Soliloquy

HYBRID

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF ART, DESIGN, AND ARCHITECTURE

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Hybrid

Interdisciplinary Journal of Art, Design, and Architecture

Hybrid is a thematic journal aimed at fostering a culture of research and writing at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture and beyond. It is transdisciplinary in nature, and focuses primarily on those practices and projects that seek to apply any combination of art, design, architectural, and related genres to issues of critical, cultural, political, and educational significance, inclusion, and social justice. It emphasises praxis by providing a forum for research into the creative practices that exist within urban, academic, developmental, and other milieus, especially in the national and regional contexts of Pakistan and South Asia. *Hybrid* offers a platform for disseminating research by established and upcoming academics and practitioners as well as students, and includes sections for lead essays, a photo-essay, interview, portfolio, and a spotlight on crafts. Its objective is to bring new and multiple perspectives, grounded in Pakistan and the region, to a local, regional, and international audience, and to further pertinent debates.

Editorial Note | 10

Zehra Nabi | 14
Kafka in the Woods

Usman Ansari | 28
The Potato, the Mark, and the Body

Sarah Ahmed and Arooj Aurangzeb | 52
The Self Within the Collective

Priya Pinjani Perwani | 62
Mapping Sacred Games

Noor Butt | 76
Narrative Images: Women's Selfies, History, and Storytelling

Zehra Jabeen Shah | 98
Spirit of the Sarangi

Shamama Hasany | 110
Shared Spaces

About the Contributors | 130

Editorial

Amid the back and forth, while adapting how to readapt and learning how to unlearn, we are now living in a world which is three years into the pandemic. From the individual to the collective, we experienced an unprecedented newness that belonged to no one but quickly became the reality for all. A space to reflect is invaluable, to be able to negotiate the pause and play of reality and its impacts on our individual and social realms. To acknowledge, commemorate, and investigate the power of these wandering, meandering, and critical reflections, the editorial board chose 'Soliloquy' as the theme for the fifth volume of *Hybrid*.

Traditionally, a soliloquy is a character's internal monologue theatrically situated in a play to provide the audience with an insight into the character. As creative practitioners and researchers, we often find ourselves soliloquising in the form of personal contemplation and deliberation. As our minds grapple with our reflections, these soliloquies show us how far the stream of consciousness can stretch and where we can hold on to it. The idea of a soliloquy embraces the collective while still remaining individual. In our recent past, the collective experience of individual isolation became a unifying exploration of finding refuge in one's surroundings. It allowed the resurfacing of ideas, thoughts, and intentions that we had been holding on to, unarticulated, for too long. This volume explores various soliloquies of practice, medium, and methodology as each contributor shares their own version of process.

Zehra Nabi's inquisitive reflections delve into the soliloquies of a writer, situating writing as a craft and the writer as the craftsman and curator. Her essay explores Franz Kafka's wavering musings – both tame and wild – in his personal diaries, unveiling and expanding on the labour of writing. She embodies the struggles and despair of this labour not only for self-comfort as a writer, but also to critically reflect on the writer's processes.

Usman Ansari crafts an intimate narrative, situated strategically within the interdisciplinary overlaps of an architect's soliloquy and an artist's struggle to perceive the mundane architectural everyday as art. It is a series of soliloquies woven together to showcase the evolution of a preschooler into a trained architect who finds solace in 'as-found' objects on his project sites. He also reaches closely to his own body as a tool to reflect and interrogate his inhibitions around his artistic practices.

Sarah Ahmed interviews Arooj Aurangzeb to understand the personal and collective impact of a moment that went viral on social media. They stitch together the hope out of the helplessness

and messy power dynamics that Arooj experienced in the limelight, and offer an affirming vision of social change emanating from collective action that is undertaken with critical self-consciousness.

Priya Pinjani's piece explores her positionality as a Pakistani Hindu as she maps the sacred and profane aspects of the multiple urban identities of Hindus in Karachi. Her essay is a social and geographical mapping of anecdotes, expanding on the etched and evolving urban myths around minority lives in the context of the city.

We often question ourselves about how much of our soliloquies are meant for display. Are soliloquies, as internalised as they are, even meant to be shared with others? What is the relationship between the private and the public? Looking within and through a literal self-reflective lens, Noor Butt writes about women's selfies, history, and storytelling. Her essay makes us wonder if the selfie is the twenty-first century version of a soliloquy.

Zehra Jabeen Shah's essay hums the narratives of *sarangi* players as they share their deeply personal journeys and relationships with the musical instrument. She writes evocatively about the *sarangi* and the many webs of social, cultural, and spiritual meaning it is embedded in. Finally, Shamama Hasany shares a series of tender reflections and moments of closeness with those who have inspired her creative practice. Her writing weaves narratives of site, reminiscence, and resistance, channelled within her mind and body and becoming the methodology of her work.

As creative practitioners, there are often times where a soliloquy performed is a soliloquy heard. My soliloquies have undulated between practice and academia where they negotiate their overlaps and dichotomies. Reflecting back on the process, labour, and conversations that brought this volume to life, I am grateful to Sumaila Palla for introducing me to *Hybrid* and for pushing this architect into more academic spaces. The comfort and intellectual space I found within *Hybrid* has allowed me to explore a new lens as each of the pieces evolved and drew me closer to my love for writing and editing, that had been sidelined otherwise.

The editorial board would like to extend its gratitude to Kiran Ahmad for her design and layout, Sarwat Azeem for proofreading this volume, and Currim Suteria for working closely with us on Shamama's essay in the student section. Above all, no amount of applause and appreciation would be enough for Dr. Faiza Mushtaq and Sumbul Khan; their thoroughness and consistency have been the driving force behind this volume.

Maham Khurshid
Editor, *Hybrid* 05 | Soliloquy

Kafka in the Woods

Zehra Nabi

"I suspect writers are more likely than, say firefighters or doctors or accountants to seek professional advice from those they admire," writes Amitava Kumar in *The Blue Book: A Writer's Journal*[1], which features writing and drawings produced during the Covid-19 pandemic. There's much to say about the form of this journal or 'painted diary'[2], but let's first address the quote.

It might be tempting to dismiss Kumar's observation as mere generalisation. Who are we — the non-firefighters, non-doctors, and non-accountants of the world — to speculate about mentorship practices in other fields? Especially those fields which offer, in the form of fire academies and accountancy apprenticeships and medical schools, highly professionalised spaces for the seeking and giving of advice. Yet I share Kumar's suspicion that creative writers are likely to seek advice from their masters, and this has something to do with — going back to Kumar's words — the idea that writing is often "regarded as a magical act."[3] Magical, and also mysterious.

In his profile of Zadie Smith for *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, Jeffrey Eugenides describes the writing process in the following manner: "Novelists are like fur trappers. They disappear into the north woods for months or years at a time, sometimes never to re-emerge, giving in to despair out there, or going native (taking a real job, in other words), or catching their legs in their own traps and bleeding out, silently, into the snow. The lucky ones return, laden with pelts."[4] But what exactly happens in those woods? That's what the emerging, aspiring writer desperately seeks to learn from their master.

In Kumar's case, he asks fellow novelists — his peers more so than his potential mentors — to share advice when inscribing their books for him. He points out in *The Blue Book* that the motivation for doing so is related more to gaining insight into the inner world of other authors than in seeking self-help. He then goes on to list some of the advice he has received from authors, which ranges from the practical ("Read aloud!" exhorts Tommy Orange) to the more self-reflective ("Learn what advice to refuse", writes Mark Doty)[5]. But few of us have the luxury of meeting the authors we admire and have to find other ways to discover what happens in the metaphorical north woods. We make do with reading *The Paris Review* interviews, or *The Guardian's* 'Ten Rules for Writing Fiction' series. Here we find that while some authors lay bare their motivations and writing routines, others are glib, evasive or even — as was the case with V.S. Naipaul's *Paris Review* interview — rather antagonistic when asked about their craft. Few, it

seems, are willing to publicly share the grisly details of how they trap the animal for its fur. For such details, it might be better to turn to the more private world of the author's diary.

Franz Kafka's diaries, written between 1910-1923, were published posthumously against the author's wishes. He had requested Max Brod, his friend and literary executor, to burn all his unpublished work after his death, but Brod defied him.[6] The dead have no right to privacy and Kafka's diaries are among the most famous literary diaries in the world today. In these diary entries there is, of course, no dispensing of pithy advice for the aspiring author. No rules for writing fiction are presented in bullet points. Instead, what the diaries offer are insights into the anguished state of a writer's mind.

Kafka didn't gain literary recognition until long after his death in 1924. Today his works are considered canonical and his name has inspired an adjective, but the diaries belong to a time when he was an unknown author with wavering faith in his writing abilities. In these diaries, Kafka takes us deep into the woods; he writes about everything from his constipation to his writing life, and we see the author less as a genius and more as a human being. Do we read literary diaries in pursuit of the same kind of professional advice Kumar mentioned in *The Blue Book*? I believe so, especially if the reader is also an aspiring writer. And Kafka's diaries, never intended to be read by others, provide rare insight into the world of writing.

The first page provides little context to the reader. There's no 'Dear Diary' salutation, nor is there any confession of feelings or summary of the day typically associated with the diary as a genre. Instead, the diary begins with fragments — isolated sentences or short scenes — which suggest the act of the writer sharpening his prose on the page. Kafka writes about a man's way of pronouncing 'ask' as 'ahsk' (at least that's the version we get in the English translation), a visit to the woods, and a dream featuring a famous Russian ballerina. It's not until a few pages into the published diaries that we gain some insight into his inner state of mind: "I write this very decidedly out of despair over my body and over a future with this body. When despair shows itself so definitely, is so tied to its object, so pent up, as in a soldier who covers a retreat and thus lets himself be torn to pieces, then it is not true despair. True despair overreaches its goal immediately and always, (at this comma it became clear that only the first sentence was correct). Do you despair? Yes? You despair?"[7]

I'm less interested in this particular simile likening despair to a soldier than in the parenthetical remark that reveals the author self-correcting as he writes. The discovery of the writer's thought process preserved in the writing is one of the many pleasures of reading these diaries. And this self-correction, this struggle to write exactly what he wants to write, is frequently evident in Kafka's diaries.

In an entry dated 19 July 1910, for instance, Kafka introduces this observation: "When I think about it, I must say that my education has done me great harm in some respects." Following this matter-of-fact statement, the paragraph dissolves into more poetic musings about living in nature, and he wonders how childhood exposure to the extremities may have encouraged "good qualities" to grow within him like weeds. Perhaps dissatisfied with the abstract turn he took in this paragraph, Kafka then writes a new paragraph with the same opening sentence about his aforementioned harmful education. In this second attempt, he does not turn to the optative mood; instead, he provides a list of people he holds accountable for his childhood years. Subsequently, in his third attempt at articulating the harmful effects of his education, Kafka writes more than one paragraph and finds a way to connect it with his earlier musings on living in nature. He ends this attempt with the image of his good qualities growing like weeds, only to start all over again, and again, and again.[8]

What these consecutive drafts do is that they negate for the reader the idea of effortless writing. Good writing doesn't simply flow from the writer's mind onto the page; it is coaxed and finessed. Writing is a form of thinking, rather than its end-product, and the private pages of the diary provide the space to wrestle ideas and feelings into (usually) decipherable combinations of words. Therefore, reading such diaries reminds us of the labour of writing, and not its magic. And for Kafka, this labour brings the above-mentioned despair as well as self-loathing, shame, and depression.

It feels cruel to write this, but the more Kafka suffers, the more comforted I am about my own writing life. When in July 1910 he sums up his day with six words: "Slept, awoke, slept, awoke, miserable life", or in the summer of 1912, there appear many brief entries in which Kafka mentions he has written nothing all day, it makes me more forgiving of my struggle to maintain a daily writing routine.

This cheap comfort is thankfully not the sole motivation for reading the diaries. While the self-flagellating comments humanise Kafka, there are many other passages which have the capacity to overawe the reader. Whether it's a description of the mess on his desk or of portraits of his acquaintances, we see how Kafka pounces on each detail and commits it to the page. Of the Yiddish actress Mania Tschissik, for instance, he writes: "Mrs. Tschissik has protuberances on her cheeks near her mouth. Caused in part by hollow cheeks as a result of the pains of hunger, childbed, journeys, and acting, in part by the relaxed unusual muscles she had to develop for the actor's movements of her large, what originally must have been a heavy mouth."[9] Elsewhere, he delivers an incisive aphorism: "Parents who expect gratitude from their children (there are even some who insist on it) are like usurers who gladly risk their capital if only they receive interest."[10] In these diary entries we see the stark prose and acuity of detail that are commonly associated

with Kafka's novels. These passages inspire the reader, but also intimidate. In other words, the aspiring writer can recognise herself in Kafka's torment or his laziness, but not as readily in his moments of mastery.

I experienced something similar while reading a passage from John Cheever's journals quoted in Kumar's book. It's a description of a baseball game in which Cheever, who is much more of a prose stylist than Kafka, writes this astounding sentence: "The umpires in clericals, sifting out the souls of players; the faint thunder as ten thousand people, at the bottom of the eighth, head for the exits."[11]

In an email interview, I asked Kumar about how reading diaries can be both intimidating and inspiring and if he, like me, had been left overawed by Cheever's private writings. Kumar wrote back: "Cheever's diaries do leave me overawed. I think they represent his best writing. But your question is about a reader's response to such art. You know, it is okay to feel overwhelmed. But it is also okay to want to be in conversation with those people. Or to build up a body of work that appears to be in conversation with those who have inspired you. I was very much influenced by V.S. Naipaul's accounts of his making as a writer (as in his autobiographical essay 'Finding the Centre') and I wrote more than one book believing myself to be in conversation with that book and its author."

This idea of books being in conversation with each other is illustrated in Kumar's *The Blue Book* when he includes an anecdote about discovering a copy of *Bento's Sketchbook* by John Berger, the Booker Prize-winning author and art critic. The 'Bento' in the title refers to the seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, whose drawings are now lost to the world. What Berger has done in this brief book is intersperse quotes by the philosopher with his own artwork and musings on various topics. Take out the Spinoza quotes, and the form is not too dissimilar from Kumar's book. In fact, when writing about his discovery of Berger's *Sketchbook*, Kumar shares that he was immediately drawn to it and likened the experience to "blood calling out to blood." He concludes this anecdote with the idea that books can serve as ancestors and "give us permission to carry on doing the same."[12]

The vignettes and watercolour sketches in Kumar's journal were written and drawn during the time he was working on his novel *A Time Outside This Time* at various residencies in America. The novel was published in 2021, the journal the following year. There are thematic overlaps in the two works and Satya, the narrator of *A Time Outside This Time*, is a writer of Indian origin who is working on his novel at a prestigious retreat. There are many other similarities between Satya and Kumar, and some reviewers have even suggested that this novel falls in the genre of autofiction.

Let's pause here for a moment. Autofiction blends autobiography with fiction. Many contemporary novelists write in this mode, but it is by no means a new phenomenon. Marcel Proust's seven-volume *In Search of Lost Time* could be considered an early example of this genre. Autobiography is, of course, when someone writes the story of their life. A diary, or a journal, is also when someone writes about their life. However, unlike with autofiction or autobiography, the diary operates in some ways as a logbook of everyday experience. There is no audience in mind, therefore there is less pressure to justify the inclusion of seemingly mundane details or to make the various entries cohere as a whole. In one of his diary entries, for example, Kafka provides a lengthy, almost academic study of theatre as an art form and then the following entry begins: "I dreamed today of a donkey …" As readers, we cannot criticise the bathetic effect of such entries and, looking at the genre as a whole, can appreciate the diary for its democratising effect. Anything is worthy of being included in a diary, because its author must have found it worthy at the time of writing it.

Returning to Kumar, *The Blue Book* also covers an eclectic range of observations. One part of the journal provides an anecdote about a Rajasthani Uber driver in Colorado who gifted Kumar a bottle of *ittar* [essential oil]. Elsewhere, Kumar explains how a newspaper photograph of a lynching victim in India compelled him to make a painting. These disparate musings presented in *The Blue Book* can be viewed as more concrete articulations of the thoughts and images that linger in his mind. The fragmentary nature of the work is not only accepted, but expected, because the word 'journal' in the full title instructs the reader on what lies within.

