He explained when your country called on you, it was your duty to run right back to it..." (Khan, 2015, p.123).

Fiction offers new vistas to a literary author in recreating historical events such as Khan has depicted in the text i.e. the crucial era of Pakistani history. The literary author while remembering the past events enables us to recreate in our minds the social and political backgrounds. The writer makes us to imagine the lives of those who witnessed those events. Khan in *City of Spies* (2015) tells the factual history in terms of Aliya's individual and personal version. Through the concurring of history and memory Khan enables us to re-imagine the political upheavals of Pakistani history during 1970s. Khan's remembering of the past through Aliya's self-

conscious thoughts or what we may say memories problematizes history. The problematization of history is caused by its rigid nature as opposed to memory which is fluid. Khan acknowledges this as is evident from the text: But memory is slippery and plays tricks with us... (Khan, 2015,p.218). Aliya's thoughts challenge the formal history because of her own interpretation of every event. She narrates the historical facts but gives her own meaning to them.

'The army has taken over. The constitution has been suspended, the national assembly has been dissolved and the governors and chief ministers have been fired' (Khan, p.8).

Khan herself spent the time of martial law in Pakistan and is the witness of the happening. Her personal experiences help her to map out those events. Next Khan writes that,

"My father said that the night before the coup, the prime minister had been guest at the Independence Day celebrations of the American Embassy... an American official waved a tumbler of whisky in his face and cried, 'The party's over! The party's over!'

'The Americans knew?' My mother asked.

'Exactly,' my father said" (Khan, p.10).

Khan like other historians and researchers believes in the US involvement in the political instability of Pakistan. She has presented the historical events of 1970s in the literary context. She has formally written the remembered events of past by recontextualizing the political history. New Historicists think that the significance of past events lies in their representation. As they believe in discursive practice, they do not consider the authority of historical representation reliable. Khan recalls the past history of Pakistan which has a permanent place in her memories. She even regards that past contributes in forming our present. The text echoes the reference of 1971 war when Pakistan lost its eastern part.

The country had just lost a war and half its territory, but the new leader used the defeat to really expatriates like my father to return home to develop what was lost of it... now, many years later, I still blamed the prime minister... I held him personally responsible for my discomfort with what was I ... (Khan, p.29).

Khan has deep interest in exploring the past history to bring out those truth which the state sponsored histories do not tell. The text contains many allusion of Bangladeshi war of independence. At another place Khan states, '...the house was abandoned in mid-construction by a fleeing Bengali family during 1971 war, but the explanation rattled us...' (Khan, p.24). After war the Bengalis living in Pakistan moved to their country. The explanation which rattled is the account of atrocities which western wing made on the eastern wing and of which our official history is silent. Khan in her article *The Silence and Forgetting That Wrote NOOR* gives the explanation:

My parents explained that such houses belonged to East Pakistanis who'd fled for safety to East Pakistan during the 1971 conflict. The houses were a legacy of the war, rotting and unfinished, some flush against the gorgeous backdrop of the Margalla Hills (Khan, 2015, p.123).

The accounts of Prime Minister Bhutto's overthrowing, his trial in court, death sentence and hanging on the accusation of conspiracy and murder against a politician are spread in the text. The judgment of Bhutto case caused national and international unrest. Despite Bhutto's application for decision review and mercy he was hanged to death.

The Khabarnama newscaster was reciting news BBC had already reported. In its long awaited decision, the Lahore High Court had awarded the death sentence to former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the Nawab Muhammad Ahmad Khan murder case...4 April 1979. The prime minister was hanged... The children weren't allowed to attend, and neither Begum Bhutto...(Khan, p.46-47).

Khan through her New Historicist concept of various perspectives of an event rejects the idea of a single, linear authentic official history as there is always place for individual versions. Khan through the self-conscious thoughts of Aliya Shah and other characters pose questions on a single and official version of history. Aliya's thoughts and other characters' discussions on various historical incidents reveal that numerous interpretations of past events are inevitable.

My father asked me if I knew an Iranian boy, Humayun... 'His father must have been appointed to the Iranian Embassy by the Shah, and they fled because of Khomeini,' my father suggested. 'His father was SAVAK,' my mother said, quickly getting to the point. 'The spy agency?' I asked, ...Humayun's family went to America because the Americans are friendly with Iranians? I asked. 'Were friendly,' my father corrected me... My father embarked on a long explanation that didn't make sense to me, having to do with colonialism, American and British oil interests (Khan, p.74-75).

