

Published:  
March 28, 2025

## **Indigenous Resistance and Spirituality: An Alternative Memory Practices in The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali by Uzma Aslam Khan**

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### **Abstract**

The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali is a historical fiction novel by a South Asian woman, Uzma Aslam's Khan (2019). The past studies on this novel were all about the brutality of foreign domination, intergenerational suffering and ecological devastation. The unexplored area of the novel is now covered in this research, which is based on psychological resilience, indigenous healing, suppressed voices and women's empowerment. This study helps us to find out how the prisoners and indigenous communities face the brutality. This research investigates how spoken traditions, cultural myths, and ceremonial practices serve as alternative historical records against colonial suppression, enabling oppressed communities to reclaim their past. Additionally, it delves into the experiences of Muslim and native women, especially those imprisoned in penal colonies. This research sheds light on the unseen strength of the oppressed, demonstrating how cultural memory and spiritual traditions serve as forms of resistance. By exploring these alternative histories, it contributes to a broader conversation on survival, identity, and the enduring power of storytelling in reclaiming lost histories. **Keywords:** Psychological Resilience, Indigenous Healing, Women's Empowerment, Oral Traditions, Cultural Memory, Alternative Histories, Resistance and Survival

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## Introduction

In postcolonial fiction, narratives that merge historical depth with the individual lives of silent voices offer perceptive critiques of the enduring impact of colonialism. Uzma Aslam Khan's (2019) novel *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* is such a gripping work. Against the creepy and historically neglected landscape of the Andaman Islands of 1936-1946, Khan's (2019) novel re-stages colonial rule from the natives' point of view, focusing especially on women and prisoners whose histories have been largely effaced by official testimonies. Uzma Aslam Khan (2019) is one of the most prominent contemporary Pakistani novelists whose work delves deeply into the intersections of history, memory, environment, and identity. Known for her lyrical prose and courageous engagement with erased or marginalized histories, Khan's (2019) writing often highlights the untold stories of colonized peoples and the lasting effects of empire. Born in Lahore and having lived in several countries, Khan (2019) brings a unique transnational sensitivity to her work. Her literary voice resists dominant narratives and instead gives agency to silenced characters particularly women living in the aftermath of colonization and displacement. *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali*, published in 2019, is widely regarded as her most ambitious novel to date. It draws on years of research and travel to the Andaman Islands, where she attempts to restore to literature the lives that history has often overlooked. Set in the historically neglected penal colony of the Andaman Islands during the period between 1936 and 1946, the novel offers a powerful reimagining of colonial rule and its aftermath. The title *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* is both ironic and subversive. It suggests a departure from "official" versions of history, hinting at the miraculous survival of truths that have been hidden, distorted, or erased by colonial authorities. In centering a young girl named Nomi Ali, Khan (2019) brings to the forefront not

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only the personal and emotional toll of imperialism but also the spiritual and psychological resilience of those who are forced to live on the margins. The use of “true history” in the title reflects Khan’s (2019) desire to challenge the colonial archive and to present instead a story rooted in communal memory, oral traditions, and lived experience. In this deeply evocative narrative, Khan (2019) introduces characters like Nomi, her brother Zee, and the mysterious prisoner 218 D, who become witnesses and participants in the brutal transitions of power from British to Japanese colonial rule. Through these characters, Khan (2019) reclaims historical space for the subaltern and constructs a narrative that defies linearity and absolute authority. What distinguishes this novel from many other postcolonial texts is its commitment not only to exposing colonial violence but also to exploring how indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual practices, and alternative forms of memory act as strategies of survival and resistance. Khan (2019) reflects on the silence within official histories, suggesting that emotions like a heartbeat are excluded from written records. This line captures the core of Khan’s (2019) literary mission: to create space in the historical imagination for the emotional, spiritual, and bodily realities of those whose voices have been left out. While earlier scholarship has acknowledged the novel’s engagement with carceral colonialism and ecological degradation, there remains a significant gap in exploring the role of indigenous spirituality, gendered resistance, and oral tradition as central forces within the narrative. Most analyses have primarily concentrated on the material aspects of colonial rule, imprisonment, land dispossession, and physical violence without fully considering how healing, faith, and cultural continuity serve as modes of defiance. Khan’s (2019) novel, however, foregrounds these neglected dimensions in subtle yet powerful ways. Khan (2019) suggests that recalling the past does not always need to be a painful weight to carry; it may also be a spiritual