The narrator of *A Time Outside This Time* also moves from one topic to another and the narrative doesn't offer much of a plot. In the conventional understandings of the novel though, there is more pressure for the various anecdotes and observations to come together; the reader expects the sum to be greater than its parts. It is in this regard that Kumar's novel has received some mixed reviews, such as the one in *The New York Times* which critiques it for lacking bite. It would be difficult to make a similar complaint of Kumar's journal despite the thematic and stylistic similarities between the two works.

In his review of the journal, Gulzar comments: "It's not good to read another person's diary. But Amitava Kumar makes the experience so intimate in *The Blue Book* that you don't feel guilty. You feel like it is your own." I stumble on this blurb each time I read it. *The Blue Book* isn't a conventional, private diary. Kumar wrote it with an audience in mind. He intended to publish it and it was curated and edited with his supervision. The guilt Gulzar mentions would be more appropriate for reading the private diary entries of someone like Kafka, who did not want them to be shared publicly. The slippery nature of *The Blue Book* and the equally slippery overlap of the words 'journal' and 'diary' call to attention the role of the audience in determining the

nature of the work. To better illustrate my point, I'll use the example of a theatrical device: the soliloquy.

The soliloquy is meant to be heard. When the character remains alone on stage and thinks aloud, he or she doesn't ramble about the weather or summarise action that the audience has already observed in earlier scenes. The soliloquy is not free-flowing speech — at least not in a traditional play — and its purpose is to provide insight into the characters' inner thoughts and machinations, which would otherwise be opaque to the audience. The soliloquist's sense of privacy in the scene is an artifice and, therefore, the people sitting in the audience listen guilt-free. In this regard, *The Blue Book* is more of a soliloquy than Kafka's diaries. Kumar captures the flitful nature of inner thought, but the transitions from one topic to another are less abrupt and bathetic than the ones found in a 'real' diary. *The Blue Book* is reflective and mosaic-like, but not disjointed. It has been compiled with the reader in mind.

The other aspect of the traditional soliloquy is that it often appears in the play when an important character is under great duress (think of Hamlet's existential crisis or Iago's spiteful jealousy). In this regard, Kumar's journal — which was written with publication in mind — draws up short. There are grave topics, but no anguish in its pages. So if the audience's pleasure of watching a soliloquy in a play is derived from the knowledge it offers about the deep, unknown workings of the human mind, then it is the private, intimate, even secretive diary that offers us a similar pleasure.

However, if a diary is never meant to be read, then why write one at all? There are varying impulses for keeping a diary, and the desire to be read is, in fact, one of them.

In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, we meet young Cecily who writes down "the wonderful secrets of [her] life" in her diary. When a potential love interest expresses his desire to read her diary, she declines his request and says: "You see, it is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication. When it appears in volume form I hope you will order a copy." Most diarists will not promote the future publication of their diaries as openly as Cecily does, but this dream of having people read her diaries is not as absurd as it may appear to be initially.

In Italy, the municipality of Pieve Santo Stefano is now known as the Town of the Diary. This archive is a democratic space where anybody can submit their diaries, letters or memoirs. In fact, most of the work is submitted by everyday, private people. In this archive, interested readers can find the raw, ungrammatical writings of a farmer and the accounts of an architect who survived a terrorist attack in the 1970s.[13] Some of these texts have even been published by small literary

presses. If the diary feeds the desire to record the world one sees, then perhaps the desire to make one's diaries public is rooted in the desire to be seen.

It's also worth thinking of the more modern offshoots of the diary that can today be found on the internet. Think of all the blogs on daily life, some anonymously written and others not. Think of all the people who share photographs, videos, posts, and tweets about their 'Outfit of the Day' (OoTD in common parlance), and their breakfasts, and their woes with parenting, and their struggles with mental health, and the books they read, and the places they visit. This online content is in many ways antithetical to the more traditional diary. There are countless people sharing their everyday lives on the internet and, unlike social media influencers, most aren't making any money out of it. It's worth noting how social media users who meticulously chronicle their lives online often attract derision ("Nobody wants to know what you ate for breakfast!"), whereas readers of published diaries are often more sympathetic to the banalities of everyday life recorded on the page. The difference in reception might be that the internet chronicler is more aware of potential readers when he or she shares material on a blog or social media account. This awareness of the audience suggests vanity or lack of authenticity, but this notion becomes complicated when we realise that historically, diaries were not always meant to be fiercely guarded private books and at least in nineteenth century England, it was quite common for them to be read by family and friends. The relationship between the diary and the reader is, therefore, a complicated one.

Kafka did not want his diaries to be read, but he didn't have any misgivings about reading the private words of others. Frequently, as chronicled in his diaries, he turned to the private writings of those he admired. For instance, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's works, including his diaries, strongly influenced Kafka. Gustave Flaubert is also mentioned several times in Kafka's diaries and, during a particularly difficult period when Kafka was struggling to write, he noted: "I have just read in Flaubert's letters: 'My novel is the cliff on which I am hanging, and I know nothing of what is going on in the world' — Like what I noted down about myself on 9 May."[14]

Kafka finds Flaubert's letters to be affirming of his own experiences, but diaries can also disappoint. Kumar, for instance, has written about the experience of reading a diary and finding it insufficiently revealing about the author. Except in his case, the author in question is his own teenage self who, rather than relating observations of his surroundings, focused more on copying passages from books he had admired.[15]

"I would have been in my late teens when I was making those entries," Kumar explained in his email to me. "I'll be honest with you: I didn't linger long enough to check the entries. When I saw the passages, I was reminded that I had read those writers whose words I had noted. But the

general feeling I got from my brief foray into those pages — of unfulfilled longing, of boredom, of failure, of sentimentalism, of stupidity — was just too depressing. Youth is a wasteland. I'd rather not return there. I shut the diaries and put them away."

Perhaps that's par for the course when rereading one's private writings. Virginia Woolf, who maintained her diary writing habit for around two decades, wrote about the experience of reading her previous diary entries and finding them clumsily written and ungrammatical. We can accept this aversion to one's own writing as a sign of healthy humility, and though Kumar couldn't stand to read the entries written by his younger self, he still has faith in the ritual of daily writing and believes it is as valuable to the creative writer as to the academic.

In 2020, Kumar, a professor in the English department at Vassar College, published a book on academic writing. Taking its title from an Elvis Costello song, *Every Day I Write the Book: Notes on Style* consists of vignettes and short chapters. One such chapter is an ode of sorts to naps and how well they fit the schedule of the academic whereas another chapter, only a paragraph in length, offers a critique of the topic sentence. The briefness of the chapters, the lack of transitions between topics, and the personal, intimate voice found in this book distance it from more traditional books on academic writing.

"I experimented at first with long essays but it felt too academic," Kumar said in his email to me. "I wanted to preach the logic of breaking convention. The idea of writing short entries, fragments and nearly-diaristic pieces, allowed me to be more flexible. I felt I could cover more ground that way and also avoid being tedious."

Kumar went on to elaborate how the diary can be of value to the academic writer: "Tediousness is the great bane of academic writing. So is its pretence to objectivity and the complete lack of a personal voice. Writing a diary and letting its voice infuse academic writing could work in fine ways, allowing you to feel less blocked as a writer. It would also allow your writing to show the traces that the day had left on you and on your writing. You could be writing a sociological treatise on the lives of widows in Karachi, for example, but let the writing reveal that on the day you were writing a particular chapter there were opposing armies lined up at your country's border."

Kumar ends some of his vignettes and chapters quite abruptly — an effect that occasionally left me dissatisfied. Kafka's diaries, where drafts of creative work and more personal observations occasionally bleed into each other, are not frustrating, but they don't allow for that seamless immersion in the text for the reader. Fragmentation encourages attention. To understand this, it might be useful to think about the film montage and what is known as the Kuleshov effect. Lev Kuleshov edited film shorts in which he paired images together to show how audiences draw

connections between two shots (which may be understood as fragments). The most famous short feature has a close-up of an expressionless man, a close-up of a bowl of soup, a close-up of the same expressionless man, a shot of a girl in a coffin, the same expressionless man, and a woman wearing only a dressing gown. The man's expression doesn't change, but the pairing of his face with another image or fragment (soup bowl, dead girl, attractive woman) allows us as viewers to fill in the gaps and associate the man with states of hunger, grief, and desire. Kafka's diary is not as neatly composed as a Kuleshov film, but it offers through the 'jump cuts' and 'cross dissolves' of the written word a montage made up of fragments. As readers, we can't help but try to draw connections between the various parts, and this desire to make the entries cohere elevates the reading experience beyond pure voyeurism.

I began this essay with Kumar's quote about the aspiring writer's eager seeking of advice. In *The Guardian's 'Ten Rules for Writing Fiction'* series, Margaret Atwood advises using pencils because pens can leak ink, and Richard Ford cautions against having children. There is a lot of cheeky counselling in this series, but occasionally some sincere advice slips through. For instance, Michael Morpurgo, the famed author of children's novels, shares: "Ted Hughes gave me this advice and it works wonders: record moments, fleeting impressions, overheard dialogue, your own sadnesses and bewilderments and joys." In other words, keep a diary. And it's worth noting that even as Kafka was grousing about not writing anything, he was still writing in his diary.

In an essay on the diaries of the Nobel Prize-winning author Samuel Beckett, Mark Nixon alluded to Kafka as well. He writes, "Like a shipwreck victim adrift in a sea of conflicting desires, Kafka clings to his diary as if his existence depended upon it …", before going on to say that both Beckett and Kafka's diaries offered the writers space to contain and organise their everyday, fragmentary experiences.[16] Nixon's suggestion is corroborated by Kafka when he avows not to abandon the diary and writes, "I must hold on here, it is the only place I can."[17]

Record-keeping is perhaps the most obvious function of the diary. The minutiae of everyday life find a comfortable home in its private pages, but the diary as mere logbook doesn't fully explain the impulse to keep one. When I read *The Blue Book*, I was struck by some of the quick sketches of landscapes Kumar included in it. The sweeping rough-edged strokes of paint and the confident and hurried lines of the drawing suggested an eagerness to record the images *quickly*. In my eyes, it's as if there's a fear that if the scene — this could be two figures sleeping in a motel room or the shadows of tree trunks on a field of snow — isn't put on paper immediately, then it would be lost forever. How does a scene, an impression, our feelings of "sadnessness and bewilderments and joys" get lost? There's the fallibility of memory, of course, but also the deeper fear of death. And it was particularly in relation to Kumar's sketches that I asked him about how the diary can be a form of memorialisation.

He wrote back saying: "It has occurred to me, in recent years in particular, that when the sun goes down on New Year's Eve, I feel a little bit melancholic. I'm aware that I'm watching the last sunset of the year, the year is ending. But that is not what I feel every day when I'm making notes in my diary. My impulse there isn't the least melancholic. Instead, my senses are on alert, archiving the moment, putting down a record. I feel hollow without memories. And there are far too many things in the world today that rob us of our memories. Devices and distractions of all sorts that steal our attention. My diary-writing is a way of inhabiting, and indeed preserving, the moment. I believe that is what drives most people who keep written or visual diaries."

Kumar's measured response emphasises that the impulse to keep a diary, at least for him, is rooted in the impulse to 'be' — he acknowledges the diary's function in preserving a moment, but in order to preserve a moment one first has to live it. But the diary can be as rooted in life as it can be in death, which is what Maurice Blanchot, the influential French literary theorist and novelist, argued in his essays on the diaries of Kafka and other writers.

Death was a favourite topic for Blanchot and in *The Space of Literature* he describes the relationship between death and the diary (*'journal intime'* in the original French). He writes:

> The journal is not essentially confessional; it is not one's own story. It is a memorial. What must the writer remember? Himself: who he is when he isn't writing, when he lives daily life, when he is alive and true, not dying and bereft of truth. But the tool he uses in order to recollect himself is, strangely, the very element of forgetfulness: writing. That is why, however, the truth of the journal lies not in the interesting, literary remarks to be found there, but in the insignificant details which attach it to daily reality. The journal represents the series of reference points which a writer establishes in order to keep track of himself when he begins to suspect the dangerous metamorphosis to which he is exposed ... The journal — this book which is apparently altogether solitary — is often written out of fear and anguish at the solitude which comes to the writer on account of the work.[18]

What Blanchot is suggesting is that while one is writing (this could be a novel or an academic work), 'living' is in a state of abeyance. Paradoxically, by writing about their daily life in a journal the writer can find a way to stay connected with their everyday life. Blanchot's idea of the spectre of death hanging over the diary seems especially apt for Kafka, who died at the age of forty and whose diary entries often betray the "fear and anguish" which Blanchot mentioned in the quote above. But the diary is not the only avenue for memorialisation. Brod, the friend who ignored Kafka's wishes and had the diaries published, wrote a novel in which he presents a fictionalised account of his friendship with Kafka. A kind of autofiction, you might say.

Of course, Kafka's diaries are not filled with just the above-mentioned "fear and anguish." Some of the detailed descriptions of everyday life suggest a sense of wonder and an eye for beauty. Many of the entries also suggest the author using the diary to address his worries — as opposed to simply worrying — as he develops his stories.

In 1914, for instance, Kafka described in his diary a sketch in which a white horse mysteriously appears in a busy town. It's a kind of a non-story in which he is gradually developing the setting and the atmosphere, but little happens in terms of plot. The sketch ends anticlimactically with a police officer getting hold of the horse and immediately, in the next paragraph, Kafka dismisses his writing: "It has meaning, but is weak." Despite his frustration, he doesn't abandon the idea and instead seems to console himself. He writes: "If I am not very much mistaken, I am coming closer. It is as though the spiritual battle were taking place in a clearing somewhere in the woods. I make my way into the woods, find nothing, and out of weakness immediately hasten out again; often as I leave the woods I hear, or I think I hear, the clashing weapons of that battle. Perhaps the eyes of the warriors are seeking me through the darkness of the woods, but I know so little of them, and that little is deceptive."[19]

Like us lesser writers, Kafka wants to know how the fur is trapped in the woods. And he himself shows how it's done in his diaries.

Notes

1. Kumar, *The Blue Book: A Writer's Journal*, 85.
2. This phrase is used by author Kiran Desai in her blurb for Kumar's book.
3. Kumar, *The Blue Book*, 85.
4. Eugenides, "The Pieces of Zadie Smith."
5. Kumar, *The Blue Book*, 85-87.
6. Batuman, "Kafka's Last Trial."
7. Brod, *Franz Kafka: The Diaries 1910-1923*, 10.
8. Brod, *Franz Kafka: The Diaries 1910-1923*, 15-20.
9. Brod, *Franz Kafka: The Diaries 1910-1923*, 84.
10. Brod, *Franz Kafka: The Diaries 1910-1923*, 317.
11. Kumar, *The Blue Book*, 23.
12. Kumar, *The Blue Book*, 73.
13. Fondazione Archivio Diaristic Nazionale, "The Archives of Pieve Santo Stefano."
14. Brod, *Franz Kafka: The Diaries 1910-1923*, 205.
15. Kumar, *The Blue Book*, 81.
16. Nixon, "Writing 'I': Samuel Beckett's German Diaries", 10–23.
17. Brod, *Franz Kafka: The Diaries 1910-1923*, 29.
18. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 28.
19. Brod, *Franz Kafka: The Diaries 1910-1923*, 271.

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The Potato, the Mark, and the Body

Usman Ansari

August 1986. I am at preschool.

Aunty Sheila holds a large potato in her hand before slicing it in half. She then proceeds to carve into the inside with a fruit knife.

"*What is the colour of a heart?*"

"*It's RED!*"

In one swift motion, she dips the potato on to a palette, lifts it and presses it firmly on a piece of paper. Her fingertips turn white with the pressure she is exerting. When she's ready, she lifts the potato and the paper with a flourish, punctuated by our gasps of awe. On the paper is a heart with crisp edges in thick red pigment; the indelible mark that will stay like that forever. The inside of the potato has the same shape, although the edges of this heart are bruised, the pigment pink and bleeding beyond the boundary of the carved stamp.

"*Wow…*"

When our gasping has subsided, she hands me the potato and announces, "*Your turn.*"

I am about to become an Artist.

January 2017. I am at a site.