Before the prologue there is an epigraph, having two lines, one from Intizar Husain and the other from Agha Shahid Ali. The line from Husain is: 'They had left their cities, but they carried their cities with them, as a trust, on their shoulders.' The line from Agha Shahid is: 'Your memory gets in the way of my memory.' In the epilogue Khan writes: 'Because my story and the story of my country are woven into one.' (Khan, p.221). Both the lines depict the nexus between history and memory. Actually, the memory is story, a story which is the history of Pakistan. In Khan history gets in the way of Khan's story that is based on memory. Khan has left Pakistan years ago but she carried with her the past of her country which is reflected in her work.

Aliya's memories form the historicity of text. Her individual memory gives birth to collective shared memory of Pakistani nation. The text makes us to understand that past offers us to visualize the reality of present. As far as the historicity of text is concerned it is evident that text is historicized as it is brimmed with actual historical facts narrated through protagonist's memories. Khan in *City of Spies* (2015) through the memories of past exposes the miserable plight of contemporary Pakistan. Khan writes: 'The Islamabad of my childhood is so remote there was only one way to keep it alive. I wrote my home.' (Khan, p.239). Khan through the projection of Aliya's personal memories and her interaction to other characters not only enlivens the past but also forms a narrative of a nation. Her thoughts, memories and remembrance are a way to approach the past in the saga of history. she retrieves the history of particular periods of time and in doing so according to Montrose is the "historicity of texts". One of the basic assumptions of New Historicism is that in the creation of a text writer's personal experiences and the historical background have firm influence. Similarly text also exercises influence on the readers. As Montrose (1989) asserts, "the writing and reading of texts are being reconstructed as

historically determined and determining modes of cultural work” (Montrose, 1989, p.15). *City of Spies* (2015) contains evidences that it is much influenced by Pakistani political history. Thus, historicity of text is manifested through Khan’s writing process, the way she depicts the events through her narrator and also by the readers who have varying interpretations. The historical and social milieus contribute in forming the historical atmosphere in a text.

The novel also examines the question of historicity by developing a bond between self and nation. Aliya’s ‘zindagi ki kahani’, in rewriting of her life through retrospection, makes it obvious that the retelling of her personal and national history is the truth of her memories as Khan writes: “All I’ve said above is true, but as a rule, truth is as wide and all encompassing as you let it be, and there is always more of it.” (Khan, p.3). Khan through the truth of her memory tells her personal and familial history while incorporating national history. Khan in her essay, *Take me Home* writes, ‘As a writer, I am often asked why I write. There are many answers, but most honest one is the most basic writing is home’. Her home is Pakistan with which she shares personal and familial history. Khan in her interest to explore the relation between individual and politics adopt family as a metaphor. This metaphor serves as nation-state and implicit to the Foucauldian concept of power as it contributes in constructing subjectivity.

4. Conclusion

In a New Historicist reading of text the researcher took the initiative by the new historicist principle that both history and culture in which literary text is produced, influence it. Taking this notion in consideration it is evident that both Khan’s own life experiences and the era of Zia’s dictatorship and cold war contribute in the making of the novel. Further, it has been observed that Khan replicated, in the text, her experiences and what she felt through her narrator Aliya and thus there is a strain of parallelism between Aliya and Khan. It has been analyzed that Khan is much affected by politics (Khan accepts it as reality) and interested in depicting it as a reality of our lives. *City of Spies* is a well researched work as all the political events, national and international are researched by Khan and she acknowledges the validity of all the historical references in the epilogue of novel and various interviews. The New Historicist reading of *City of Spies* suggests that the historical context of text reveals that it subverts the dominant ideology of the time that is, Zia’s tyrannical and stern regime, his unintelligible policies, Islamization, censorship, hanging of Bhutto, and America’s political interests in region. As a conscious human being and writer Khan has the understanding of the harmful repercussions of those political upheavals which have a strong bearing on the current state of affairs. *City of Spies* is also a text which subverts the authorial vision of the historical discourses written in the 1970s. To support this idea, the narrative technique employed in the novel has been dealt briefly and it has been marked that Khan employed Aliya the principal narrator. Thus, Khan engages the readers in the interpretative process. Ambivalence achieved by the narrative technique of the novel which enables us to see various subjective truths. The history-fiction interface involves the recognition of history as a linguistic construct and fiction as a product of specific historicity.

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