

The Crucible of Coloniality and Resistance: The Andaman and Nicobar Islands in Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali*

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Abstract— Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* (2019) excavates a largely forgotten chapter in the history of the Indian subcontinent: the experience of the convicts, their island-born descendants and the colonised inhabitants of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands under British penal rule and, from 1942 to 1945, under Japanese military occupation. This article argues that the novel presents the archipelago as a crucible of coloniality, a space in which successive regimes of domination are tested, refined and handed on, and in which the replacement of one coloniser by another produces not liberation but a renewed form of the same violence. Drawing on Aníbal Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power, Michel Foucault's analysis of panoptic discipline, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's account of the subaltern and Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory, the article reads the novel in four movements: its historiographic method, which sets fiction against an archive, Khan regards as written by and for the privileged; its rendering of *kaalapaani* and the Cellular Jail as an architecture of total surveillance; its figuration of the unnamed Prisoner 218 D, whose body and memory become the last territories of resistance; and its depiction of the Japanese occupation as a continuation rather than a rupture of colonial rule. The article concludes that Khan's novel performs a decolonisation of history, recovering the archipelago's silenced lives while refusing the comforting binaries of coloniser and colonised, and of oppression and liberation, on which official national narratives depend.



Keywords— Postcolonialism, coloniality, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, penal colony, *kaalapaani*, *panopticon*, Japanese occupation, historical fiction, postmemory

I. INTRODUCTION

Uzma Aslam Khan, a Pakistani novelist whose earlier works include *Trespassing* (2003) and *Thinner Than Skin* (2012), published *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* in 2019. The novel is set in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands between the late 1920s and the end of the Second World War, and it follows a small group of lives caught in the vortex of history. Nomi Ali and her brother Zee are "Local Borns", children of a convict transported from the mainland and of the woman who followed him into exile. Their friend Aye belongs to the same island-born community. Alongside their story runs that of Prisoner 218 D, a woman political prisoner whose name the novel

withholds and who is known only by the number on her wooden tag. When the Japanese take the islands from the British in March 1942, the children's world, already shaped by the penal settlement, is remade again by a new and more volatile occupier.

The Andaman Islands occupy a peculiar place in South Asian historical memory. On the Indian mainland they are remembered chiefly through the Cellular Jail and the nationalist martyrology that has grown up around it: the political prisoners of the freedom struggle, the brief raising of the national flag by Subhas Chandra Bose in December 1943, and the post-independence image of the islands as a harmonious "mini India". What this memory leaves out is

considerable. It says little about the ordinary convicts who formed the bulk of the transported population, about the women among them, about the children born into the settlement, about the Indigenous peoples whose lands were seized to build it, and about the civilians who suffered under the Japanese. Khan's novel is an attempt to write into these silences.

This article argues that the novel presents the archipelago as a crucible of coloniality: a bounded space in which the techniques of domination are concentrated, intensified and passed from one ruling power to the next. Its central claim, which it shares with decolonial theory, is that the struggle of the colonised is not against a single coloniser but against an enduring system of power that survives every change of flag. The argument proceeds in stages. The first section sets out the theoretical framework. The second sketches the historical formation of the islands as a penal settlement. The third examines Khan's historiographic method and her quarrel with the colonial archive. The fourth reads the novel's representation of *kaalapaani* and the Cellular Jail through Foucault's account of panoptic power. The fifth turns to Prisoner 218 D as a figure of gendered and subaltern resistance. The sixth considers the Japanese occupation and the continuity of coloniality across regimes. The seventh discusses the Local Borns and the transmission of traumatic memory across generations. A conclusion draws these strands together.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: COLONIALITY, SURVEILLANCE AND THE SUBALTERN

The concept that organises this reading is coloniality, as distinct from colonialism. For the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, colonialism names a historically specific relation of political and economic domination, whereas the "coloniality of power" names the deeper matrix of hierarchy, racial classification, labour control and knowledge production that colonialism established and that outlives the formal end of empire (Quijano). Nelson Maldonado-Torres puts the distinction succinctly: "coloniality survives colonialism" (243). It persists in institutions, in categories of thought and in the everyday ordering of who may speak, who may move and whose life counts. Walter Dignolo extends the argument by insisting that modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same project, so that the rational, improving vocabulary of empire cannot be separated from the violence it authorises.