Two masons are stacking blocks over a blurry red line on an unfinished floor. Another is using a plastering trowel to apply mortar in between each unit. One labourer is carrying concrete blocks to the incomplete wall. His palms are chafed from their roughness. Yet another mason is mixing cement, sand, and water in a dented, shallow bowl.

"When will this wall be completed? It *still* has to be plastered and painted!"

I turn around and leave before they can answer.

Later that day. I am at the office.

I sit before a computer screen, churning out a package for a tender for an eighteen-storey building, having wasted half a day looking at untreated masonry blocks. After more than a decade into the practice, I know how to translate my vision into a set of construction drawings. I understand the raw materials used to construct spaces, and how to engage them in dialogue to form polished assemblies. I direct craftsmen as they use their tools to produce finished products to my exact specifications. I choose to celebrate completed spaces that come closest to my original vision. I decide which surfaces speak and which are silenced forever.

I have become an Architect.

November 2020. I am neither at the site nor at the office.

I am still an architect but no longer build physical spaces. I am, however, still restless to create art, and plagued with questions.

> "*How will I make art without formal education in the discipline?*"
>
> "*What will my art say? What language will it speak?*"
>
> "*What materials and tools will I use?*"
>
> "*What techniques would I need to teach myself to realise my vision?*"
>
> "*How much will I rationalise my intuition?*"

Unsure where to begin, I turn back to my architectural past for answers. What remains of that life are bleary visions of the construction site and the lingering memory of how these would evolve to become complete spaces. I decide to pay a visit.

December 2020. I am at Space No.1.

I enter a construction site which is far from becoming a finished space. It is a world of painfully exposed, untreated, and coarse textures. There is the familiar wall of raw masonry blocks, oxidising steel bent to provide shape to the staircase, the crumbling mould of wooden planks, and splashes of red oxide markings covered in footprints. I photograph the unattended sharp edges of discarded corrugated metal sheets, a half-complete scaffolding of bamboo, and stacks of porcelain tiles resting in the shade. My camera captures the friction between the comb and

Space No.1 – Discarded corrugated metal sheets. Photo by author

Space No.1 – Splashes of red oxide markings. Photo by author

Top Left: Space No.1 – Rusted steel, bent to provide shape to the staircase. Photo by author

Top Right: Space No.1 – Formwork, while it is being filled with concrete. Photo by author

Bottom: Space No. 2 – The underbelly of floors. Photo by author

the wet bathroom wall being scored to receive ceramic tiles. The floor being whipped by the taut nylon string, leaving a sharp line that is either red or yellow. The sound of metal lathe being nailed at the threshold between the beam and the wall. The vibration in the wooden rafters holding in place the formwork while it is being filled with concrete. My phone records the loudness of both, cacophony and chorus alike.

December 2020. I am at Space No. 2.

The second incomplete space is nearly complete. It is quieter than I had imagined. The salted coarseness of the masonry blocks has been slapped into silence with smooth cement slurry. Painted walls stand over the red and yellow markings. The high-pitched, rusted ridges of the bent steel are buried deep into a beam. The slippery skin of the ceramic tile has rendered the deep incisions on the bathroom walls inaudible. Planks of wood and metal formwork that had earlier constrained the walls and held up the underbelly of floors are nowhere to be seen, no bamboo scaffolding to be climbed on anymore, no grains to be mixed with paint. All dialogue has been hushed. In disappearing the tools, entire stories have been erased. I hear nothing.

I had forgotten how we worked to manipulate things into stillness, and how deceptive that quietude was. In an attempt to seek answers to questions that plagued me earlier, I have discovered that the voices of raw materials, untreated surfaces, and the tools of the craft are suddenly audible to me. I am struggling to hear finished and polished surfaces.

> "*Was it because I no longer had a preconceived vision of the finished product?*"
>
> "*Did I feel map-less because I hadn't authored the construction drawing that dictated the final product?*"
>
> "*How would I now be able to discern the complete from the incomplete?*"

January 2021. I am at various construction sites.

I want to hear them again, these migrant tools of the trade and trappings of the craft, outside the realm of the incomplete space. I frequent more sites, scavenging yet feeling like a rescuer with every bit of paraphernalia brought back to my studio.

1. *Nylon and Jute Strings*
2. *Bent Steel*
3. *Block Masonry*
4. *Wood and Metal Formwork*

A. Taghari[6]
B. Tile
C. Jaali
D. Sarya
E. Chunnai
F. Dori[7]
G. Furma[8]
H. Gurmala
I. Baans[9]

5. *Metal Lathe*
6. *Plastering Comb*
7. *Trowel*
8. *Bamboo*
9. *Corrugated Metal Sheet*
10. *Sand and Gravel*
11. *Tile* 12... 13... 14... 15...

Detached from their past assemblies and outside their original context, they are no longer engaged in dialogue with each other. Indifferent to the absence of an audience, they announce, independently, who they are, where they have come from, and how they are complete on their own. I had known these materials and tools to serve a specific purpose. A change in context has now triggered a change in perspective. Now through their prolonged monologue, I begin to understand their character very differently.

"*Why did their dialogue on site become a monologue in my studio?*"

"*How would this monologue now turn into a dialogue with me?*"

At this juncture of unravelling how to use these materials to create differently, I decide to explore them. The *chunnai*[1] is incredibly heavy and has rough edges. Lifting it once, chafed my palm. The *sarya*[2] is impossible to bend by hand. The rear side of the tile has a pattern of rough teeth. The *chaadar*[3] loses its rigidity at the slightest pressure. The *gurmala*[4] has sharp, knife-like edges. The *jaali*[5] pricks my palm every time I try to pick it up. Somewhere along these tactile explorations, the preschooler in me finds the potato all over again.

January 2021. I am at the studio.

It is time to introduce the canvas and the potato to each other. The canvas is stretched; the first potato slice, the block, is painted. It is then placed on the taut fabric. As soon as they meet, the block tears into the sheet. With all my strength I lift the block immediately, only to discover that it has left no mark on the surface. I paint the steel a deep turquoise and let it sink into the whiteness of the cloth. Yet another failed encounter.

"*Why were these two refusing to speak to each other?*"

After two unsuccessful introductions, I reach for the nylon string. It is slippery and endless. After dipping it into red oxide pigment, I straddle the canvas, stretching both limbs out to the

Linear splash across. Photo by author

In the form of a relief. Photo by author

full expanse of the sheet, and ask my studio assistant to pull and release. One whip leaves a linear splash across the length of the cloth. Without changing posture, I shift and ask for the string to be pulled and released again. This time around, the mark is contained and recognisable. Reaching for another material as limber as the string, I pick the metal lathe. It immediately tells me that it cannot be pressed onto the canvas, nor flicked like the string. I lay it on the canvas and bury it in a thick coat of paint. After the pigment dries, I peel it off gently. The lathe has left its imprint on the cloth in the form of a relief.

> "*Had I comprehended the monologue of the lathe and the string better than the others?*"

Now, I had to rehear the voices of all the potatoes, adapting to multiple locutions at the same time. The metal lathe and nylon string had already articulated that they would only converse with stretched canvas. The bamboo, block, tile, and wooden planks had an earnest discourse; they could only rhapsodise with un-stretched canvas. The monologues are turning into a dialogue, conversing directly with the emerging creator in me.

March 2021. I am at the site.

As the marks around my studio grow, so does the urge to go back to the construction site.

> "*What other materials and tools could I dig up from the debris?*"

> "*How were the impressions I had made on canvas different from the ones on the unfinished floor and wall?*"

A labourer carries blocks towards an incomplete wall; the calluses on his palms, although more numerous, are similar to my own. Two masons stretch a nylon string over a bathroom floor. A third pulls it, then releases. With every flick, the mark on the floor becomes more contained and recognisable, like it had on my canvas. Another mason, who has just nailed a metal lathe sheet, rubs his hand where the mesh punctured his skin. Before I can even search for more tools and materials, I am struck by a thought...

> "*How was the emerging creator in the studio different from the masons on the construction site?*"

I had replaced a concrete surface with canvas. The masons and I could both hear the monologue of the raw material. We were both using the trappings of the craft to produce a final product.

Seasoned masons flourish on under-construction sites; without their skill, the polished assemblies that I had celebrated for over a decade wouldn't exist. It was never just me who determined which surfaces would speak. Their vision and agency not only realised my vision but furthered it. The difference now was that the masons on site still had a vision to pursue. I was searching for one.

They were craftsmen; I was trying to become one.

Same day. I am at the studio.

The architect has returned to the studio having had many new realisations. The emerging craftsman can better see how the relationship between the un-stretched canvas and the building materials could evolve. In light of these revelations, the possibilities seem endless. If the wooden plank meets the canvas with too much enamel on its body, the mark it leaves will be fuzzy. If the jute string is left in paint for too long and then flicked, its print will be ambiguous. The block and the bamboo soak up copious amounts of pigment before leaving an indelible mark on cloth.

> "*How much paint was too much and how much was not enough?*"

The steel has to be painted gently, with shorter bristles. The rear of the tile has to be rollerbladed with pigment. Before every meeting, the stamps have to be lathered up, scrubbed, and rinsed. The cloth needs time to cherish the memory of the last meeting. From one union to the other, their association continues to mature and, just as most relationships evolve through continued contact, so does the one between the stamp and the canvas. With each scrub, the stamp refashions itself. With each mark, the disposition of the cloth changes. The process leaves as much an impact on the stamp as it does on the canvas. They have both come very far from where they had started.

Nestled within the process is an older question that still remains unanswered:

> "*What will my art say and what language will it speak?*"

What truths are being revealed as I peel off layers from the material world I had been constructing around myself and others? No longer seeking only the pristine exterior, I have now found in the debris the signs and sounds of everything that was underneath. By creating multiple layers of marks on canvas, I am celebrating the workings and trappings of craft that are integral to the construction of our built environment, yet remain destined to be hidden from sight, touch, and ultimately appreciation.

Top: Process work for the piece titled *Dori 1*, displayed at the show titled *Unsung* at the Art Chowk Gallery, Karachi. Photo by author

Bottom: Process work for the piece titled *Furma*, displayed at the show titled *Unsung* at the Art Chowk Gallery, Karachi. Photo by author

"*Will we look, or simply look away?*"

April 2021. I am at the studio.

As my vision starts to take shape, so does the level of intervention in existing crafts on under-construction sites. To ensure that all marks on the cloth are as close to the original material as possible, I use my own body. Previously, when *sarya* and *taat*[10] met for the first time, both parted without leaving any impact on each other.

"*What tool could I use to apply pressure to their union when they meet the second time?*"

Instinctively, I use the base of my palm to apply force along the length of the steel. At times, also my fingertips. The teeth behind the porcelain tile only register on canvas under the weight of my heel. I have to knead the cloth draped over the *furma*[11] with my elbows for a distinguished impression. The block is adamant. Despite the efforts from all my ligaments, it remains unconvinced.

"*What tool other than my body could I now use?*"

Upon listening intently, I realise that the *gurmala* has been drowned out by the voices of all the others. As soon as its hard and shiny underbelly meets with canvas under the weight of my body, the block yields. However, no matter how much pressure I apply, the prints carry many imperfections; they are indistinct, almost like a memory of the original material.

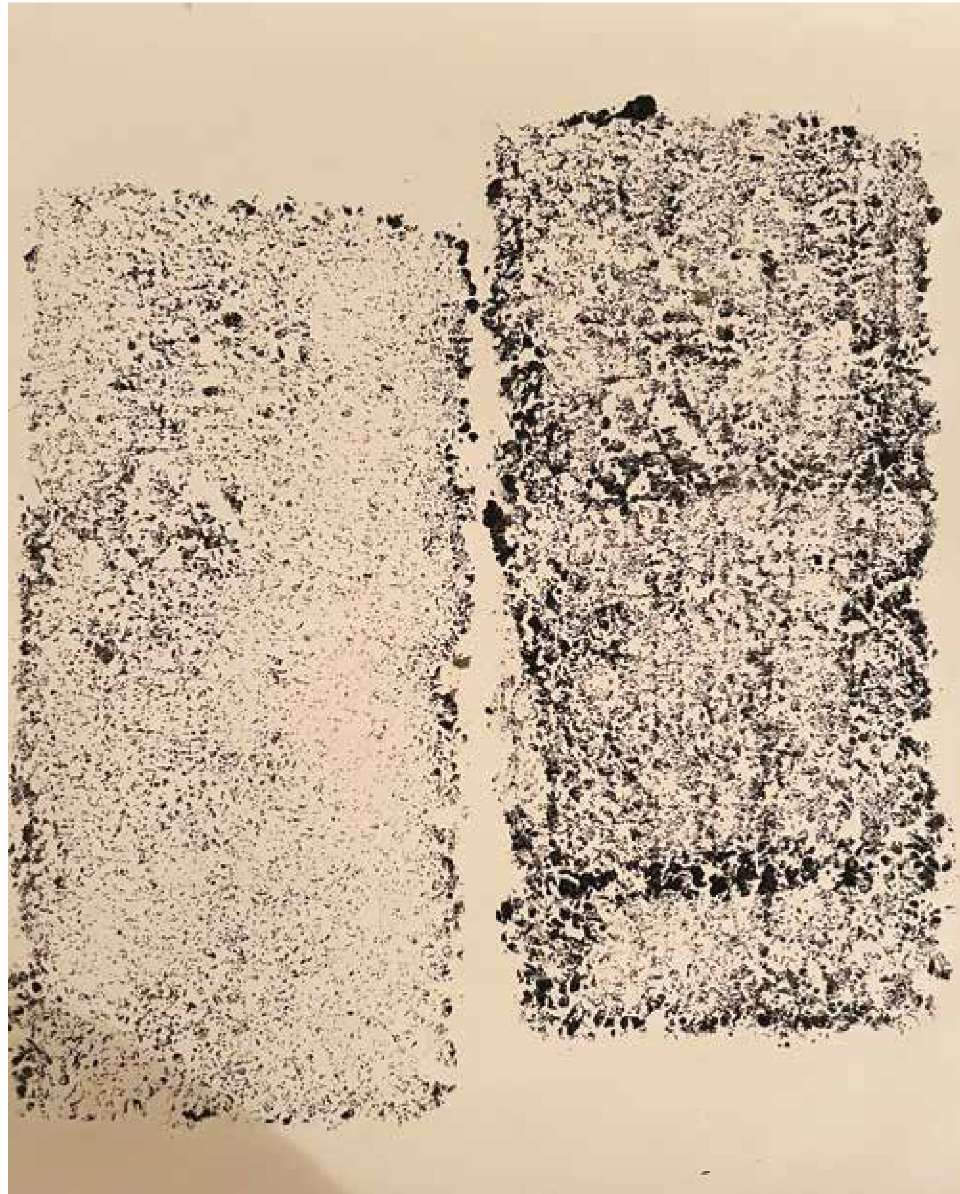
"*Will these prints always be constrained, just like the body being used as a tool?*"

"*Do they have to be accurate to be finished?*"

They are whole on their own, just like the raw materials in my studio.

In the process of pressing my body to material and canvas, a soliloquy ensues. My body has always been there: as a shadow that interlaced with gravel and sand on the ground, as an obscure outline on the lens capturing the journey of each painting, and as a reflection of the imperfect mark.

"*Will all impressions converge in the monologue of the body?*"



They were indistinct, almost like a memory of the original material - Impression of masonry block on canvas. Photo by author

I want to include the body as a final layer over all impressions. *Dori 1*, an ode to the *dori patakhna*[12] by craftsmen on floors before erecting walls, receives the marks of the underbelly of my shoes and bare feet. To celebrate the textured teeth behind the porcelain tile, I dip my hands in buckets of paint and press them over the impression of the teeth. All body positions while working over, under, and beside the canvas are drawn and superimposed on the piece that glorifies bent steel. It is eventually titled *Sarya*. The stretching, retraction, and repose between working postures is also important. In superimposing the story of the hands, feet, and muscles that had stretched and compressed along with each medium, a cadence forms, its tempo a labouring beat now heard on cloth.