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endeavor or a form of quiet meditation. This question offers a radical redefinition of memory not as a weight but as a sacred act that connects living to the dead and the present to the past. By examining how Khan (2019) interweaves cultural rituals, spiritual knowledge, and intergenerational trauma into the story, this research fills an important gap in literary studies. It highlights how memory in the novel is not confined to the written archive but also resides in the body, in sacred spaces, in stories whispered between prisoners, and in the unrecorded dreams of women. Through this, Khan (2019) not only deconstructs colonial historiography but also reclaims the very process of historical narration. Her novel insists that the act of remembering when performed through indigenous and spiritual frameworks can be a form of resistance, healing, and survival. Therefore, this study aims to go beyond conventional interpretations of *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* and bring to light the deeper layers of indigenous resilience, feminine agency, and postcolonial memory-making embedded in the novel's structure and soul.

### **Literature Review**

Postcolonial theory offers a foundational lens to understand Uzma Aslam Khan's (2019) *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali*, particularly when exploring the silences, resistances, and complex identities that emerge in colonized landscapes. Edward W. Said's (1978) seminal work *Orientalism* remains crucial in recognizing how colonial powers constructed the East as inferior and voiceless. Said argued that the colonized were not simply exploited physically but erased intellectually and culturally through dominant narratives. This theoretical grounding gives urgency to a novel like Khan's (2019), which aims to retrieve voices and histories excluded from colonial archives. Through its careful attention to indigenous people, particularly Muslim women in the Andaman Islands, the novel resists this orientalist silencing. In a similar way, Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concept of the

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“Third Space,” introduced in *The Location of Culture*, proves essential to understanding how identities are shaped in-between rigid colonial binaries. Bhabha writes, “It is that Third Space... which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity.” (p. 37) This “Third Space” creates an ambiguous terrain in which characters like Nomi and Prisoner 218D navigate multiple, often conflicting, cultural pressures, colonial, indigenous, religious, and gendered and still manage to assert agency in subtle and profound ways. Their voices are shaped by loss and violence, but they are not static victims. Instead, they embody negotiation, hybridity, and the ongoing struggle for self-definition. Environmental history also plays a key role in contextualizing the novel’s setting. Aparna Vaidik’s (2010) *Imperial Andamans: Colonial Encounter and Island History* uncover how the British converted the islands into penal colonies, reordering both the landscape and its people to serve imperial agendas. Vaidik links this ecological manipulation to the social control of prisoners, arguing that domination over land paralleled domination over bodies. In contrast, Punam Tripathi’s (2018) *The Vulnerable Andaman and Nicobar Islands: A Study of Disasters and Response* show how colonial legacies continue to shape the islands’ vulnerability to natural disasters and institutional neglect. These works offer an important historical backdrop for Khan’s (2019) novel, which engages not just with the trauma of incarceration but with the spiritual connection to land and memory. As a form of resistance and remembrance, Khan (2019) tells the story of a character who plants neem seeds in the desolate area while providing them with hope and stories. She evokes an intimate ecological knowledge and a faith in healing that resists both colonial ruin and postcolonial abandonment. Despite these rich historical and theoretical frameworks, previous scholarly work on *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* has tended to emphasize colonial

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brutality and ecological destruction without fully exploring the novel's alternative forms of resistance, especially spiritual and gendered ones. The few critical voices who have approached these dimensions include Madhu Krishnan, whose work on postcolonial narrative silences informs us how we read the gaps and absences in Khan's (2019) text. Krishnan (2014) emphasizes how such silences are not empty but filled with political significance; they mark the presence of what has been deliberately erased. Similarly, Aroosa Kanwal (2015) in *Rethinking Identities in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction* argues that contemporary Pakistani literature is increasingly concerned with reclaiming erased histories and reshaping fragmented identities. Kanwal's argument about the narrative agency of marginalized characters especially women support a reading of Khan's (2019) novel as a text that centers Muslim, indigenous, and female voices in its reimagining of the Andamans. Furthermore, literary studies have yet to fully explore how memory in Khan's (2019) novel functions beyond trauma. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's (2012) idea of post memory in *The Generation of Post Memory*, this research interprets how the characters carry inherited trauma not only as burden but as a source of continuity and resistance. According to Hirsch (2012), inherited memories can seem to be physically present, as though ancestors' voices continue to reverberate through traumatized areas, exemplifying how memory travels across generations, embedded in space and ritual. This is not merely a return to pain but a reconstruction of cultural identity through spiritual and oral practices. When combined with Peter Levine's (2010) neuroscience-based approach to trauma in *In an Unspoken Voice*, the novel can also be understood as portraying the body and land as co-witnesses of historical pain and eventual healing. In synthesizing all these scholarly contributions, this research attempts to move beyond dominant discourses of violence and loss by foregrounding the acts of survival and sacred remembrance