This framework is particularly apt for the Andaman Islands, where the colonial project was not incidental but constitutive. The settlement at Port Blair was established as an instrument of punishment and was

justified in the language of reform, discipline and civilisation. When the British were displaced in 1942, the Japanese claimed to be liberators of Asia from Western imperialism, yet they inherited the jail, the administrative apparatus and much of the logic of the colonial state. The concept of coloniality allows us to see this as a continuity rather than as an aberration, and Khan's novel, as the following sections show, is built around exactly this recognition.

The second element of the framework is Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault takes Jeremy Bentham's design for the panopticon, a circular prison in which a central tower can observe every cell without being seen, as the diagram of a modern form of power. Its "major effect", he writes, is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 201). The prisoner, never knowing when he is watched, comes to watch himself, so that power no longer needs to be continuously exercised in order to be continuously effective. "Visibility", in Foucault's phrase, "is a trap" (200). The Cellular Jail at Port Blair was built on a radial plan derived from this model, which makes Foucault's account directly relevant to the novel's spaces.

Disciplinary power does not exhaust the violence of the colony, however. Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics, the sovereign capacity to decide who may live and who must die, and to consign whole populations to conditions of "living death", supplements Foucault by attending to the naked violence that discipline rationalises but never replaces (Mbembe 40). Frantz Fanon had made the point earlier and more bluntly: colonialism "is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence" (Fanon 61). The novel moves between these registers, from the cold calculation of the jail's architecture to the sudden brutality of interrogation and execution.

Finally, the article draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?", and on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. Spivak's essay warns that the subaltern, and the subaltern woman above all, is doubly effaced, written out by colonial record-keeping and spoken for by nationalist and humanitarian discourses alike (Spivak). Hirsch's postmemory describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to traumas it did not live through but which it inherits through stories, images and silences so powerful that they seem to constitute memories in their own right (Hirsch 5). Both concepts bear on Khan's project: the first on her decision to leave Prisoner 218 D unnamed, the second on her portrayal of island-born

children who grow up inside the after-effects of their parents' exile.

III. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE ARCHIPELAGO AS PENAL LABORATORY

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, now a union territory of India, form the largest archipelago in the Bay of Bengal. More than five hundred islands, of which only a few dozen are inhabited, stretch in a long crescent from Cape Negrais in Myanmar towards the Banda Arc of Sumatra. Celebrated today for their beauty and biodiversity, the islands have been shaped for more than two centuries by projects of punishment, settlement and strategic control.

The British first established a settlement on the islands in 1789, but abandoned it in 1796 because of disease and hardship. The decisive moment came after the uprising of 1857, the event that Indian nationalist historiography calls the First War of Independence. Faced with thousands of captured rebels, the colonial government re-established a penal settlement at Port Blair in 1858. Over the following decades the islands received convicts from across the subcontinent and from Burma, among them political prisoners, ordinary criminals and members of communities designated as hereditarily criminal. Historians such as Satadru Sen and Aparna Vaidik have shown that the settlement functioned as a laboratory of colonial governance, where theories of race, criminality, labour and reform were tested on a captive population, and where convicts were expected to clear forest, build roads and eventually settle as "self-supporters" on the land (Sen; Vaidik).

The settlement was built at the expense of the islands' Indigenous inhabitants. The Great Andamanese, the Jarawa, the Onge, the Sentinelese and, in the Nicobars, the Nicobarese and the Shompen had lived on the islands for millennia. Colonial expansion brought armed conflict, most notably at Aberdeen in 1859, and also epidemic disease and dispossession, and the population of the Great Andamanese collapsed within a few decades. Any account of the islands as a site of colonial violence must therefore recognise that the convicts, however brutally treated, were themselves made into instruments of an older and continuing dispossession. Coloniality on the islands was layered, not binary.

The name the mainland gave to this place was *kaalapaani*, "black water". The term carried more than geographical meaning. Crossing the sea was understood in many caste communities to entail the loss of caste and of social belonging, so transportation meant exile from kin and community as well as from the land. To be sent to the

Andamans was to be removed from the social world that made a person legible, and often to be unable ever to return to it.

