

Australianama: The South Asian Odyssey in Australia

By Samia Khatun

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AUSTRALIANAMA IS A BOOK THAT IS HARD TO SUMMARISE AND SITUATE FOR REASONS I will come to. Its basic historical core, however, is relatively easy to designate. It is the story of South Asians in Australia, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It draws on Samia Khatun's doctoral thesis, 'Camels, Ships and Trains: Translation Across the "Indian Archipelago", 1860-1930', written at the University of Sydney and awarded in 2012. In this respect it makes a valuable contribution to Australian historiography. Its carefully woven micro-histories of intersecting lives and circuits of material and cultural exchange up-end orthodoxies, or at least popular conceptions, about the cultural dynamics of Australia in the late colonial period. In particular, the critical role played by South Asian camel drivers meant that the settler frontier in arid Australia was necessarily multicultural. Khatun draws on the word 'track' to emphasise the way that people—Indigenous Australians, largely white settlers, and South Asian cameleers—traversed and transected these spaces:

Put simply, a track is a story. I propose that tracks from different epistemological traditions circumscribed physical movement through Beltana, structuring settler and Aboriginal trajectories through Kuyani lands. Tracks not only underpinned the terrain of colonial encounter but also informed how people saw place and recounted the past. (91)

I was particularly struck by the lives Khatun singled out for detailed exposure, at least as far as the archives and sources allow one to see. There was Khawajah Muhammad Bux, the remarkable entrepreneur who travelled from Lahore to Fremantle and became a cloth and clothing merchant, chronicling his life in Urdu. There was also Myrtle Mary Dee, the daughter of NSW storekeepers, who married Morbine Perooz, who had arrived in Australia from Peshawar in 1893. In fact, Myrtle Mary married Morbine twice. In 1913, they were married by a Presbyterian minister, and then in 1917 they married under Islamic law. Perhaps the most stunning story was that of Lallie Matbar, a Wongatha woman born in the Eastern

Goldfields of Western Australia in the early twentieth century. Lallie was imprisoned three times at the infamous Moore River Native Settlement—and escaped three times. Her life was spent under constant persecution by the Western Australian Department of Native Affairs and their agents in the police force. When Lallie Matbar married Akbar Khan in 1926, Khatun notes, the marriage was ‘negotiate[d] across three legal epistemes’ (158)—Islamic, traditional Indigenous and the pernicious (eugenicist) rules of the 1905 Aborigines Act.

These stories of lives caught in the webs of cultures often deeply ignorant of each other’s traditions and world-views provide the historical substance of Khatun’s analysis. With its asymmetries of power and violence it was no merry melting pot, but the colonial project was far from seamless. In this respect, the book’s method seems indebted to Gayatri Spivak’s famous essay, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Khatun’s doctoral thesis was examined by Dipesh Chakrabarty, the brilliant scion of the Subaltern Studies school who, like Khatun, spent time in the Australian academy before moving on to greener fields. Like Spivak, Khatun seems to answer this question with an emphatic yes and an emphatic no. On the one hand, the subaltern cannot speak because to be subaltern is to be speechless, at least insofar as speech equates to accessing a language that is consequential in systems of power and governance. But on the other hand, the subaltern *does* speak—they speak through resistance, they speak through refusal, they speak through their actions and their non-actions, and they speak through their bodies. An example is Spivak’s own ancestor, who killed herself while menstruating so that her suicide would be understood as a political act. Had she not done this, Spivak notes, the death would have been attributed to the shame of unmarried pregnancy.

As noted, as an imaginative, counter-historical study of South Asian people in Australia, *Australianama* is a significant intervention into late colonial and early Federation Australian history. But, intriguingly, the book is not simply a sensitive re-examination of the archives, but something much more personal as well. *Australianama* wants to be an account not only of Australia’s colonial *past* but also, in a phrase Khatun borrows from Lorenzo Veracini, of Australia’s *settler colonial present*. Khatun frames the historical study of South Asian people in Australia within her direct experience of Australia as a South Asian migrant. During her doctoral candidature at the University of Sydney, Khatun began to become increasingly aware of the particular price levied on migrants for their membership of Australia’s imagined community. Indeed, *Australianama* begins in the psychiatric ward of Liverpool Hospital, where Samia Khatun is dealing with the breakdown of her mother, Eshrat:

Inside the ward, when psychiatrists asked my mother questions, her responses in English were cheerfully bland. Everything was fine. She

was coping with it all very well, she told them. She insisted that she was remarkably strong. But her visions are only in Bengali, I pleaded with doctors and nurses. Yet hospital staff would not engage an interpreter. She is perfectly capable of speaking English, they informed me. Day after day, I translated Eshrat's escalating delusions to psychiatrists in windowless interview rooms. (xv)

The author socialises this moment, refusing to regard her mother's condition as a merely personal pathology. For Khatun, her mother's breakdown is not one woman's personal struggle with mental health, which would be the preferred explanation within liberal orthodoxy. Rather, this aging woman's withdrawal from the demands of everyday life and progressive immersion into Islamic scriptures was a falling away of the façade of multicultural Australia. Eerily, the façade remains intact, and the mother presents as the subject the institution wants her to be—cogent, resilient, cheerful. This institution is embodied in this scene in the well-meaning doctors in Eshrat's ward, but Khatun sees the hospital as the condensation of the Australian neo-liberal multi-cultural state. On this line of reasoning, Eshrat's interior life is no longer able to tally with this public fantasy and her psyche has resorted to making good the difference via a delusional system. These 'visions' are in Bengali, Khatun tells us, and Khatun becomes the translator between her mother's fantasy world and the reality that is upheld by the 'psychiatrists in windowless interview rooms'.