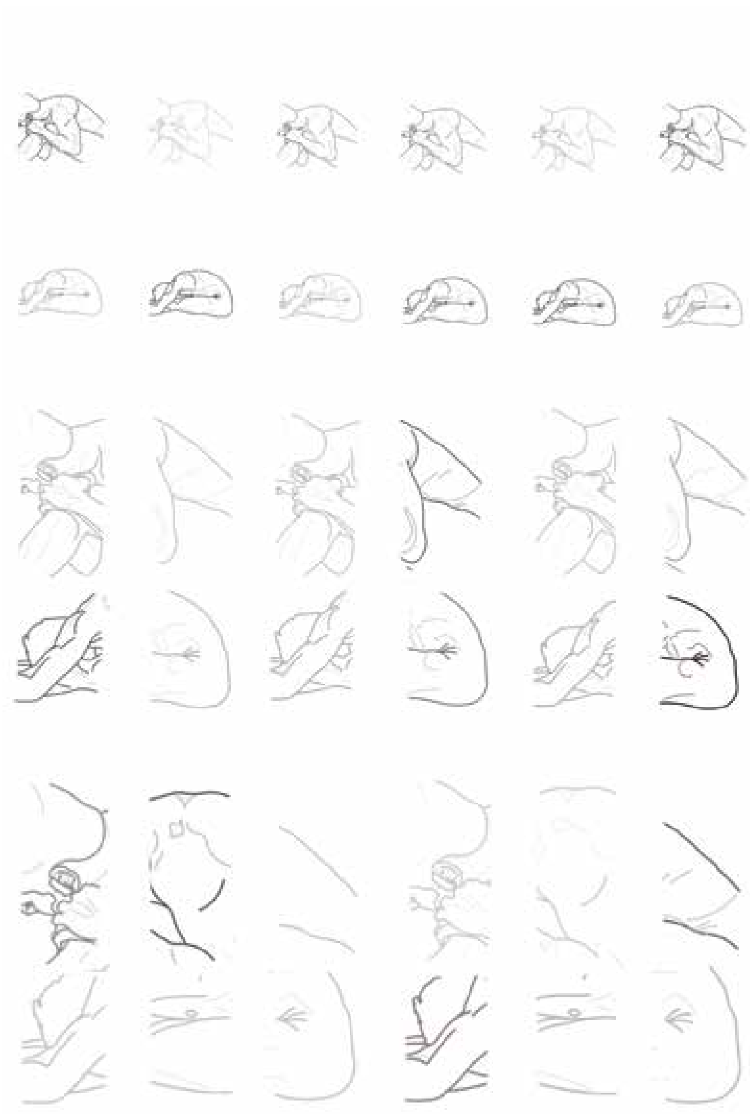
14th October 2021. Opening night of the solo art show titled *Unsung*.

An established architect is frozen in front of the piece titled *Dori 1*. A seasoned printmaker is moving closer and closer to the piece titled *Chaal*[13]. A mason is touching the protruding textures of *Chunnai*. I know his name is *Atiq*.

> Architect: *Which art school did you attend?*
>
> Me: *I was trained as an architect. I taught myself how to paint.*
>
> Architect: *Oh! Do you still practise? Or do you just paint now?*
>
> Me: *I don't practise architecture anymore.*
>
> Architect: *That's unfortunate. Being an architect is nothing like being an artist. Do you know the difference between the two?*
>
> Me: *Still trying to figure it out.*
>
> Architect: *Come see me. I will explain the difference to you in detail.*
>
> Me: *Thank you*.

I move towards *Chaal*. The printmaker is looking for a description next to the piece.

> Printmaker: *What is your work about?*
>
> Me: *I've used physical objects from under-construction sites and taken their impressions on canvas.*



Process work for the piece titled *Sarya*, displayed at the show titled *Unsung* at the Art Chowk Gallery, Karachi. Photo by author

Process work for the piece titled *Dori 1*, displayed at the show titled *Unsung* at the Art Chowk Gallery, Karachi. Photo by author

Printmaker: *Oh, so you're a printmaker. I am one too.*

Me: *I don't think I am a printmaker yet. I have spent most of my career being an architect.*

Printmaker: *I always find it funny when architects try to become artists. Do you have an etching press in your studio?*

Me: *I didn't use a press.*

Printmaker: *How did you make these prints, then?*

Me: *I used my own body weight.*

Printmaker: *No wonder these prints are foggy. I recommend that you enrol yourself in a printmaking class immediately. You should learn how to create prints the right way first.*

Me: *Thank you. Will keep that in mind.*

Printmaker: *You're welcome.*

From the corner of my eye, I see Atiq heading for the exit. I rush towards him.

Me: *Atiq bhai! Mera kaam kaisa laga?* [Atiq bhai, what did you think of my work?]

Atiq: *Samajh main nahin aaya.* [I couldn't understand it.]

Me: *Aap hi ki ek site se main ne block uthaya tha, jis se woh tasveer banayi jo aap abhi dekh rahay thay. Main ne uss painting ka naam bhi Chunnai rakh diya.* [I had taken a block from one of the sites you were working at to create an impression for the piece you were looking at. I also named the painting Chunnai.]

Atiq: *Mujhe tasveer banana nahin aata. Magar us tasveer main block kahan tha?* [I don't know how to make a painting. But where was the block in it?]

Me: *Mujhe bhi tasveerein banana nahin aata.* [I also don't know how to make paintings.]

Atiq: *Magar ab to aap artist ban gaye hain.* [But now you've become an artist.]

Me: *Pata nahin kya ban gaya hoon.* [Not sure what I've become.]

Atiq: *Main mistry hoon aur meray liye woh kaafi hai. Mujhe yahan bulaanay ka shukriya. Allah Hafiz.* [I'm a mason and that's enough for me. Thank you for inviting me here. Goodbye.]

Later that night. I am at the studio.

The studio is now empty. There is more room to find answers to questions I was met with earlier that day. My process had been intuitive at times and rational in other instances, but non-linear throughout. The preschooler had taken his turn to create the indelible mark of the red heart. The architect never waited around for the raw masonry wall. The craftsman had chafed palms and red oxide stains under his nails. The artist had intervened in an existing craft with the help of the architect and the craftsman. They had empowered each other through empathy.

"*Will they continue to thrive within the boundaries they create for themselves?*"

Absolutely. However, choosing to blur the boundaries between these disciplines and bringing all four individuals into the studio had given me the freedom to truly realise a vision. All four were connected in my studio through the act of making. The artist used multiple mediums to put forth for the world to see, hear, and touch what it could not detect or understand. The craftsman used his hands to produce a distinctive product while employing traditional methods. The architect used his knowledge of materials and anthropometry to construct the space of the canvas. The credulous preschooler gasped in awe even at his failed attempts at mark-making. The song of the unsung materials and discarded tools rang in my ears very clearly. I was revisiting the difference between the complete and the incomplete. I wanted audiences to realise the completeness of the unfinished product. Suddenly, there was so much more to see, so much more to hear, and so much more to say.

Usman Ansari, 2021, *Chaal*. Art Chowk Gallery, Karachi. Photo by Humayun Memon

Notes

1. Masonry: can be brick or block.
2. Steel Bar: used to reinforce structural members such as columns, beams, etc.
3. Sheet: corrugated aluminium or steel sheet typically used to cordon off under-construction sites.
4 Plastering Trowel.
5. Perforated Screen: a metal mesh/lathe either used to reinforce plaster or stapled at the threshold of a beam and a wall to avoid cracks.
6. Mixing Bowl: shallow, usually made out of steel.
7. String: could be cotton, nylon, or jute.
8. Mould/Stencil: to cast concrete or similar materials in place.
9. Bamboo.
10. Canvas.
11. Mould/Stencil, into which concrete or similar materials are cast in place.
12. To snap or chalk line/reel. An efficient and accurate method of marking across long distances.
13. When all the labour/craftsmen from different trades on an under-construction site have enough direction to continue working towards completion.

The Self Within the Collective

Sarah Ahmed and Arooj Aurangzeb

Sarfaroshi ki tamanna ab hamaaray dil mein hai
Dekhna hai zor kitna baazu-e-qaatil mein hai
[The desire for rebellion is in our hearts
Let us see how strong the arm of the executioner is]
— Bismil Azimabadi

In November 2019, a video clip showing a group of students at the Faiz Mela in Lahore's Alhamra Arts Centre was widely circulated. They were chanting the poem '*Sarfaroshi Ki Tamanna*' as part of a mobilisation campaign for the Students Solidarity March organised by the Progressive Students Collective (PSC). Bismil Azimabadi wrote the poem in 1921 as an ode to the young freedom fighters of the Indian independence movement, following the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in 1919.

Central to the video clip and its popularity was a woman in a leather jacket, leading the chant. Her name is Arooj Aurangzeb. In this interview, I speak with her about that viral moment three years earlier and her experience of being part of the collective.

My conversation with Arooj is revealing of the tensions that arise between the individual and the collective. Collectives are commonly understood as mechanisms for individuals to have more access to power and resources by joining a group, union, etc. The PSC, for example, was created as a collective where students could share their problems and strategise how to best have their needs addressed by university administrations, among other objectives. However, Arooj's lived experiences as part of the PSC highlight how collectives can inadvertently replicate the very kind of oppressive power structures they were created to dismantle. Additionally, a collective may not be able to protect its members when they are singled out by the media for criticism. Among many other conspiracy theories shared in the aftermath of the clip going viral, Arooj was accused on social media of being an 'elite' and being foreign-funded. In the absence of protection from the collective due to inexperience, limited resources, and other factors, the individual must protect oneself.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of this interview is Arooj's continued commitment to the power of collective action despite losing her idealistic view of the process. She still believes that

collective struggle is the best way to achieve certain aims, including the very important one of finding joy. That is why one must find ways to transform the collective from within, through a constant reimagining of space and power.

Sarah: Hi Arooj. Thank you for doing this interview. Could you tell me a bit about yourself and about the viral clip?

Arooj: I am a Mass Communications graduate of Punjab University (PU) in Lahore. Currently, I am a Research Assistant at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) and have previously worked as a schoolteacher and in a news agency. I see myself primarily as a theatre practitioner and I am part of Sangat, a street theatre collective that performs in the Punjabi language. The video clip is from the time when the PSC was campaigning at the Faiz Mela for the Students Solidarity March in November 2019.

Sarah: What were some of the demands of the PSC at the time the clip went viral?

Arooj: There were several demands: to restore student unions; have working harassment committees with student representation; include a student representative in the university syndicate; have a quota for students from the peripheries; increase the education budget; remove the affidavit that students have to sign in public universities, in which they declare they will not participate in political activities; hear student grievances that are not being addressed by university administrations regarding transport issues, hostels, and canteen food complaints; and stop the abduction of university students by law enforcement agencies, among others.

Sarah: What happened once the video clip went viral?

Arooj: In many ways, I was pushed into a position I wasn't initially in. When I joined the collective, I had identified my political role as what I call a 'runner'. During marches, I would move back and forth [in the crowd]. The mobility felt symbolic such that I did not feel like I was fixed in one position. This was a preferable position, as I did not want to occupy the stage.

Being a runner meant being able to consciously flow among different positions, to engage and learn from multiple perspectives within the movement, to gather the courage to question the

power hierarchies within, to fill in the gaps spontaneously, and to keep my individuality without dissolving or freezing in a fixed position. A runner, as I imagined, was like water in character: able to transform its own shape according to material circumstances, easy to flow in and with the movement.

Once the clip went viral, my role shifted. Once at the fringe, I was now in the media's spotlight. It was a big change for me and not one I had anticipated or even wanted. The shift also changed my experiences and understanding of what being part of a collective entails.

Sarah: Could you elaborate on this change?

Arooj: Romanticism *utar gaya par uskay bawajood kaam kerna hai* [the romantic notion of the collective process dissipated, but one must still be part of the process and keep doing the work].

Sarah: Why do you think this happened?

Arooj: The lack of support mechanisms within the collective, the competition amongst comrades that became quite toxic, the strategic exclusion from spaces of joy and decision-making, the disciplining force of power-cliques within collectives, the patriarchal gaze, the sexualisation of feminine knowledge, the replication of capitalist principles within, the contrast between the opportunist essence and performative revolutionary acts of a political worker, the alienating praxis, and the career-advancing approach to political work.

> *I ask Arooj if this was disillusionment, something we often see when theory turns to practice. She resists this notion and instead terms it as being realistic. The media's interest in her and in the work of the PSC revealed many tensions that were previously not addressed. As part of our conversation, I ask what initially drew her into participating in collectives and how her experience of being part of a collective has changed since.*

Arooj: I see collectives as a space for revolutionary possibility: a space to share grievances, to transform the personal into the political, and to experience and express one's creative self without being alienated. I have been part of many collectives and movements over the years, including The Feminist Collective, Sangat, PSC, the Democratic Students' Association (DSA), Girls

at Dhabas, and the Haqooq-e-Khalq Party, among others. In these spaces, I met others whose beliefs resonated with me. When I first found out about socialist ideology, I remember taking my brother to our roof and telling him, "*aur bhi hain meray jaisay, main paagal nahin*" [there are others like me, I am not crazy].

Sometimes an individual can feel helpless against organisations — such as the time I had to repeat a year at PU after coming back from a study-abroad scholarship despite having received permission to do so. It was in collective spaces that I sought to address grievances imposed by the system, even if they were not addressed as such, and subsequently feel joy.

Sarah: And were you able to find joy in the collective?

Arooj: [Pause]
Not entirely, but there is still the possibility to pursue joy by being part of the collective.

Sarah: Have your experiences been different in other collectives, for example Sangat and/or The Feminist Collective?

Arooj: Similar in some ways, but since I have been able to avoid positions of power in those collectives, the intensity was much less.

> *Arooj notes that she is still processing how to accept the differences between the expectations and the lived experiences of being part of a collective. I ask her to elaborate on this further.*

Arooj: I have realised that one still needs to protect oneself even when they are part of a collective. I was not prepared for people to project their lust, shame, and insecurity on me. As a woman, I feel that I inevitably became a source of sexual curiosity, not only when I was visible and vocal but even when I was invisible and silent. Knowing when to put up boundaries, and how to promptly address issues that arise between comrades in the larger collective, are ways one can protect oneself.

In June 2018, I went to the Florestan Fernandes National School in Brazil for a course on political training for political educators. The organisers talked about seeing the collective as a living organism, which means to think and act in accordance with the organic process of the collective's growth. So, when someone does not find the nurturing force from a collective, I have learned that the solution is not to withdraw or become upset, but rather to find ways to transform the collective through revolutionary action, allyship, and organisation, to make it more inclusive.

And if that does not work, it's good to adjust your working relationships within the collective and be realistic about the end goals, as having too much hope of what can be achieved within the collective can be dangerous as well. Taking pauses to gain clarity and strategically resigning to be able to better organise in the future must not be considered a defeat.

Collectives should ideally be the space for this but sometimes, in reality, they are a replication of the larger societal relations and systems based on power and hierarchy. The difference is that in the collectives, at least the ideology is common and binds the members together. This is very tricky, as revolutionary ideology doesn't necessarily translate into revolutionary actions or ethics.

To get better at setting boundaries, one has to have a strong sense of self and know one's identity — who you are, what you stand for, what you want to do and why you want to do that, how you plan on achieving those things, and so on. Boundaries require clarity of one's sense of self.

Ideally, this should be addressed in the collective but it becomes one's own responsibility to work on it oneself. Having a clear understanding of the collective is also necessary to address issues with comrades and colleagues. Why was the collective formed? Who is involved and what does the membership want to achieve through the collective? Is what the collective actually doing different from what it says it will do? Just as to put up boundaries one needs to know themselves, to address issues one needs to know what the collective stands for and what it can and will be willing to do.

Sarah: Do you think the tensions you mentioned earlier were always there, or did they only arise once you moved from the runner position into the spotlight after the video?

Arooj: The tension was always there. When I was clear in my role as a runner, I was labelled an 'anarchist', 'liberal', or 'too abstract'. However, once I came into the limelight, these dismissive labelling forces amplified.

Sarah: You briefly mentioned your gendered experience of being part of a collective. Could you

expand on this a bit and the ways in which you created space to address grievances within the collective?

Arooj: I have learned that within collectives, if one has to, one must organise to make their place. I was the only woman in the PU chapter of the DSA when I joined [although there was no relation between the DSA and PSC, some members were part of both groups]. Often, I experienced marginalisation in various spaces where there were hardly any women. When leadership roles came up, women were not encouraged or given the space to step up.