The Cellular Jail, constructed between 1896 and 1906, made this exile architectural. Its seven wings radiated from a central watchtower and contained 693 solitary cells, so arranged that the front of each wing faced the back of the next and prisoners could not communicate with one another. Political prisoners in the jail endured hard labour at the oil mill and in the coir works, punitive diets, flogging and long periods of solitary confinement, and hunger strikes in the 1930s drew national attention to their treatment.

In March 1942, as Japanese forces advanced through Southeast Asia, the British withdrew and the Japanese occupied Port Blair. In December 1943 Subhas Chandra Bose visited the islands and, under an arrangement with Japan, they were nominally transferred to the Provisional Government of Free India. Real power, however, remained with the Japanese military. Suspected spies were arrested, tortured and executed. On 30 January 1944, at Homfreyganj, forty-four Indian civilians, most of them members of the Indian Independence League, were shot on charges of espionage. The occupation ended with Japan's surrender in 1945, and the British returned in October of that year.

Pankaj Sekhsaria, one of the most attentive contemporary writers on the islands, observes that the history usually told about them is "conveniently comfortable":

The history of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is today a conveniently comfortable one: of the British, Kaalapani and the Cellular Jail, of World War I and the Japanese occupation, of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Veer Savarkar, the first hoisting of the Indian National Flag and the modern mini India where all communities and religions live in peace and harmony. But like all histories, this one too is incomplete. It is the story of the victors, of the people who have today come to dominate these islands. The vanquished, as they say, have no tales to tell. The history of these islands as we tell it, as we are told it is, is silent in many parts. There are gaping holes that are conveniently allowed to remain as they are. (Sekhsaria)

Khan's novel can be read as a sustained response to this diagnosis. It does not fill the gaping holes with a counter-history of equal authority. Instead, it populates

them with lives that the archive did not record and that the nation has had little reason to remember.

IV. FICTION AGAINST THE ARCHIVE: KHAN'S HISTORIOGRAPHIC METHOD

Khan has been candid about the limits of the sources she encountered. In an interview with Claire Chambers she describes the novel as beginning by accident, "pulling the wrong book off a shelf", and finding a description of the Andamans as a "prisoner paradise" for Indian "terrorists", a phrase that exposed the gaps in her own colonial education (Chambers). Speaking to Aracelis Girmay, she notes that what she did find was "told from a male gaze", and that although women were also transported, "in these sources not a single woman prisoner was named" (Girmay). She adds that much of what she knows comes through sources that omit "people like me — brown, Muslim women from the Global South" (Girmay).

These remarks place Khan's novel within a broader critique of the archive. Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that silences enter the production of history at every stage: in the making of sources, in the assembly of archives, in the creation of narratives and in the retrospective judgement of what matters (Trouillot 26). The colonial archive of the Andamans is a case in point. It records convict numbers, labour outputs, punishments and mortality figures, but it rarely records interiority, affection, fear or resistance, and it scarcely records women at all. Khan's response is not to treat the archive as irrelevant but to read it against itself, preserving its hard facts while inventing the lives that those facts imply but do not disclose.

This method aligns the novel with what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction, fiction that is "intensely self-reflexive" and yet "paradoxically also lay[s] claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon 5). The novel's title announces the paradox. A history that is "true" and also "miraculous" cannot be the history of the official record. Its truth is the truth of experience rather than of documentation, and its miracle is the recovery of what documentation erased.

The clearest example of this method is the novel's opening. Khan has explained that the first shot fired on South Andaman during the war was fired by a boy trying to save a chicken from Japanese soldiers, and that "Zee is based on the boy, Priya on the chicken" (Girmay). In official military history such an incident is at most a footnote, an absurd and inconsequential prelude to the real business of invasion. Khan places it at the threshold of her narrative and so reverses the hierarchy of significance. A child's attachment to a hen, and his instinctive refusal to surrender it to armed men, becomes the first act of resistance to a new

occupation. The gesture is small, but it establishes a principle that governs the whole novel: history is made in the intimate as well as in the epochal, and the two cannot be separated.

The narrative structure reinforces this principle. The novel moves among several perspectives, those of Nomi, Zee, Aye and Prisoner 218 D among them, and among several time frames, so that the reader assembles the history of the islands from fragments rather than receiving it as a single continuous account. This fragmentation is not a formal ornament. It reflects the way history is experienced by those on its margins, who rarely see the whole design of the forces that shape their lives and must make sense of them from partial and shifting vantage points. The form of the novel enacts its argument that history is not a clean, linear progression but a messy, fragmented and contested experience.