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enacted by subaltern women. While previous readings have addressed colonial incarceration and ecological exploitation, few have highlighted how spiritual rituals, storytelling, and everyday acts of resistance serve as tools for reclaiming identity and rootedness. By integrating the ecological insights of Vaidik (2010) and Tripathi (2018) with postcolonial and feminist frameworks advanced by Said, Bhabha (1994), Hirsch, Kanwal (2015), and Krishnan, this study offers a more layered understanding of resistance one that is rooted not only in protest but in memory, land, and the imagination.

### **Description**

Uzma Aslam Khan's (2019) *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* offers a deeply moving account of a forgotten chapter in history, the penal colonies of the Andaman Islands during the shift from British to Japanese colonial rule. While the novel has rightly earned praise for its treatment of imperial violence, environmental ruin, and the psychological scars left by colonialism, one crucial dimension remains relatively unexplored. This research focuses on that overlooked space: the quiet but resilient presence of indigenous resistance, spiritual endurance, and alternative ways of remembering history. Rather than emphasizing the visible forms of rebellion against colonial forces, this paper turns to more subtle, culturally rooted strategies, ritual, oral storytelling, and spiritual practices that keep history alive even when they're erased from official records. Khan's (2019) portrayal reveals the silenced and entombed voices of human and non-human subjects by providing a sufficient explanation for the episodes and scenes of coexistence. She brings into focus those historical accounts neglected in the meta-narrative of colonization and decolonization. Scholars have often approached Nomi Ali through the lenses of ecocriticism or postcolonial trauma, drawing attention to environmental destruction and the brutal treatment of prisoners and marginalized communities. These are

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essential conversations. However, what's frequently missing is a deeper exploration of how cultural traditions, spiritual rituals, and ancestral memory serve as tools of survival and resistance, especially for the indigenous populations of the Andamans. These practices don't always take the form of loud protests or political statements. Instead, they manifest in stories told quietly, rituals passed down through generations, and spiritual connections with the land and the dead. These elements deserve more attention, as they reflect a powerful yet often invisible form of defiance. Recent scholarship has defended this reading. Khan's (2019) narrative approach affirms Linda Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction, rewriting history to incorporate voices historically overlooked in official narratives (Khan & Irum, 2024). In addition, critics have studied the way the novel characterizes intergenerational trauma, employing trauma theory to analyze the effects of colonial violence on identity, both personal and communal. The character of Nomi Ali, representing "double marginality," unearths the multiple oppressions of gender and colonial domination (Shabbir et al., 2025). At the heart of this paper lies a central question: who gets to be remembered, and who decides what counts as history? Khan's (2019) novel gives voice to the political prisoners and anti-colonial fighters from mainland India, but there's another layer woven into the text, one that hints at the buried narratives of indigenous islanders. These communities, though largely absent from official records, appear in the novel through their practices, stories, and beliefs. Aye, one of the central characters, becomes a powerful symbol of this submerged resistance. The efforts of women like Fahmida and Shakuntala to defend their families and maintain daily life under colonial rule, despite their seeming passivity, represent a potent form of cultural preservation and silent resistance (Iqbal & Mustafa, 2022, p. 1595). She doesn't fight with weapons but with words, rituals, and remembrance. A poignant moment in the novel captures