Frequently, I felt that there just wasn't any power shared with female comrades, especially those who were not from a well-off background, or not under the protection of a male comrade. My experiences have taught me to opt for creative action to find solutions in order to create inclusive spaces within the collective. By creative action, I mean not directly confronting the established power hierarchies within the collective, but registering the protest in the form of political work/organising that is non-hierarchical.

Creative action could be ally-building, internal organising, solidarity work, care-work such as being invested in each other's mental and material stability, consensus-building, using the arts as a tool, or even questioning with a hint of mischief when the know-it-alls define the collective's direction without consensus. The key, I feel, is to keep putting joy at the centre of one's actions, as opposed to anger.

Sarah: Do you think things would be different if more women were in the movement, especially in leadership roles? Also, how easy was it to find internal allies?

Arooj: The inclusion of more women does not necessarily equate to more inclusivity, especially if the path towards holding power is guarded by gatekeepers and only those women who are allowed by the hierarchy can come into power. At the time, I wasn't invested in making allies as I was scared of it being seen as a divisive process (since I was already being labelled a divisive, chaotic force by the power players). So instead of making allies, I was engaging with the people who were labelling me, and trying to prove that what I was saying was for the collective-building process and not because I was a mad woman!

Sarah: Thank you for clarifying. I want to go back to 'joy', which you have mentioned a few times. Could you elaborate on what joy means to you?

Arooj: The possibility of a collective free from the exploitative principles of profit and based on the labour of love for life brings joy. Such kind of labour helps in the process of 'un-alienating' oneself and helps in building and experiencing community. One can then be in a better position to experience the joys of life.

Sarah: I wonder if these practices are what you would encourage other individuals within collectives to opt for? Subsequently, what advice would you give to those who want to be part of a collective?

Arooj: Organising spaces are not free from the symptoms of capitalism or patriarchal sicknesses. Take notes of your experiences to protect yourself. Create allies within the collective so you do not feel alienated or excluded. Even as part of the collective, you are still a person who can be sexualised or marginalised based on your gender or class.

Strive to create processes in the collective where policies and rules are built upon the premise of consensus within. This may not always be easy and can be hard to trace, but it is important to strive for. Ask for help when you require it. You don't need to give control or power over yourself to qualify yourself as deserving of help.

Take a step back if you feel abandoned or exploited by the collective, especially when the collective is hijacked by power players, or if it starts acting like a *biradari* such that the power is concentrated at the top, among a handful of individuals. I have learned that instead of inaction or reacting or leaving, you can opt to consciously conduct your inner soliloquies without judgement, ground yourself in the material reality instead of romanticised ideals, and find clarity and resolutions to your internal chaos that arises as a result of contradictions within the collective and self. This, I feel, becomes the revolutionary task of a political worker, before stepping back into the collective.

In practice, contradictions can arise between the individual and the collective, so evaluation processes are important. For example, after an event there should be a feedback process to address any shortcomings that occurred and how these can be tweaked. This is not to put anyone down, but to ensure that everyone in the collective is on the same page. If such a mechanism is not in place, the individual should at least evaluate her own labour within the union: are there gaps or tensions between the objectives of the collective and what she wants to achieve? Sometimes stepping back and finding the distance for a more objective evaluation of one's self within the collective is important to get the necessary clarity.

Costume and Props: The black leather jacket, the demands of the 2019 Students Solidarity March, a *dafli* [tambourine], a pin with a raised fist, and two dried red roses. Photo by Arooj Aurangzeb

Notes

1.The interview has been edited for clarity and brevity

Mapping Sacred Games

Priya Pinjani Perwani

"Oh... What part of India are you from?"

This question is almost always posed to me after the one asking my name. Even after decades, I never fail to find this inquiry presumptuous and amusing. It raises obvious concerns in my mind: Why is a Pakistani Hindu an anomaly in this society? Must all Hindus be Indian? Can a Hindu thrive in a Muslim-majority Pakistan? Regardless of the answers, I have become conditioned to refer to myself as what I am not, rather than what I am. Thus, I am a Non-Muslim Pakistani unrelated to India by blood or origin. Born to a Sindhi household, three protective brothers, a large joint family, and married to more of the same, my background has admittedly given me an edge when it comes to conversation starters in post-Partition Pakistan. Growing up in Karachi as a minority in an overtly Muslim state and studying architecture and urbanism has given me a clearer understanding of cities and the politics of religion and ethnicity.

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Religious faith is an ephemeral construct that is enacted in individual ways of life, but also plays out publicly and politically. Within the city, there are many representations of religion scattered in the landscape as architectures and rituals, some permanent and others more temporary. Their material traces can be felt in the sound of bells, the visible markers on bodies, the smells of ritual offerings, and recognisable structures. Religion impacts both urban form and city life in at least three domains. The first is religious populations consisting of mobile and flexible bodies – they breathe, they perform, they celebrate. Second is religious institutions that are based on foundational literature and become points of congregation, orientation, and collective action. The third is religious discourses that are in constant flux from within and through external influences. Layers of expressions and ecologies sanctified over time make up a city, and the existence of multiple faiths sets up a complex urban landscape.

In Pakistan, where the vast majority strongly identifies with one religion or other, religion is tied to the state in more ways than one, well beyond constitutional, legal, and electoral structures. This has made religious affiliation an important factor of integration and disintegration for its civil society. I grapple with what this intersection has produced in the past and continues to produce for the future, particularly for the 1% of Hindu population[1] that lives in urban Karachi.

The intersection of religion and the urban sphere is a highly spatialised phenomenon protected and promoted by social and political will.

This conversation is not a cry for human rights, and most certainly not a plea for asylum in India.[2] It is an interpretation of Karachi's metalogue in an attempt to unpack manifestations of religions in the public space. The text that follows will foreground the sociocultural and spatial aspects of religion in Karachi, its histories and promises, risks and limits, roots and routes. In turn, it questions how urban religious identities have been or are being reshaped. This commentary is necessary in my view to better understand the politics that form the geographies of (in) accessibility and (in)visibility in my homeland.

The Minoritisation of Hindus in Karachi

On my trip to Siachen Glacier last year, the sepoy chose not to write my name in the visitors register to save himself, and me, the trouble of dealing with the possible conspiracies that could surround a 'Priya Pinjani' being at the disputed Pakistan-India border. "I have not heard such a name before," he said, "How are you Pakistani?" I didn't quite know how to prove myself. My National Identity Card was already in his hands. Was I to break into the national anthem, or to yell the second part of the slogan 'Pakistan ka matlab kya?'[3] *I chuckled at the dilemma my identity had caused him, whilst equally fearful of what the khaki-uniformed man would do next. With doubt, he chose to let me go.*
The invisibility cloak[4] *had its perks. The glacier was hauntingly beautiful, reaching it simultaneously empowering and humbling. Could it have been any more so, were I allowed to be visible while present at it?*

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Kolachi, Kurrachee, and Kalachi has been spelled and pronounced multiple ways in its 300 years of existence. Each change has succeeded or preceded a change in the politics on the ground, of people, ethnicity, dialects. The minoritisation of Hindus has been a long process involving the loss of numbers, loss of visibility, and loss of power in the public sphere, continuing well after the 1947 Partition[5]. By 1951, Karachi's 51% Hindu population had dwindled to 2% and there had been a rapid increase in its Muslim residents due to the influx of post-Partition migrants.[6] This demographic change led to the adjusting, adopting, and refuting of religious identities across the city. Karachi embraced new architectures and was made to shed others: landmarks were renamed, sculptures removed, sacred spaces camouflaged or entirely disappeared. The last census in 2017 records nine spoken languages in Karachi, with a clear majority of Urdu-speaking populations. This is followed by Pashto and Punjabi, oddly leaving Sindhi-speaking groups in fourth place in the capital city of their own province.[7]

Pakistan has been consistently placed at 'high/very high' in the Governmental Restrictions and Social Hostilities Index on minority religions,[8] despite the images of plurality objectified for consumption in multiple adverts and films for local and foreign audiences in the country.[9] In recent decades, successive governments in Karachi have dreamed of turning it into a world-class city. The fifth master plan for the city, the Karachi Strategic Development Plan 2020, centred on 'urban renewal': to regenerate the inner city even at the cost of peri-urban regions, and give its core a facelift. As James Scott argues, urban renewal is an example of a high modernist attempt to use the power of the state to impose a rational order on society.[10] It becomes pertinent to question, what is the order Karachi aspires to through all the many phases of urban renewal? Who is the ordering for? How is the ordering manifested?

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Somewhere between faith and religion, majority and minority, language and wealth, the alternate persona of 'Fariha Punjabi' has become a fitting alias to my name. I wear the phonetic appropriation out of convenience when wary of my audience. On other days, I shuffle between my many identities, and the connotations they come with. Recently, being Sindhi has allowed greater access and discounts in this city. Being a woman has gotten me in shorter queues. On my trip to Mumbai, the camouflage of being a mistakenly Indian 'Priya' made it easy to move around. In Istanbul, being Pakistani won more smiles. In New York City, no one really cared.

The Social Life of Small Urban Myths[11]

Karachi narrowly escaped Cyclones Phet in 2010, Nilofar in 2014, and Gulab in 2021.[12] In the true spirit of the city, the weather warnings were welcomed with binoculars and picnics by the beach, and music blaring from motorised vehicles. The city stood confident against all caution. Why not? Each time it has evidently been 'saved' and wound up with beautiful rainbows. Believers credit the last-minute fizzling of the seas to the city's patron saint, Abdullah Shah

Ghazi, whose shrine is perched on a hill since the 10th century.[13] Steve Inskeep writes, "at this shrine by the sea, Karachi seems spiritual, open-hearted, quirky, tolerant, and diverse."[14] There is little scientific ground connecting Ghazi and the Pakistan Meteorological Department. Yet, if the myth of the saviour has survived generations with such conviction, clearly there is an audience for it among believers and even the twitterati.[15]

Just beside the shrine, at the nine o'clock position, lies a 3000-year-old[16] cave temple named Shree Ratneshwar Mahadev Temple. It is accessed by a discreet flight of stairs through a portal under the shade of a *peepal*[17] tree. The stairs descend and fold, in stark contrast to the grand linear ascent to the shrine, and culminate deep inside a rock where the statue of Lord Shiva is seated. The Mahabharata and Ramayana seem to describe this very location as the home for Shiva under the sea. The faithful say the temple surfaced as the sea receded, and that it is in fact Shiva who has been protecting Karachiites from cyclones this whole time. Needless to add, there is no scientific evidence for this either.

I only recently discovered Lord Shiva as Karachi's silent coast guard beneath Ghazi's superpowered one. The question is not which of these myths is more credible, but how visibility and power are inextricably linked and lead to one being remembered more than the other. The two legends are effectively the same story, on either side of the ground. However, only one has become part of the public narrative. One is rendered 'legible'[18] and the other invisible. One is repeated enough times to become real, and the other is left literally underground, a secret amongst a few. A city has archived, preserved, and celebrated a narrow form of memory. It seems this political ordering of narratives and associated spaces in my city has become the lived reality for my people.

Shahrah-e-Firdousi is a fascinating intersection of coexistence in the postcolonial subcontinent. Between the emblematic shrine of Ghazi and Shiva's temple lie a mall, a skyscraper, a mosque, an amusement park, and a public park. The tangible heritage at this site developed over many phases and is named after people from different faiths: the Hindu Judicial Commissioner Rupchand Bilaram Park of the 1900s, the Parsi Jehangir Hormas Kothari Parade and Kavasji Katrak Bandstand of 1919, the British Christian Lady Lloyd Pier of 1921, the Parsi Pirojbai Hormusji Khajurina, and the Hindu Motumal Shewaram Setpal Fountains of 1936.[19] Fast forward 70 years and you will collide with the Muslim Mayor Syed Mustafa Kamal who commissioned the Bagh Ibn-e-Qasim in 2005, and Muslim Imran Khan who inaugurated it in 2019.

All the above-mentioned names are visible in the built forms, materials, or plaques at these sites, although after much searching in some cases. Jehangir Kothari and Rupchand Bilaram had developed this seafront centuries after Muhammad bin Qasim's arrival, yet only some of these names are part of urban memory and legitimised by geotagging on Google Maps. As with the myths, the urban fabric appears to be conveniently warped to propel a privileged discourse. This imposition of cultural singularity on the built environment reinforces a skewed understanding of history for the communities in the city.

In the last decade, the shrine, the temple, and their peripheries have been undergoing another major change through a glaringly visible intervention of questionable legality by Bahria Town, the largest real estate development company in the country. The sanctity of the architectures is diminishing, as is their interface with and access to the street. The Icon Tower with its supporting road network and many bright white lights stands tall, dominating the skyline and overpowering these remnants of the past. This 'height of sophistication' is now 62 storeys tall.[20] In contemporary Karachi urbanism, form follows financial clout.

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Shri Lakshmi Narayan Mandir has stood beside the Native Jetty Bridge since at least 1943.[21] *In Sanskrit, the name 'Lakshmi' means 'wealth and good fortune.' However, since 2011 the Mandir*[22] *has been enveloped by the shopping and entertainment hub of Port Grand, just off one end of M.A. Jinnah Road. The temple entrance is sequestered from the security checks of the complex under the Karachi Port Trust (KPT) flyover. On one of my visits, the resident priest stopped me at the entrance to ask me the purpose of my visit and to confirm my faith. Without a second thought, rather than reciting a verse from scripture, I rattled off recognisable names of men from my family: Ishwar, Daulat, Vijay, Rajkumar, Manoher, Suneel, Amit, Dhiraj, Ravi, Pardeep, Ajay – as if I was reading ice cream flavours off a menu card. I knew I couldn't hesitate nor slow down in this naming exercise. Convinced by what rolled off my tongue, the priest let me through.*

Future of the Past

Every city is simultaneously real and imagined. It is at once a place of tangible materialities and a dreamscape, haunted by ghosts of the past, caught in multiple social imaginaries, and constantly reconstructed by dominant and dominating aspirations.[23] As a temporal abstraction, it holds the "possibilities of representing these temporalities and the historical experiences they signal in spatial terms."[24] This makes the city a rich but convoluted and multilayered archive of memory and belonging, and by extension, of access and visibility. In an instant it offers windows into the past, the present, and various futures.

The "city-as-archive"[25] raises some important questions. What happens when everyday experiences become memories, memories become narratives, and narratives are collected in urban form? On the one hand, urban form becomes an event in history, significantly distanced from the protagonist, and on the other, a reflexive tool used to decipher past experiences, reconfigure memory, and reconstruct narratives. Who decides what memory, whose experience, and which narrative?

In Karachi, further up on M.A. Jinnah Road, there is a park and yet another legend that has gone missing. 'Aram Bagh' translates as 'garden of rest' and 'Ram Bagh' is a garden named after Lord Ram. The two share the same coordinates in a historic neighbourhood, but in different time periods. There is a belief that Ram, Sita, and Laxman camped at this location which marks it as a sacred site for their followers. When the belief was in circulation in the public sphere, the neighbourhood was populated with temples. During that time, it also hosted events to commemorate Ram and Leela. Due to its central location and abundance of water, this public space was sanctioned for political rallies and eventually as a campsite during Partition. It is said that the park continued to host music and theatre commemorating these legends in the new country of Pakistan. Then it was renamed. The performance stage is now buried under a mosque and where there used to be four temples earlier,[26] there now remains only one. Aligning with the new name, the garden of rest is now accessed by a wide road — the present-day Shahrah-e-Liaquat — and surrounded by a furniture market along narrow streets named Panjrapur, Ram Talao, and Rupchand Bilaram, at least on Google Maps. However, colloquially this is now just referred to as the Aram Bagh district and these street names have been forgotten.

The change from 'Ram' to 'Aram' might just be the addition of one letter, but this renaming has enforced a change on the entire neighbourhood. When names are used as titles of places and streets, they invoke a particular story and imbue them with a distinctive character. Renaming public spaces gives them new ownership and erases previously established identities. As a result, contemporary visitors to the park relate differently to the space and this distinction comes into play at the first sound of the *azaan*[27]. Some are active participants and respond to this sound by proceeding to their prayers, others tune in more passively, while a third category is excluded, 'othered', and ultimately erased.[28] These different positionalities go unacknowledged in the archive of the city.