V. *KAALAPAANI* AND THE PANOPTIC ISLAND

The Cellular Jail stands at the physical and symbolic centre of the novel's colonial landscape. Khan's description of a group of prisoners being marched up the hill to the jail captures both its material reality and its psychological reach:

A steady whisper extended through the crowd as the prisoners frogmarched up the hill to the jail, a mat rolled on each head and an iron bowl on each mat. Too many who watched had never stopped living it, the climb to the hill's summit to one of the 693 cells, the days and nights creeping from one end to the next, 13½ x 7, a smallness buried deep in the folds of the brain, where it grew, oh it grew. Then the sound of the heavy grill door as it slammed shut, and the three-step snap of a latch system to puzzle even the niftiest thief. Equally dreadful was the unsnap, for then it might be the jailor, the terrible Cillian, who was born to never die. And even before all of this, at the entrance to the jail, the high wall garlanded with manacles, shackles, iron belts and implements of torture impossible to name, each warped into figures more gruesome than the next. They could not forget the day this sight was first encountered, when the science of bondage dangled inches ahead: to pass

through the gates meant never return the same. (Khan 20)

Several features of this passage repay attention. The first is the position of the observers. The scene is witnessed by a crowd, many of whom "had never stopped living it". The jail is not only a place where some people are confined. It is a memory that organises the consciousness of an entire settlement, including those who have been released or were never imprisoned in it. In Foucauldian terms, the panoptic effect has escaped the walls of the building and become a condition of island life.

The second is the precision of the measurements. The number of cells and the dimensions of each cell, "13½ x 7", are rendered with the exactitude of an administrative report. Yet the passage immediately converts measurement into experience: the cell becomes "a smallness buried deep in the folds of the brain, where it grew, oh it grew". The repetition breaks the controlled syntax of the sentence, and the reader feels the confinement as an expanding interior pressure rather than a fixed quantity. Khan here dramatises the gap between the colonial archive, which records the cell in feet, and the prisoner's memory, which records it as a growing dread.

The third is the phrase "the science of bondage". The manacles, shackles and iron belts displayed at the entrance are not merely instruments of restraint. They are presented as the products of knowledge, refined, classified and exhibited, and that is precisely the point. The colonial jail is a rational institution, built according to a theory of reform and administered by trained officials. Its cruelty is not a lapse from reason but an application of it. This is the convergence that Mignolo identifies between modernity and coloniality, and that Foucault locates in the history of the prison. The display at the gate also performs a pedagogical function: it teaches the incoming prisoner, before any punishment has been applied, what can be done to his body.

The fourth is the figure of the jailer Cillian, "who was born to never die". The phrase mythologises him in the imagination of the prisoners, and it anticipates the novel's larger argument. Khan has noted that Cillian is based on a historical figure and that the character reappears later in the narrative (Girmay). He embodies the persistence of the system rather than of any individual: whoever holds the keys, the apparatus of the jail remains. In this sense he is the human face of coloniality, the official who survives changes of regime because the regime depends on functionaries of his kind.

The jail's architecture also illuminates the novel's treatment of the islands as a whole. The panopticon isolates individuals so that they can be observed and corrected one

by one. The archipelago, a scatter of islands separated from the mainland by hundreds of kilometres of open sea, reproduces that logic at the scale of geography. The sea itself functions as a wall, and the mainland, invisible beyond the horizon, functions as the unseen authority whose judgement has determined each prisoner's fate. *Kaalapaani* is the panopticon writ large: a space in which exile is total, communication is controlled and the prisoner is reduced to a number in a ledger kept somewhere else.

Yet the novel never lets this landscape become merely a prison. Khan consistently juxtaposes the cruelty of the settlement with the beauty of the islands, their forests, reefs, birds and light. This paradox is central to her vision. The islands are not intrinsically a hell. They are made into one by the uses to which power puts them, and the persistence of their beauty is a reminder that another relation to the place, older than the jail and possibly outlasting it, remains imaginable. The landscape thus functions as a protagonist in its own right, a witness to the violence enacted upon it and a source of the novel's tentative hope.

