

# DECCAN HERALD

Sunday, June 06, 2004

---

---

## Hope is the healer

Concerned about the fragility of human relationships, Khan weaves a haunting tale about the legacy of the 1971 war.

**Noor**  
**Sorayya Khan**  
**New Delhi: Penguin, 2004**  
**pp 223, Rs 250**

Can a story of great suffering make a work of beauty? Sorayya Khan's *Noor* focuses on East Pakistan during the war of 1971 in such a resonant manner that it is poignant, powerful and tender.

Sorayya Khan does not mask the horrors of war in bombastic prose or dramatic verse. She doesn't applaud the victor or sympathise with the vanquished simply because to her, everyone in this war has suffered. The history of the vanquished gets in the way of the memory of the victor. It chases him when he's asleep taking the form of nightmares, it disturbs him when he's awake, robbing him of peace.

Concerned about the fragility of human relationships, Khan weaves a haunting tale about the legacy of the 1971 war. She peoples the tale with Sajida, Hussein and Ali -- all of whom have some connection with the war -- and she celebrates the astonishing power of love in *Noor*, Sajida's mentally challenged child who is so gifted that it's unsettling for even those who come to know and love her.

With atonement and forgiveness running as leitmotifs through-out the story, *Noor* moves back and forth in time. From the killer cyclone that hit East Pakistan in 1970 and the war of 1971 to the 1990s. From the time little Sajida lost her family in the swirling waters to the time when she, with her daughter *Noor's* help, lays the ghosts of the past to rest.

Little Sajida is found wandering on the streets by Ali, a young Pakistani soldier, who brings the waif back home to his mother, Nanijaan. Sajida gives new meaning to Nanijaan and Ali's life. Treating her as the daughter he will never have, Ali makes her every wish his command. Sajida marries Hussein, her college sweetheart and is pregnant with her third child when the story begins...

Always suspecting that the child will be different from her two naughty, energetic sons, Sajida considers Noor her secret -- she even knows the exact moment when Noor was conceived. Each time she speaks to her swollen belly, she feels a thrill run through her very being. Yet, when Noor is born, even Sajida is shaken. Noor suffers from a serious mental disability. Sajida stays with the child every sleeping and waking moment while Hussein, unable to accept Noor's disability, turns away from them and locks his grief and shame within.

It is left to Nanijaan and Ali to fuse fractured relationships. To them Noor is gifted, they sense that her world is full of life and colour. So they buy her boxes and boxes of crayons and paints and watch transfixed as the child takes the family by storm with her sketches. Is the child endowed with other-worldly intuition, they wonder. Noor's sketches begin to take form and shape - they are the memories that haunt her parents and Ali, her grandfather. These are traumatic memories, buried deep in the recesses of their minds; kept locked away with determination but Noor's childish drawings unlock the past with violent force. The climax is cathartic - cleansed of betrayal and disillusionment, renewed by hope, their wounds start to heal. It is Noor who will heal them.

It is to Sorayya Khan's credit that she does not allow such a moving tale to become maudlin or macabre. Though unflinching in her descriptions of the horrors of the war, she doesn't give in to the temptation to take sides or offer justification. Her writing is remarkable because it is so subtle and so honest.

**KAVITHA K**