The fight to claim space by renaming non-Muslim remnants is a common practice in Karachi. The contradictions continue in the virtual realm, facing off in the neighbourhood's representation on the crowdsourced OpenStreetMap (OSM) and on Google Maps. Sawa Sunderdas Street, Takchand Udhamdas Road, and Shankar Lal Road become Park Lane, Memon Gali, and 'untitled' respectively in two maps of the district. In the OSM, the visualisation is fed by data from bottom-up sources, and in Google Maps, via top-down modes. The list of name conversions is long, with some sly and others more aggressive. In other neighbourhoods of Karachi, Moti Lal Nehru Road has become Jigar Muradabadi Road, Hari Chand Rai Road is now Siddiq Wahab Road, Patel Park is Nishtar Park, and Krishan Nagar is Islam Pura. These new names threaten the space, material, and memory of the city. Is it presumptuous to read these as the state's efforts of ordering narratives? Can we admit this is concerted invisibilisation of the Hindu community in the public sphere? Each change has erased anachronistically from the map in order to, as Scott says, "simplify and standardise"[29] the post-1947 city grid by repositioning history and creating a hierarchy of visibilities and power.

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In an aerial map of Karachi representing the different ethnicities across city neighbourhoods, published in Dawn, a leading newspaper, it is both worrying and amusing to find one area marked simply as 'wealthy'. Marking wealthy as an ethnicity comparable to other spoken languages in the city implies that wealth neutralises ethnic and linguistic differences.[30] *Given Karachi's land governance and land reclamation patterns, perhaps the 'wealthy' Army Cantonment — formalised in 1980 as the Defence Housing Authority — is a good place to visualise the aspirational city grid. A dreamscape, an ordered ideal. In the same locality, however, my conspicuously different name compelled the landlord of a residential property to refuse me tenancy. Contrary to expectation, wealth has not been a great equaliser as evidenced in the nomenclature of each newly laid street. Behold the Muslim Manhattan, with Khayaban-e-Muslim-gentleman's-name for avenues cutting across numbered streets; a sanitised housing project sans history, sans texture, sans culture.*

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Cities, as we know, house many individuals who are difficult to pull under an umbrella identity. After all, identity is a complex phenomenon: layered, malleable, and accumulated over various geographies and generations. It is formed by, but not limited to, attributes such as gender, class, origin, ethnicity, and infamously, religion. Each of these qualifiers may be socially produced along scales ranging across body, home, community, urban, regional, national, and global boundaries.[31] Thus, identity is not an absolute condition, but a fluid performance. Every day an individual negotiates and enacts one, two, four, or even six aspects, depending on the space they inhabit. In effect, each individual becomes another representation of the city.

For me, the city-as-archive and all its representations are equally important. Together, they

produce the space for urban religious identities to thrive within its actual and imagined realities. In Pakistan, the intersection of religion and state has been used to order narratives and concretise power in a way that refuses to let some identities be flexible, particularly minority ones. Instead, the city fixes their identities to just one poster image and nothing else. The imposed singularity ignores the people behind the image and the many layers of their identities. It hinders accessibility and fosters fear in the community. Perhaps for this reason, I was problematic for the state at Siachen as a Hindu Pakistani. With each minoritisation, I shrank further. I became a minority, I became a Non-Muslim. I became a Hindu, I became the Other. Until, in plain sight, I became invisible.

Augmented City

A city thrives somewhere between romanticism and utopia.[32] However much we grant an autonomous life and reality to the history of Karachi, history at its core is a futurist proposition, a way of drawing on the past to dream another world.[33] I suspect we may not have to look very far for this other world. It sits in our pockets.

Maps have changed our inhabitation of both real and imagined cities. The trajectory from analogue maps to digital maps has been momentous and has impacted how we perceive and experience three-dimensional space. Earlier, maps allowed us to explore a route via landmarks between points A and B, in which the starting point, in-between paths, and the ending point held equal importance. Their designs allowed us to explore multiple routes to a destination. Their recent digital successor, Google Maps, promises accurate navigation of familiar and unfamiliar territories with frequent updates to direct the user to the shortest or most time-efficient route. Navigation has now become a matter of following directions faithfully.

In *Mapping the Sovereign State*, Jordan Branch credits maps for much more than navigational ease. His theory extrapolates that nation-states didn't create borders, but it was the creation of borders that gave birth to the idea of territorial nation-states.[34] An in-depth study of communities living 'on the lines', from Siachen down to the Arabian Sea, may give us a more realistic perspective. Analogue or digital, one cannot deny the map's privileged God's eye view, which in itself augments this representation. It gazes from the top, and looks down at urban life; it shows you an elevation that your eyes were not meant to see. Maps have a quality that is so convincingly official that it is dangerously illusory. We forget that, like all other forms of representations, maps too are abstractions of the material, political, and aspirational will of the maker, be it the cartographer or the nation-state.

The corporate mission of Google Maps is "to organise the world's information", but it also bends it to its will.[35] By processes of selective inclusion and exclusion, for different audiences, the resultant visualisations distort reality. The embedded data in this map, because of its widespread reach, has the power to order discourses about the city. Google Maps' algorithms thus dictate geographies and histories. For Karachi, it takes a very particular vision — a largely Muslim one — and then turns it into an objective reality through its visualisation. Repeated enough times and easier on the hearts of a majority, this narrative is quite easily accepted. Once again, a curated reality is consumed.

The digital world, however, is nothing if not disruptive. In this milieu of ordered data capture and information overload, those who throw the first spanner into the works are as celebrated as those who pick it up as the gauntlet of innovation. In that sense, Pokemon Go has subtly but surely presented a counter-imaginary of the city. In 2016, the American software company, Niantic, launched an augmented reality and location-based game called Pokemon Go.[36] The game negotiates the real and the virtual city simultaneously. Amongst other attributes, the interface flattened the globe into a singular plane. A blank city, untainted by anyone's markers of identity, power or politics. With nameless streets and spaces, grey building blocks, and a shared blue sky [Image 1], a real-time scavenger hunt for virtual Pokemons, Pokestops, and Pokegyms scattered across the cityscape induced many enthusiasts to walk or drive with their phones and map the city afresh.

The game map is built on collective knowledge of geographic features and landmarks of cities, and in that sense, it mirrors the public perceptions of the city. Religion has surreptitiously found its way into the architecture of the internet and the virtual realm to police our encounters in this public space as well. Here again, like Shahrah-e-Firdousi, religion resides alongside contemporary capitalism, even if uncomfortably.[37] In a hilarious turn of events, many public parks and mosques in Karachi are Pokestops [Image 2]. It makes me wonder, what will follow if a non-Muslim Pakistani is able to 'check in' at Aram Bagh for more Pokeballs and 'capture' the Pokemons hiding in the mosque, 'battle' them out, and 'claim' the stage for themselves. Will the names return on the map and the city? Would this be a way to reclaim space, material, and memory from the inside out? What will that do for urbanisms, and importantly, for the many believers of Karachi's curated reality?

Interestingly, Pokemon Go rejects the Google basemap and instead uses location data from OpenStreetMap. In doing so, it presents itself as a unique opportunity — one that allows a new imagination of the city to order a new reality. A politically constructed narrative was made into an uncontested, absolute reality by Google Maps. This familiar reality appears skewed in the Pokemon Go game map, and the interface stands at the "threshold of visibility, pushing against the flood of obfuscating messages, of dominant narratives, fabricated noise, and attempts at

denial."[38] After years of constructed narratives that were made real by reordering, replacing, and erasing, now a new, albeit virtual, reality can be ordered through a crowdsourced imagination. The game offers a chance to return to the old names, to recreate the multilayered archive of Karachi, and become a new equitable public space where all of us can thrive.

For now, in a different dimension, power can be shared in Karachi by making the invisible visible, and the illegible legible. A collective intervention can reshape the city and the experience of religion within it. The various Pokemons are easily identifiable and traceable through their cloaks, if only we have the eyes and the will to see them. This scavenger hunt is an exciting mapping moment between *naya*[39] [new], *purana*[40] [old], and in-between Karachis. I would invite you to join in mapping the Lost and Found in Karachi and to reclaim the spatialities and visualities of Hindu populations.

Notes

1. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, "Population Census."
2. "Pakistani Hindus Returned Home."
3. Translates to 'what does Pakistan mean?'
4. Reference to the Cloak of Invisibility in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, a magical artefact used to render the wearer invisible.
5. Zamindar, *The Long Partition*, 231.
6. Khan and Hasan. "Transformation of the Urban Space," 16.
7. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, "Population Census."
8. Baronavski *et al.*, "Religious Restrictions around the World."
9. Azad Film Company, "Sacred Spaces."
10. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 342.
11. A play on a film by William Hollingsworth Whyte *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980).
12. John, Umar, Sikander, "Abdullah Shah Ghazi."
13. Shakir, "Sufi Shrine."
14. Inskeep, *Instant City*, 67.
15. "Worst of Cyclone Gulab."
16. Kumar, "Clifton Beach Karachi," 116.
17. *Ficus religiosa* or sacred fig is a tree species native to the subcontinent.
18. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 11.
19. Balouch, "The Clifton of Yore."
20. Reference to the adverts of the development. "Bahria Town Icon."
21. The plaque at the gate reads 1943, but stories about the *Mandir* go back hundreds of years.
22. Hindu temple.
23. I owe this formulation to Joseph Heathcott, who taught me urban theory.
24. Rao, "City as Archive," 179.
25. Rao, "Embracing Urbanism," 377
26. "Rambaugh Quarter." 1874 Map.
27. Muslim call to prayer.
28. These categories are used by Margaret Kohn in *Brave New Neighbourhoods: The Privatisation of Public Space*.
29. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 29.
30. Paracha, "Understanding Karachi."
31. Smith, "Contours of a Spatialised Politics," 54.
32. Coleman, *Lefebvre for Architects*, 20.
33. Borrowed from Joseph Heathcott, Urban Theory.
34. Samuel, "Mapping the Future with Pokémon Go."
35. Bensinger, "Google Redraws the Borders."
36. "Pokémon GO."
37. Gould, "Pokémon Go Feels like a Religion."
38. Weizman, *Forensis*, 29.
39. The term '*Naya Pakistan*' [new Pakistan] was popularised by Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) political party.
40. '*Purana Pakistan*' [old Pakistan] was used as a retort to the PTI by the Chairman of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in his National Assembly speech on 10th April 2022.

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Narrative Images: Women's Selfies, History, and Storytelling

Noor Butt

Noor Butt, 2021, *Repetition*, Karachi, Pakistan, Digital Photograph

The first selfie I ever took was at the age of 11 with a Sony Ericsson flip phone with a front camera. This was before the release of the first iPhone, when the maximum phone storage capacity used to be 16MBs, and several years before the word "selfie" was officially included in the Oxford dictionary.[1] At 19, I owned my first smartphone with a selfie camera just as photo-sharing platforms like Instagram and Snapchat started gaining popularity worldwide. Word-of-mouth and peer pressure coerced me into participating in this new form of communication as the selfie trend began to plant its roots in visual culture. Today, Snapchat and Instagram have amassed 493.7 million and 1.452 billion worldwide users respectively, 93 million selfies are taken every single day, and my own archive of digital images includes thousands of selfies.[2]

For the average millennial who grew up creating visual archives of herself in cyberspace, selfie-taking is now an ordinary, almost instinctive, act where the tropes, patterns, and trends associated with this form of digital image-making are almost passively consumed and adopted.

This essay locates the selfie in the history of visual culture and photography, positioned in the continuum of the snapshot, memory, and consumerist impulse. It examines how the participation of women — the key demographic engaging in this trend[3] — speaks to feminist discourses of female representation and the male gaze. It also explores how social media has paved the way for history-making and archiving through the medium of the selfie.

The starting point of this enquiry was an investigation of my own digital archive of selfies. I then proceeded to examine the selfies of people I knew, so as to query their connections with my own archive. Finally, I compared these to selfie trends among photographs posted by Instagram users. However, conducting primary research on Instagram had its limitations: language, choice of privacy settings, and social media literacy filtered the kind of audiences and demographics that I could reach.

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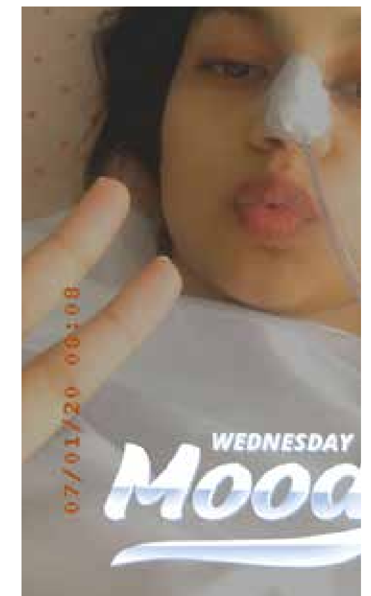
Capturing the Mundane

Selfies can be located somewhere between personal and documentary photography. Kozinets, Gretzel, and Dinhopl aptly describe the practice of self-representational photographs: "Selfie taking is complex and multidimensional, a cultural and social act, a call for connection, an act of mimicry, and part of people's ever-incomplete identity projects."[4] Microblogs of daily snaps can be read as commodified inner monologues, created to be consumed and disseminated. Whether



Top Left: Saman Imtiaz, 2021, *Shopping*, Karachi, Pakistan, Digital Photograph. Source: Snapchat

Top Right: Ishita Gupta, 2022, *Getting a Haircut*, United Kingdom, Digital Photograph.

Bottom Left: Sakina Ali, 2022, *On the Plane, travelling from Australia to Pakistan*, Digital Photograph. Source: Snapchat

Bottom Right: Ashba Riaz, 2020, *Recovering from Appendix Surgery*, Georgia, Digital Photograph. Source: Snapchat

one is out shopping, getting a haircut, travelling on a plane, or even recovering in the hospital, one must take and share a selfie. Considered collectively, these selfies begin to merge into a single imitative model that is replicated by so many of us. The idea that the camera is readily available, mixed with a compelling need to self-document, suggests that people take selfies simply because they can. In search of the perfect selfie, we find ourselves snapping dozens of photographs at a time, each one being repetitive and monotonous, almost completely identical to the one before. What can we learn about ourselves through the images we curate, put on display, or hide away?

I argue that for all its banality, the selfie is deeply personal and documentative, an in-between space where fleeting moments are captured. While studying abroad, I took selfies of my mundane day-to-day activities as a daily ritual. Often, I would only get a chance to take a picture during the few moments of pause in the elevator of my student dorm. I thus accumulated a large number of 'elevator selfies' through which I had inadvertently mapped and recorded crucial aspects of my daily life. They turned into a digital journal of sorts that was never posted or displayed anywhere, but I can recall a separate story for each one of them: when I was heading to the laundrette in the basement, picking up mail from the front desk, or heading out to buy groceries. Although completely ordinary instances, they became significant with the onset of Covid-19 as some of them were taken in the last days of normalcy before the abrupt shift to lockdown life.

Artists also use selfies to delve into their personal histories, blending mass-culture aesthetics with private space in their work. British artist Tracey Emin, for example, created an entire body of work using selfies sporadically captured in bed: close-ups of her face, narrating her issues with insomnia, showing the scars from her cancer treatment.[5] Deeply raw and vulnerable, her selfies acted as documentation of the turbulent times she faced in a specific period in her life. Through these selfies, she subverted the conventional 'picturesque' Instagram imagery and chose to display a narrative that was completely unglamorous and unfiltered. Although the images may seem imitative and needlessly repetitive, each selfie has a distinct backstory.