VI. PRISONER 218 D: THE BODY AND MEMORY AS SITES OF RESISTANCE

If Zee's shot is the novel's emblem of spontaneous resistance, Prisoner 218 D is its emblem of sustained resistance under conditions of total control. Khan has explained that the "D" on her tag stands for "dangerous", and that although she originally gave the character a name, she later removed it (Girmay). This decision is among the most significant formal choices in the novel. To name her would have been to rescue her, to restore an individuality that the colonial system had stripped away. To leave her unnamed is to keep the reader aware of that stripping, and of the many women prisoners whom the archive never named at all.

Here Spivak's argument becomes pertinent. The subaltern woman, Spivak contends, is caught between colonial and nationalist discourses, each of which claims to speak for her and neither of which allows her to speak for herself (Spivak). The heroic martyrology of the Cellular Jail has largely been a male martyrology, centred on the political prisoners whose names now adorn its memorial. A woman political prisoner sits uneasily within that story. Her transportation carried a specific social and sexual stigma, and her suffering does not fit easily into the narrative of masculine sacrifice through which the nation has commemorated the jail. Khan does not claim to give Prisoner 218 D a voice that history denied her. Rather, she writes the denial into the character, so that the reader encounters her through the very mark of her effacement.

Within these constraints, the novel shows the prisoner waging a war on her jailers with the only resources that remain to her: her body and her memory. Her body, which the jail seeks to discipline through labour, deprivation and punishment, becomes a site of refusal. Her memory, which the jail seeks to erase through isolation and repetition, becomes a refuge in which an earlier self and an earlier world can be preserved. The novel thus distinguishes between two kinds of power. The power of the jail is spatial and visual: it confines and observes. The prisoner's counter-power is temporal: it remembers, and in remembering it insists on a continuity of selfhood that the institution cannot reach.

This emphasis on memory as resistance links Prisoner 218 D to the novel's broader historiographic project. What the prisoner does in her cell, holding on to a past the system wishes to obliterate, Khan does in her novel, holding on to a history that official narratives have discarded. The character is therefore not only a subject of the novel but a figure for its method. Her number is the colonial archive's version of her. The novel's account of her inner life is the counter-archive that fiction makes possible.

VII. CHANGING MASTERS: THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION AND THE CONTINUITY OF COLONIALITY

The Japanese occupation of March 1942 is the turning point of the novel. Had the narrative followed the logic of nationalist history, it might have presented the departure of the British as a liberation, or at least as an opening onto one. Bose's later visit and the nominal transfer of the islands to the Provisional Government of Free India would seem to support such a reading. Instead, the novel shows the occupation as bringing what one reviewer calls "a new malice" ("Book Review"). Zee is forced to flee, and Nomi and those who remain must negotiate a dangerous mesh of alliances and betrayals with an occupier who is at once a fellow Asian power, a self-proclaimed liberator and a military regime prepared to torture and kill.

This is the novel's sharpest statement of the article's central thesis: oppression, whatever the identity of the oppressor, operates on a systemic level, and the struggle of the colonised is not against a single coloniser but against the enduring system of coloniality itself. The Japanese do not dismantle the colonial order on the islands. They occupy it. The jail remains a jail. The apparatus of surveillance is turned against new suspects. The categories of loyalty and disloyalty are redrawn, but the logic that divides the population into the trusted and the suspect, the useful and the disposable, is unchanged. Maldonado-Torres's dictum that coloniality survives colonialism (243) finds here an

almost literal illustration: the colonial power departs, and coloniality stays.

The historical record of the occupation confirms the novel's darkness. The Homfreyganj killings of January 1944, in which forty-four civilians accused of espionage were shot, took place shortly after Bose's visit and at a time when the islands were formally under the authority of the Provisional Government. The episode reveals the gap between the rhetoric of liberation and the practice of rule, and it exemplifies what Mbembe calls necropower: the sovereign right to determine who will live and who will die, exercised under the cover of a political language that promises freedom (Mbembe 40). The novel's attention to fear, suspicion and summary violence during the occupation allows readers to feel this gap from the perspective of those who lived within it.