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this beautifully. Khan (2019) writes: “They were called and roasted on a low fire in a wrapping of leaves... tell stories about their ancestors, who fought the outsiders and were free” (p. 120). In this simple yet powerful scene, storytelling is embedded into the act of preparing food, transforming everyday practice into an act of cultural preservation. The food itself becomes a symbol, a way to connect with ancestors, to recall lost freedoms, and to reaffirm identity. This passage becomes a cornerstone of the current research, showing how memory and resistance are not always grand gestures but can exist in the most intimate and ordinary moments. The concept of memory passed down across generations is often discussed through Marianne Hirsch’s theory of post memory, the idea that trauma is inherited not just through direct experience, but through stories, silences, and behaviors passed down within families. While Hirsch’s work is rooted in the context of Holocaust memory, it offers a useful starting point for understanding the transmission of trauma and memory in Nomi Ali. However, this paper argues that Khan’s (2019) novel invites more expansive reading. Here, memory is not only psychological or familial, but also deeply spiritual and communal. It lives not just in minds and bodies, but in the land, in sacred rituals, and the names whispered through generations. In this way, the forest, ocean, and soil of the Andamans themselves become living archives holding stories that were never written down but never forgotten. Political prisoner 218, another key character, offers a different angle on memory and loss. His forced relocation from Lahore to the Andamans represents not only physical displacement but also a deeper sense of historical and cultural erasure. Isolated from his homeland, he becomes a vessel for memory, not just his own, but of others around him. His suffering is not recorded in official documents but is held in the recollections of fellow prisoners and locals, especially women. These women serve as living bridges between the past and the present, preserving narratives that resist

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colonial silencing. Their memory-keeping doesn't appear in textbooks, but it endures in rituals, caregiving, and oral tradition. By centering the cultural and spiritual frameworks of the Andamanese communities, this research argues that Khan (2019) is offering more than a critique of colonial rule; she's presenting a counternarrative, one that values indigenous ways of knowing. In a world where history is often recorded by the victors, the novel insists on the legitimacy of other epistemologies: storytelling, ritual, and oral memory. These practices don't just resist colonial forgetting; they actively shape identity, continuity, and resistance across generations. Even as power shifts from British to Japanese control, these traditions remain steady, grounded in place and community. The novel also sheds light on how women, especially those at the intersections of gender, religion, and colonial marginalization, carry the burdens and responsibilities of memory. Muslim and indigenous women in Nomi Ali are often portrayed in the shadows of larger political events, yet they are the ones who preserve meaning through their actions. Through song, stories, spiritual rituals, and acts of caregiving, they embody a resistance that is often overlooked. This paper emphasizes how these women function as cultural archivists, keeping alive the knowledge that the empire tried to erase. Their resistance is not through confrontation but through endurance, which is a radical act. Another vital contribution of Khan's (2019) novel is its focus on the Andaman Islands themselves, a place often ignored in mainstream postcolonial discourse. Postcolonial studies tend to prioritize centers of power like India, Pakistan, or the colonial capitals. But Khan (2019) deliberately chooses a space that has been doubly erased first by colonial authorities who used the islands as dumping grounds for political prisoners, and then by academic neglect. By situating her novel here, Khan (2019) shifts our focus to the margins and forces readers to reckon with the histories of island communities, whose experiences of violence, resistance,

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and survival challenge dominant narratives. Bringing in a feminist-postcolonial perspective, this research further examines how trauma, especially for women, doesn't always present itself in visible or verbal ways. Instead, it's often embodied in daily routines, in rituals of remembrance, in the quiet rhythm of survival. The novel doesn't portray women as helpless victims but as vital agents in the transmission of cultural knowledge. This understanding expands trauma theory beyond Western-centric frameworks, recognizing that in many non-Western contexts, memory and healing are closely tied to communal and spiritual life. Contemporary political developments also offer meaningful parallels to the themes in Nomi Ali. For instance, recent efforts to retrieve stolen colonial archives from European governments, or political leaders issuing vague "half-apologies" for historical injustices, reflect ongoing global struggles for historical justice. These real-world events echo the novel's central concern: who has the power to remember, and who gets forgotten? The fictional account of prisoner 218, whose story is preserved through personal narratives rather than official documents, mirrors the present-day battle to reclaim suppressed histories. The novel also suggests that memory isn't limited to humans. The Andaman landscape, the trees, the rocks, and the ocean serve as a spiritual and historical witness. In many indigenous belief systems, the natural world is alive with ancestral spirits, and Khan (2019) taps into this animistic worldview to show how nature itself holds memory. These elements are not just settings; they are active participants in the act of remembering. While the novel doesn't focus explicitly on photography, the metaphor of a "snapshot", a frozen moment preserved in time, can be extended to these rituals and natural symbols. Each one becomes a kind of photograph, capturing a lived experience that colonial history failed to document. Ultimately, this research proposes a broader understanding of what resistance means. Defiance doesn't have to be loud or