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Origins of the Snapshot

One way to understand the sameness and repetitiveness of the selfie is to trace its roots in the capitalist history of the photographic medium. The Eastman Kodak Company is credited with

Noor Butt, 2020, *Elevator Selfies*, London, United Kingdom, Digital Photograph

Top Left: Noor Butt, 2020, *Tourist Bucket List*, London, United Kingdom, Digital Photograph

Top Right: Gul Butt, 2016, *Class trip to Interior Sindh*, Pakistan, Digital Photograph

Bottom Left: Yamuna Mahendra, 2022, *Maldives Photo Dump*, Maldives, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @yooossshhhiii

Bottom Right: Anum Sohail, 2017, *Big Ben Tower*, London, United Kingdom, Digital Photograph

the introduction of the "point and shoot" camera in the American and then global markets, enabling any user to take a snapshot. Kodak's strategic advertising campaigns exhorted the consumer to continuously make images and preserve memories through photographs. They particularly targeted women as the "memory keepers" of the family.[6] As Kamal Munir notes: "Kodak's ad campaigns emphasised how — if women were to appear as responsible and caring wives and mothers — they were morally obliged to keep a meticulous record of their family's history. They could do this by preserving those Kodak moments."[7]

A print advertisement from 1914 for 'The Kodak Girl' campaign depicted a young woman holding a Kodak camera while outdoors. Beneath the image, a blurb stated: "The city girl's trip to the country, the country girl's trip to the city, any girl's trip to the seashore or the mountains — in all of these are picture stories of the interesting places and the still more interesting people."[8] Several versions of this campaign marketed the importance of documenting memories and moments, the easy accessibility of the camera, and the necessity of owning one as a woman.

The selfie, then, is yet another version of the snapshot. Contemporary photo-sharing platforms like Instagram and Snapchat do not deviate much from Kodak's marketing strategy. Instagram's corporate slogan is "Capture and Share the World's Moments",[9] while Snapchat's mission statement reads: "… our camera will play a transformative role in how people experience the world around them."[10] The selfie camera stays true to being "in every home, every vacation trip" today. For the average consumer now, birthdays, graduations, weddings, vacations, everything needs to be documented. Otherwise, where is the proof that it happened? Or worse, how would they remember that it happened if it did not exist in pictorial form?

The selfie is not just the result of a technological advancement from a hand-held camera to a smartphone selfie camera, but also a shift in the cultural paradigm of how image-making garnered value for its consumer. I had not noticed the coercive powers of platforms like Snapchat and Instagram until, after years of accumulating digital images and posting them online, I realised that features like augmented reality (AR) and photo-editing filters are designed to prompt consumers to continuously use the product, and mimic effects used by others. For instance, the Snapchat "streak" records the number of daily snaps users send to each other.[11] The streak offers no tangible value, but users still find themselves religiously opening the app every day to send a snap to their friends to not break their streak. The longest streak I managed to keep on Snapchat was for over 800 days, until I concluded that mindlessly taking selfies on a daily basis just to maintain a fictional, purposeless streak was negatively impacting my mental and emotional health. There would be an itch at the back of my mind to pick up my phone and use the app, teased by the hourglass symbol prompting me that my streak was about to break. Most of the selfies taken during this time were random and recorded nothing of substance, which is when I realised that one reason I felt compelled to continuously take selfies was that corporations like Snapchat, much like Kodak, made me think it was necessary.

The Tourist Selfie, Simulacra, and the Photographic Ritual

According to Susan Sontag, "Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted. Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies; it is the most irresistible form of mental pollution."[12] A relevant selfie genre to test Sontag's claim is the tourist selfie. The 'Instagram-worthy' selfie validates the idea that the reality and experience of visiting a travel destination are confirmed and enhanced by posting them on social media. Countries where tourism contributes significantly to the national economy tactfully focus digital image marketing on recognisable landmarks and monuments. A tourist in London would, therefore, make sure to pose next to the city's plethora of landmarks, like Big Ben or Westminster Abbey, to announce to all their social media following: 'Look, I was here.'

Selfies posed with tourist landmarks, re-enacted infinitely, are classic simulacra. They have been copied so many times that there is no evidence left of a definitive original. Jean Baudrillard claimed that society depended on easily distinguishable symbols and templates, performing imitative and repetitive actions.[13] This holds true in the digital age, as each sub-genre of the selfie follows a set of aesthetic conventions that result in images taken by different individuals looking the same. An active Instagram user usually becomes acquainted with the conventions of selfie-taking not just through their friends and followers on the platform, but also through the barrage of social media influencers and celebrities that commodify their images online. With enough exposure to such images, it becomes easier to identify the many tropes associated with the genre of the selfie. If one has ever found themselves making a 'duck face', sticking out their tongue, or making a peace sign with their hands while posing for a selfie, that is not something they invented, but in fact, borrowed from elsewhere as a ritual performative gesture. The fact that many tropes and conventions of selfie-taking are mimicked and repeated by different audiences points to the possibility that there are deeper connections between the camera, the self, and the gaze.

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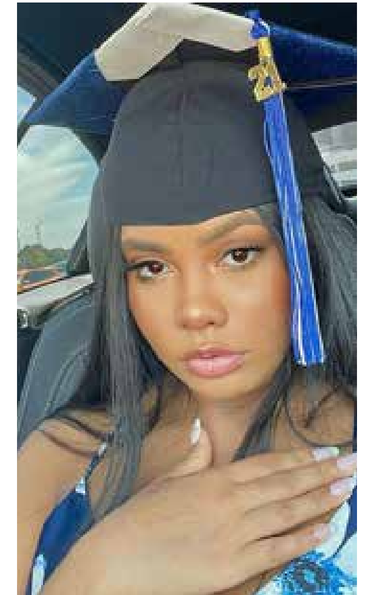
Courting the Gaze

The popularity of the selfie relies significantly on contemporary mass media. The 2014 song '#SELFIE' by the Chainsmokers largely popularised the phrase "But first, let me take a selfie", possibly also amplifying this trend amongst the youth — the primary demographic that



Top Left: Zara Ijaz, 2022, *One of my favourite selfies from 2019 that never made it to Instagram*, Pakistan, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @zara_i.k

Top Right: Angie, 2021, *#graduationselfie*, United States of America, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @gotangie

Bottom Left: Tomas Fabianski, 2021, *#graduation*, Czechia, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @selfie_nut

Bottom Right: Noor Butt, 2021, *Online Graduation*, Karachi, Pakistan, Digital Photograph.

Top Left: Sakina Ali, 2021, *Aus,* Sydney, Australia, Digital Photograph

Top Right: Kriti Naidu, 2022, *I do a thing called what I want,* India, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @__whyusername__

Bottom Left: Fareha Hassan, 2022, *Don't know what I was thinking wearing low rise with that muffin,* Karachi, Pakistan, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram

Bottom Right: Elizabeth Paul, 2021, *We love a mirror selfie,* United States of America, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @scientist_liz

participates in the practice.[14] Although the song's music video includes selfies of men as well, the primary narration of the popular phrase is done by a woman, further buttressing the notion that women are more concerned with taking selfies than men.

In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes broadly explored the relationship between the camera and the spectator. The act of being in front of a camera, he says, provokes a "photographic ritual" to take place: "Now once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image."[15] As a contemporary mode of self-portraiture where an individual operates their smartphone camera themselves, fully aware of how they appear on camera even before the image is taken, the selfie takes Barthes' "transformation of the self into an image" to another level. For a generation that grew up in the digital age of social media, the effect of the camera and spectatorship often appears unconscious and covert. Interestingly, it also continues to see these enactments as individualistic.

Barthes also said: "I want you to know that I am posing, but ... this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality..."[16] It would be accurate to say that every spectator is aware that a selfie is staged and posed, but somehow also individualistic. Take the graduation selfie as an example, where the graduation cap instantly symbolises the individual and also the collective story of a graduating student. This kind of digital image is probably one of the most imitative and recognisable models of the selfie, adopted on a global scale. It is ritualistic and universal. In the case of my graduation selfie – a photographic ritual in which I consciously wanted to participate – I was fully aware of the simulacra associated with it, but still wanted to create a digital image as everlasting proof that I actually did graduate. This desire for proof was fuelled by the fact that all in-person graduation ceremonies had been cancelled due to the pandemic. Taking a selfie with a makeshift paper cap at home, I attempted to individualise and concretise an intangible experience by using the identifiable symbol of the graduation cap, in obvious imitation of the thousands of graduation selfies posted online.

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Subverting the Gaze

Feminist discourses surrounding the relationship between self-imagery and the commodification of selfies oscillate between criticism and praise. On the one hand, selfies of women are found to regurgitate the same "narrowly defined beauty ideal" of female representation catering to the

male gaze.[17] On the other, selfies are an act of "empowerment" since the women taking these pictures are in autonomous control of how they represent their own bodies and femininity.[18]

The mirror selfie that encompasses a full-body shot instead of the regular headshot is popular amongst women, particularly when following Instagram trends like "Outfit of the Day."[19] The mirror has served as a symbol of vanity and narcissism since ancient times, and some argue that women's display of their bodies in mirror selfies originates from a deeper, voyeuristic need to see and be seen through the male gaze. However, recent feminist scholarship finds this assumption to be derisible and inaccurate, as women occupying space on social media as the primary demographic of selfie-takers pull at another strand in the paradigm: historically, women's bodies have been fetishised and objectified by male image-makers but with the selfie, women have the opportunity to subvert that gaze and redefine it as their own.[20]

It is useful to reflect that even before the advent of the selfie, photographers like Cindy Sherman deconstructed clichés associated with female representation in Hollywood films. Sherman's cinematic self-portraits took ownership of her femininity, ultimately becoming a satire about the voyeuristic nature of female representation. According to feminist theorist Laura Mulvey, Sherman's photographs acted as a parody to voyeurism, thereby "de-fetishising" the female body.[21]

The discourse surrounding gendered power dynamics in self-imagery remains relevant in the digital age. Placing the selfie in post-feminist discourses, Derek Conrad Murray states that women in recent years have utilised selfie culture as a "radical act of political empowerment: as a means to resist the male-dominated media culture's obsession with an oppressive hold over their lives and bodies."[22] Pop singer Britney Spears' nude selfies on Instagram recently caused a stir as several media outlets and online users deemed the images "concerning."[23] Documentaries like *Britney vs. Spears* (2021) took a closer look at how Spears, as a female performer, had been sexualised by the media since she was a minor and controlled by her father under his court-appointed conservatorship. It was considered acceptable for magazines like *Rolling Stone* to publish images of Spears in lingerie as a teenager, but somehow Spears posting nude selfies now as a fully autonomous adult woman was deemed shocking.[24] Some followers contested that her provocative selfies allowed her to rebel against the hypocrisy of the same male-dominated media that controlled her bodily autonomy and profited from objectifying her image.[25]

Spears' case serves as an interesting parallel to Qandeel Baloch's in the Pakistani context. The 2015 "honour killing" of the social media personality by her brother, based on her provocative selfies and online persona, highlights the lack of bodily autonomy that women are granted in patriarchal societies where even their selfies are strictly policed.[26] Social media was flooded with opinions about Baloch's murder, some condemning her brutal killing but the majority seemingly in favour of her death, deeming it "punishment" for how she conducted herself online.[27] Pakistani religious cleric Maulana Fazlur Rehman commented: "Shamelessness and exhibitionism are a scourge in our society, spread through women like her."[28] Mufti Abdul Qavi, with whom Baloch had taken selfies, also claimed that her death was "a sign of God's displeasure — and a message to others."[29] Qandeel Baloch had created content that she knew would spark controversy, yet she could not have anticipated the posthumous fame she received as a feminist icon due to her non-conformity with religious and cultural strictures about female respectability and body autonomy.[30] Her selfies with male Pakistani Islamic clerics also exposed the hypocrisy of the state and society's conservative laws and values.[31]

Not all women use selfies towards rebellion or empowerment. Celebrities like the Kardashians, for example, have been routinely criticised for promoting problematic tropes of self-indulgence and self-objectification through their selfies, undeniably profiting from exploiting the insecurities of consumers (mostly women).[32] However, the notion that women take selfies purely out of vanity or narcissism is contestable, as the selfie in many instances acts as a tool to subvert gender politics in image-making and viewing.

Navigating her relationship with Instagram and selfie-taking as a woman, sociologist Sneha Annavarapu states: "Most women are told that 'wanting to be looked at' is wrong … In the virtual streets, we are still figuring out our presence, our participation, on our own terms."[33] Growing up in a conservative society where modesty for women was preached since childhood, I too find it difficult to position my selfies within the frame of self-objectification and self-expression. My selfie-taking practices as a woman have to be carefully curated to not invite judgement from peers, colleagues, or family. I have also known women who posted and then quickly deleted selfies out of fear of showing the slightest bit of cleavage or inviting any kind of attention to their bodies online. The idea of selfies being scopophilic or voyeuristic is, however, an issue that only women seem to be subjected to most of the time. Annavarapu states that since "women are constantly surveilled, evaluated, assessed through the eyes of men", then we, as women, should not feel ashamed for "seeking validation" through our selfies and unapologetically "being seen the way we want to be seen."[34]

The cases of Spears, Baloch, and the Kardashians highlight very different approaches to selfie-taking, but also bring forth nuanced discourses surrounding female representation. I argue that such selfies ultimately act as social commentary, becoming multifaceted artefacts that shine a light on society as it exists today. It also begs the question: if documentary photography can be seen as historical material, why not selfies?

Top Left: Robin Zabiegalski, 2018, *#protestselfie #womensmarch*, United States of America, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @body.lib.robinhood

Top Right: Tomas Fabianski, 2022, *#PrideMonth*, Czechia, Digital Photograph. Source: Instagram @selfie_nut

Bottom Left: Usman Pasha, 2022, *Aurat March 2022*, Karachi, Pakistan, Digital Photograph

Bottom Right: Maha Minhaj, 2021, *Protest for Palestine*, Karachi, Pakistan, Digital Photograph

Selfies as Social History

Pierre Bourdieu believed that the practice of photography and interpretation of the photographic image could be a useful sociological method for understanding cultural meaning.[35] Allan Sekula posed the question: "How is historical and social memory preserved, transformed, restricted and obliterated by photographs?"[36] In recent years, selfies taken at political rallies against military intervention, and at protests such as those against abortion laws or for LGBTQ rights, have generated powerful imagery that documents not just personal experiences but also the larger political and cultural climate. Big, passionate crowds, identifiable flags or banners, and peace signs are some recognisable symbols in such selfies. True to the nature of selfie-taking, these images are also imitative but employ a kind of storytelling that places them within individual and collective narratives of contemporary social history. Selfies taken by protestors capture the essence of the experience that being in a revolutionary space provides, in a way that photographs taken by the press and other external observers of crowds cannot. They become evidence of historical moments and movements through the perspective of the people living them first-hand.

Some of these socio-political selfies present a radical account of women reclaiming their presence in the public and virtual space. The current wave of feminist activism in Pakistan, particularly in the form of the Aurat [Women's] March, has been heavily criticised by the religious and conservative majority of the country which deems it "Western propaganda."[37] The Aurat March emerged at a time when Pakistan's female youth began to utilise social media to record their emancipation from strict cultural and religious regulations against their autonomy, boldly marching, chanting, and recording their revolution through protest slogans and selfies, while also claiming solidarity with and drawing inspiration from protests happening worldwide.

So much of human history has been discovered and preserved through creative artefacts left behind by our ancestors, at times even providing a glimpse into the inner thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of people living in earlier eras. Contemporary scholarship recognises that women's lives have often been excluded or erased from such narratives, as history is arguably remembered through a male lens.[38] The images and selfies created by women can now become valuable archival material for society at large. These selfies not only act as historical documents but also provide more nuanced perspectives of women's existence that urgently need to be inserted into historical as well as contemporary visual narratives.

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Selfies as Soliloquy

This essay was an attempt to understand how I found myself becoming part of the selfie phenomenon. After a decade of taking selfies and making observations about this mode of communication, I can recognise that selfies, much like the early days of the snapshot, were a trend harnessed by corporations that eventually manifested within different parts of culture. I am indeed guilty of snapping mundane, touristy, and mirror selfies, all stemming from a need to preserve memories, recreate experiences, make connections, and identify with myself. Much like the first-ever selfie I took at the age of 11, I will most likely forget taking the thousands of selfies that followed, being lost in the overabundance of imagery I have accumulated over time.[39]

As I get older, I already find myself snapping fewer selfies than I used to. Distancing myself from Instagram and Snapchat also drastically altered my need to continuously take selfies or share them online. This simple act of self-awareness acutely displays the correlation between selfies and consumerism, and how corporations manage to capitalise on consumers' sentimentality and need to document. The practice of taking selfies may just be another form of self-representation that will eventually become outdated. The history of social media obsolescence also reminds us that these current platforms will most likely either be completely out of use or replaced over time. Millennials approaching the age of 30 and above may feel as though they have outgrown the practice of taking selfies, which then appears juvenile or simply not needed anymore. In that case, selfies might no longer serve the same purpose they do now.