Fanon's assertion that colonialism is "violence in its natural state" (61) also acquires a particular force in this context. Under the British, colonial violence on the islands had been routinised and bureaucratised, embedded in regulations, ledgers and architecture. Under the Japanese, especially as the war turned against them, it became more openly arbitrary. The novel therefore shows two faces of the same coloniality: the disciplinary face, in which violence is rationalised and concealed within institutions, and the necropolitical face, in which it appears without disguise. The transition from one to the other is not a movement from colonialism to freedom but a movement between modes of the same domination.

The novel's refusal of a simple binary has a further implication. It denies the reader the comfort of choosing a side. The British are not redeemed by the cruelty of the Japanese, and the Japanese are not excused by their anti-Western rhetoric. Nor does the nationalist movement, whose symbolic victories are associated with the islands in Indian memory, escape implication, since its alliance with Japan coincided with the suffering of island civilians. In this sense the novel mirrors the decolonial critique that the legacy of colonialism is not a simple dichotomy between coloniser and colonised but a convoluted and even enigmatic network of power relations, in which the colonised may be drawn into complicity and liberators may become new oppressors.

VIII. THE LOCAL BORN AND THE INHERITANCE OF EXILE

Nomi, Zee and Aye belong to a generation that did not choose exile but was born into it. As Local Borns, they are neither mainland Indians nor Indigenous islanders. They are the children of the penal settlement, raised in the shadow of a jail that their parents knew from the inside. Their

position gives the novel a third axis of experience, alongside the prisoner and the occupier: the experience of those who inherit a history of violence without having lived through its originating moment.

Hirsch's notion of postmemory is useful here. Hirsch describes how the children of survivors of collective trauma inherit experiences they did not live through, transmitted so deeply through stories, images and behaviours that they seem to constitute memories in their own right (Hirsch 5). The Local Borns of Khan's novel occupy precisely this position. The crowd watching the prisoners march up the hill includes those who "had never stopped living it", and the children of the settlement absorb that unending experience through their parents' silences, fears and habits. The Cellular Jail is part of their inheritance even before it becomes part of their experience.

Yet the novel does not present the Local Borns only as the passive heirs of trauma. They are also the generation that confronts it. When the Japanese arrive, it is Zee who fires the first shot, and it is Nomi who must survive what follows. The children are drawn into history as actors, and their choices, however constrained, are their own. In this sense the novel suggests that the "generation after" is not condemned to repeat the experiences of its parents. By confronting the silences it has inherited, it can begin to break the cycle of subjugation, or at least to name it. The novel itself, addressed to readers who have largely forgotten the islands, extends this postmemorial labour beyond the fiction.

IX. CONCLUSION

The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali is a novel about a place that history has used and then forgotten. Khan presents the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a crucible of coloniality, a bounded space in which the techniques of domination were concentrated, tested and passed from one regime to another. The penal settlement, the Cellular Jail and the Japanese occupation are not, in her telling, discrete episodes in a progressive national story. They are successive configurations of a single enduring system, in which the identity of the ruler changes while the logic of rule persists.

The novel's achievement lies in the way it makes this argument through form as well as content. Its fragmented, multi-voiced structure reflects the fragmented experience of those on the margins of history. Its opening, built on a forgotten footnote about a boy and a hen, reverses the official hierarchy of historical significance. Its unnamed woman prisoner writes the archive's silence into the heart of the story. Its depiction of the Japanese occupation refuses the binary of coloniser and liberator on which nationalist

memory depends. And its attention to the island-born children shows how colonial violence is inherited across generations, and how it might be confronted.

Khan's explicit scepticism towards official archives, and her decision to set personal memory against documented history, align the novel with the central commitments of decolonial thought. Like Quijano and Maldonado-Torres, she recognises that coloniality outlives colonialism. Like Foucault, she shows how power works through architecture and visibility as well as through force. Like Spivak, she is wary of claiming to speak for those whom history silenced, and she makes that wariness part of her art. The result is a novel that functions as both a record and a refuge: a record of lives the archive failed to keep, and a refuge in which those lives can be remembered.

In this sense the "miracle" of the title is the miracle of fiction itself. Where the archive offers numbers, Khan offers names, or, where names cannot honestly be given, the knowledge of their absence. Where national memory offers a comfortable history, she offers an uncomfortable one. And where the system of coloniality seeks to make its subjects forget, the novel insists on remembering. It thereby performs, in the space of literature, a decolonisation of history that the islands themselves are still waiting for.

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