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dramatic; it can be found in the act of remembering, in the refusal to forget, in the preservation of cultural rituals. These quiet forms of resistance are often the most enduring. They allow communities to survive cultural annihilation and assert their humanity in the face of dehumanization. By highlighting these alternative forms of survival and resistance, Khan (2019) challenges conventional definitions of power and history. In conclusion, *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* is far more than a novel about colonial violence; it is a story about the resilience of people, the sacredness of memory, and the power of silence. Through its focus on indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual practices, and alternative modes of remembering, it pushes the boundaries of postcolonial studies. This research contributes to that evolving conversation by shedding light on what lies beneath the surface: the quiet, persistent, deeply human forms of resistance that endure through time, despite the forces that try to silence them.

### **Conclusion**

Uzma Aslam Khan's (2019) *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* does more than merely describe colonial violence; it is a work of literary resistance that recasts history in the personal prism of the subaltern indigenous and Muslim women. By placing center stage figures such as Aye, Nomi, and Prisoner 218 D, Khan (2019) tells an alternative archive that challenges prevailing historiographies. These women survive not just by enduring but also by remembering, resisting, and reclaiming, frequently through rituals, narrative, and embodied memory, which Caruth (1996) and others imagine as the intergenerational and fractured quality of trauma (Shabbir et al., 2025). This resistance is not militant but is rather thoroughly embedded within the cultural and spiritual lives of the colonized. Aye's custody of ancestral bones and burial rituals personifies a cultural rebellion born of post memorial traditions. According to Aamir and Khan (2021), post memory, the

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profound psychological legacy of ancestral trauma, is inscribed in material things, gestures, and silences as acts of political continuity. Likewise, Prisoner 218 D's anonymity is not a lack in narrative but a metaphor for the institutional erasure of female resistance. Her body and silence are places of resistance against the history inscribed by colonizers. The setting of the novel, the Andaman Islands, moves beyond geography to become a living archive of ecological and historical trauma. The environment imbibes and resonates with the violence committed to its inhabitants. As argued by Rab Nawaz Khan et al. (2022), colonialism is not merely political conquest but an ecological violation, transforming the natural landscape into a theatre of human misery. The tree, river, and even the cry of animals in the novel becomes carriers of remembrance, encapsulating what Khan (2019) terms "the land remembering its pain" (Khan,2019). These environmental metaphors compellingly challenge Eurocentric trauma frameworks, shifting from psychology to community, location-specific, and culturally informed models. Khan (2019) also challenges Western trauma theory's universalist vision. As Aamir and Khan (2019) contend, the Eurocentric model's emphasis on discrete catastrophic events cannot capture the chronic, structural, and multigenerational quality of colonial trauma. In contrast, Khan's (2019) work demonstrates how trauma is not only experienced but also inherited and adapted through cultural rituals, oral traditions, and spiritual endurance. Nomi's fragmented search for her father mirrors Pakistan's collective struggle to reconnect with a silenced past, a process that postcolonial feminist theory reveals as both gendered and political (Shabbir et al., 2025). Women in Nomi Ali are not helpless victims but keepers of memory. Their caregiving, mourning, and remembering are acts of political significance. For example, the novel's representation of indigenous Andamanese funeral rituals, bone necklaces, ritual grieving, and spiritual belief establishes a non-Western epistemology of

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remembrance against colonial forgetting (Aamir & Khan, 2021). These rituals refuse the colonial appropriation of relics and bodies, making claims to the right to mourn, remember, and belong. In short, *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* is a historiographic metafiction that not just rewrites history but retrieves the act of remembering itself. It claims that history is not only to be found in monuments or documents, but in earth, flesh, and oral tradition. Khan's (2019) novel thereby challenges us to reimagine resistance as an exercise in survival, quiet, unyielding, and spiritually resilient, reverberating across generations.

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