This is what makes *Australianama* a unique work of Australian history: it is a work of Australian history that refuses both Australia and history. The book will not be restrained by the ideological violence of nation nor the epistemological violence of the past tense. Furthermore, the book even seems uneasy with the fact that it is a book. Indeed, the 'book' is a field of radical uncertainty in Khatun's account. Along with her mother's breakdown, the other instigating event in *Australianama* is the author's realisation that a book has been mislabelled. In a museum exhibit in Broken Hill devoted to South Asians in that town and its hinterland, a book is exhibited with the plaque 'The Holy Koran'. Yet Khatun realises that the book was not the Quran at all but the *Kasasol Ambia* (Stories of the Prophets), a 500-page book of Bengali Sufi verse-narrative printed in Calcutta in the late nineteenth century. Khatun's quest to find the origin of this book, and just how it found its way to a Broken Hill mosque, takes her to Calcutta and is a fascinating journey in its own right. But, it also constitutes a defining gesture in *Australianama*, which is to ground the stories of Australia in a *different book*. Instead of the usual creation stories involving Cook and the explorers, Khatun pushes Australian history into different, and often more profound traditions, particularly those which connect the Australian continent to archipelagic South Asian circulations. The misnamed Quran thus becomes an emblem for the casual annihilation of difference.

To loosen the grip of accepted narratives on the past, Khatun introduces what might seem like arbitrary devices of her own. For instance, in trying to understand how a copy of the *Kasasol Ambia* ended up in Broken Hill, Khatun uses the stories of the prophets contained in that book to mobilise her necessarily speculative hypotheses: 'A third tale in *Kasasol Ambia* is the story of Khidr's patronage of sailors ... Could *Kasasol Ambia* have arrived in Broken Hill with a sailor headed into the grip of power?' (36-37). Similarly, the story 'Khawajah Bux' is rewritten using the folk cycle of Sindbad's voyages so as to shift his life out of the 'successful multicultural migrant' story in which it had already become domiciled. In a hypnotic, meta-fictional final chapter, the book's narrator—is she still the author, Samia Khatun?—comes across a book called *Australianama*, but with the subtitle 'The Book of Australia'. In this moment the book, even as it is being written and read, is re-encountered from the outside, an outside that is also within Australia. With such Borgesian subterfuge, we have come a long way from traditional history. These self-conscious ploys have the effect of defamiliarising not only Australian history, but the very practice of history in its essentially whiggish adherence to the liberal metanarrative of a progressively more just and inclusive society.

In these ways, Khatun seeks to pre-empt the fact that her book can only ever be a footnote to 'The Book of Australia'. What if, she asks, the footnotes *were* the book? As well as insisting on alternative discursive sources for Australian reality—the voyages of Sindbad, the *Kasasol Ambia*—*Australianama* also relies on another key strategy in subaltern history. This is to insist upon the hermeneutic possibility of forgotten people, people like Lallie Matbar and Akbar Khan, and Myrtle Mary and Morbine Perooz. What powers the book's account of their lives and the interpretation of them is a moment of recognition or, in the psychoanalytic sense, identification. In other words, the author sees herself in each of these people. This is, of course, not unique to Khatun, but in her book this becomes a mode of understanding and the source, despite all the muddy archival water, of a certain conviction. One can see this most clearly in the founding moment of *Australianama*. The mother's psychosis directly articulates—in a way that the author does not seem ever to doubt—with Khatun's own epiphany concerning multicultural Australia. As Khatun puts it: 'In 2008, a story I had lived inside for many years collapsed. That year, I stopped being able to inhabit the contradictions of Western multiculturalism' (xv). The mother's breakdown both triggers and underwrites the author's own renunciation of the fraught positionality that multicultural Australia granted her. Her mother, who now spent her days in a locked hospital room poring over 'the melting Quran', is the living figure of a liquid South Asian Islamic universe teeming beneath a thin, fractured crust of Western assimilation. This is *me*, the book says. *My mother is acting out what I am thinking and have unknowingly thought for a long time.*

Khatun's own narrative of withdrawal from the assignations of multiculturalism frames a broader historical investigation of South Asians in Australia. With the recent death of Ania Walwicz, Australia lost a pioneering voice of multicultural refusal. Her iconic poem 'Australia' had the temerity to bite the hand that fed it, a bitter comic rant that threw back into the smiling faces of Team Australia all of its well-meaning camaraderie. Like Hannah Arendt or the terrible fable that Lars von Trier delivered in his film *Dogville*, Walwicz knew that accepting the kindness of strangers often comes with a bill that is calculated with interest. When, in the final chapter of *Australianama*, Khatun stages a fictional encounter with her own book, she is trying to insist that Australia is also other to itself. In other words, official multiculturalism, as Ghassan Hage has been at pains to point out, was a discourse that exchanged actual difference for the parade of difference. But true difference has to remain outside. This scandalous outside of the multicultural refusenik is what this book insinuates.

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