Interacting through images is a very contemporary mode of communication, where selfies have become a new, globally intelligible form of language. Although this practice was internalised, repeated, and practised due to the evolution of image-making in the digital age, I find it intriguing how my selfies may act as reminders of my youth and everyday experiences when I am older. Whether considered kitsch, mundane, or narcissistic, the billions of selfies we leave behind can nevertheless narrate how we as human beings in the 21st century communicated with each other, identified with ourselves, and preserved fragments of our collective histories. This archive is a visual soliloquy of its time that recounts the lives and experiences of an entire generation.

Notes

1. Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, 29.
2. Charney, *The 12-Hour Art Expert*, 129.
3. Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, 63.
4. Kozinets, Gretzel and Dinhopl, "Self in Art/Self as Art," 731.
5. Emin, interview.
6. Toronto Metropolitan University, "The Kodak Girl."
7. Munir, "The Demise of Kodak."
8. Duke University Libraries Repository Collections and Archives, "The Kodak Girl."
9. Instagram, "About Us."
10. Snapchat, "About."
11. Bhatt, *The Attention Deficit*, 64.
12. Sontag, *On Photography*, 24.
13. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 146.
14. Rettberg, *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology*, 17.
15. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 10.
16. Ibid, 11.
17. Rogan, *Digital Femininities*, 48.
18. Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures*, 12.
19. Huang and Copeland, "Gen Z, Instagram Influencers."
20. Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures*, 13.
21. Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body," 141.
22. Murray, "Notes to Self," 490.
23. Stolworthy, "Britney Spears Supported by Fans."
24. "Britney Spears: The Rolling Stone Covers."
25. Ryu, "Britney Spears' Nude Instagrams."
26. Maher, *A Woman Like Her*, 7-9.
27. Ibid, 8.
28. Ibid, 9.
29. Boone, "She Feared No One."
30. Ibid.
31. Chaudhry and Ajmal, "Qandeel Selfie."
32. Rogan, *Digital Femininities*, 131.
33. Annavarapu, "Main Apni Sabse Favourite Hoon."
34. Ibid.
35. Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, 1.
36. Wells, *The Photography Reader*, 444.
37. Saigol and Chaudhary, *Contradictions and Ambiguities of Feminism in Pakistan*, 40.
38. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," 1054.
39. Brock, "Instagram is Dead (It Just Doesn't Know it Yet)."

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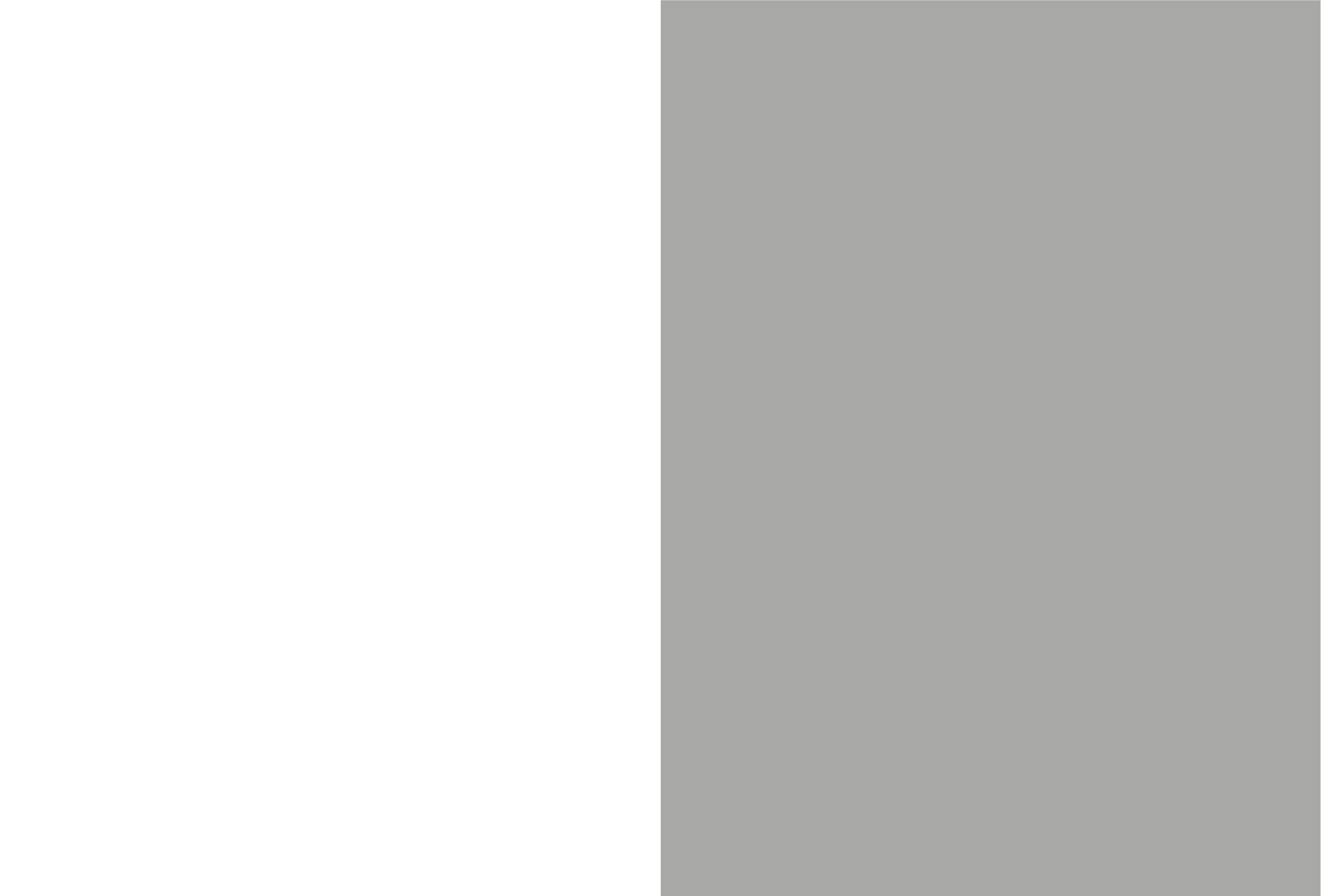

Spirit of the Sarangi

Zehra Jabeen Shah

This essay explores the *sarangi* within the tradition of Indian classical music and the social context of present-day Pakistan. As a current student of the *sarangi*, I am particularly interested in the mystical and spiritual elements associated with the instrument. I explore this predominantly through mythical tales, legends, and oral histories gathered from the only two professionally active *sarangi* players[1] of Pakistan: Gul Muhammad of Hoshiyarpur *gharana*[2] and Zohaib Hassan of Amritsari *gharana*. The essay focuses on the social life of the *sarangi*, a story in which it is a vessel and guide through which players act as messengers. I also investigate the trait of nurture associated with the gendering of the *sarangi* as female, and apply that to the nurturing roles of women in the two *sarangiyas'* musical journeys.

Zohaib Hassan is a seventh-generation *sarangi-nawaz* of Amritsari *gharana*, who currently resides in Lahore and follows in the footsteps of his grandfather, Hussain Bakhsh Khan Sahib. What makes Zohaib stand out — not just from *sarangiyas* of Pakistan but also of India, Nepal, and Bangladesh — is that he is the hereditary master of the four-finger technique,[3] a playing style unique to his *gharana*. Gul Muhammad, on the other hand, is a fifth-generation *sarangi-nawaz* of the Hoshiyarpur *gharana*, who currently lives in Karachi. He uses the three-finger playing style. Gul is Ustad Akhtar Hussain's son and grandson to well-known *sarangiya* Ustad Ghulam Muhammad.

For my inquiry, I take inspiration from Regula Qureshi,[4] who is one of a few female players of the *sarangi*. Qureshi is of Canadian origin and received her training from *sarangi* maestros in India and Pakistan. I hope that by giving written form to the oral knowledge and legends shared by the two *sarangiyas* mentioned, this essay will provide insight to readers who are otherwise at a far remove from the tradition and practices of the *sarangi*. As Qureshi says, "To convey this participatory dynamic is a major goal for me, since I see in it the very uniqueness of this oral culture."[5] Moreover, my writing shares the objective that Bates outlines for his essay:

> … my goal is not to provide a comprehensive overview or theory of the *saz*,[6] an instrument that (like most instruments) is grossly undertheorised. Rather, in order to explain the immense thing-power of the *saz*, I chose examples that demonstrate the heterogeneity of networks in which *sazes* have agency, and the multitude of attitudes towards and engagements with the *saz*… I also hope that this article will encourage others to publish their own *saz* stories, to expand our understanding of the social life of the *saz*.[7]

Spiritual Anecdotes

A society's narrative around an instrument and its community of practitioners is important for understanding the web of relationships in which it resides — relationships "between humans and objects, between humans and humans, and between objects and other objects."[8] A reimagining of organology within the field of ethnomusicology argues that the instrument is a living object or being. Instruments are protagonists of their stories who love and hate, break and make up, curse and laugh. Places such as instrument museums are mausoleums,[9] thereby being antithetical to their living condition. The instruments neatly curated behind glass windows and placed on wooden shelves in these places are considered dead. They are seen as relics of a dead musical past where the soul of the instrument was once awakened by the hands of the player.

Sue DeVale claims that organology's final destination is "to help explain society and culture", so that one could tap into the "essence" of other cultural traditions.[10] In that vein, she writes about "instrument-spirits as participants in rituals."[11] This idea is not new to the Indian classical music tradition. Within each *saz* and *gharana* resides a world of spirits and divine occurrences waiting to happen. Gul Muhammad also speaks about this phenomenon. He agrees that the *sarangi* has a story it is impatiently waiting to convey, and that because the *sarangi* is closer to the human voice than other musical instruments, it is only natural for it to speak.[12] The strings used in the sarangi are traditionally made of the gut of sheep or goats, and that is believed to bridge the gap between voice and instrument. *Sarangiyas* of the present — and past — prefer the traditional method of using gut strings as opposed to modern-day nylon equivalents, even though the former are more difficult to play with. This connection with 'voice' and 'spirit' invokes the vast range of spirituality experienced with, and by, the *sarangi* itself. Gul states that soul enters the *sarangi* once it is played, after which the player's soul also enters it. The two souls align and merge to bring about a sweet or melancholic melody. He emphasises that the instrument prior to being plucked is equivalent to a corpse; he must serenade and awaken it so it must live and return the favour to him. This is equated with the tradition of the *sarangi*-maker who births a *sarangi* in his workshop by making it from scratch.

Zakir Hussain in an interview[13] describes the spirituality of instruments:

> What I tell people is: try to experience the music a little bit, and if it actually excites you and makes you happy, then it has the potential to turn into a lifelong relationship. And it *is* a relationship. Every musical instrument has a spirit, and that spirit has to accept you. It's like in the film *Avatar*, when the Na'vi bond their hair to a horse or bird. That animal has to accept you as a friend before you can ride it. Only then can you fly the way you imagine yourself to. That's what music is all about. My own relationship with the *tabla* is such that we are both friends and lovers. We are together on this journey and every time I grow and find new shades in my musical expression, I find that the *tabla* is right there saying, "Okay, let's try this."

As Zakir Hussain talks of the instrument's spirit, so do the two *sarangiyas* of Pakistan. Zohaib Hassan narrates a personal life experience where his father and *ustad* got into a fight, which cost Zohaib his music lessons as well as his *ustad*. As he was in the initial stages of training, it was hard for him to keep up without a mentor. He stopped playing regularly and even began despising the *sarangi* since he was left with an untuned instrument, and didn't know what to do with it because he hadn't learnt the art of tuning yet. For weeks, Zohaib pleaded with his father to let him visit his *ustad*, even if just to have his *sarangi* tuned. His father did not budge and seemed so absolute in his decision that Zohaib thought his journey with the *sarangi* was over. Internally, however, his father was deeply worried for him and his *sarangi*. On the night of the final appeal, Zohaib made a prayer and went to sleep. The next morning, Zohaib's father woke up from a dream in which his own father, *sarangi-nawaz* Hussain Bakhsh Khan Sahib, came and said, "Don't worry, I will help Zohaib." Zohaib was shocked to discover that, after that day, he was able to tune the *sarangi* completely and all by himself. According to Zohaib, this is a clear case of the spirit of his grandfather guiding him.

For Gul Muhammad, however, *aamad*[14] is what truly guides and curates the playing experiences of a *sarangi-nawaz*. According to him, *aamad* enters a *sarangiya's* journey 40 to 50 years after one has dedicated their life to practising and playing. Gul labels this *aamad* as *ruhani ilm*, which translates to 'knowledge of a spiritual nature'. In this process of learning and acquiring knowledge, there enters a ray of light which cannot be seen; it can only be felt. He narrates his first spiritual and/or supernatural experience with the *sarangi* thus: he was alone, playing Raag *Puriya Dhanasaree* (an extremely sorrowful raag), without light, in the corner of his house. He was hours into practice when, suddenly, he saw the raag's *shakal* [face]. This terrified him and he instantly stopped playing, at which the face vanished. In this narration, it is important to note that when an Indian classical musician states that they saw the raag's 'face', they hardly mean it literally. This is part of the understood musical language where a raag's 'face' can come in any shape, form or colour. The face usually appears when the musician is sombre and deep into their practice, achieving a state similar to what is known as 'nirvana'.

A popular, deceased *sarangi-nawaz* of Pakistan, Hamid Husain, is known to have experienced the following:

> Practising for "real" is called *riyaz*.[15] I did six years of *riyaz*, while some do 12. During *riyaz* you do nothing but music. Your nourishment — that is, eating, sleeping — it [is] all music. In this way you do about 14 hours daily of music, practising, playing, often until you get into a transported state (*sama*). You can't stop… You delve deeply

> into the *raga* and you forget everything… I never got bored. Often I would kiss my fingers and embrace my instrument for the wonderful, great gift they are and the happiness they give.[16]

Further, the way in which both players chose and nurtured the *sarangi* can be seen as a sort of spiritual awakening. Both Zohaib and Gul extensively narrate how the hereditary instrument — that is, the *sarangi* — was not their first instrument of choice. For each, a stringed instrument from the other side of the world, the guitar, was their introduction to music. Zohaib's brothers also chose Western instruments. Zohaib's twin Sohaib (who currently plays the harmonium and accompanies Zohaib during classes and performances) had first gravitated towards the keyboard, while their youngest brother chose the drums. Zohaib, his brothers, and Gul all started playing music as teenagers.

Zohaib's journey as a guitarist ended soon when his uncle, Iftikhar, disapproved of it and pushed Zohaib's father to have him learn the family *sarangi* instead. Iftikhar went as far as insisting that he would pay for Zohaib's training. Zohaib was not willing. However, all that changed when he heard the *sarangi* being played for the very first time. A chord struck and he was not the same again. He broke into goosebumps and thought to himself, 'Oh my God, what is this thing?'[17] After that pivotal moment, he agreed to learn the *sarangi*. He states that this sudden change in his 'life path' was only possible in the way that "a child does not fear touching a snake." This metaphor might seem odd to the reader unfamiliar with the *sarangi*, but Zohaib's imagery hints at the association between the difficulty of mastering a *sarangi* and the animistic/spiritual qualities of a snake, in the context of the desert where the *sarangi* was originally played. Once the fear of mastering it is removed, the *sarangi* is understood, felt, and communicated with and that, according to *sarangiyas*, is the only real way to play it.

For Gul, the journey back to the *sarangi* was somewhat similar. At first, his main motivating factor was the immense respect his father, Akhtar Hussain, received as a regular *sarangi* player at the National Academy of Performing Arts (NAPA) in Karachi. After Gul and the instrument got well acquainted with one another, he found himself at a crossroads where he would try to leave the instrument but the instrument wouldn't leave him. "What have I done to myself?" he would scream in anguish. For Gul, befriending the *sarangi* took a long time, but it was a path he admits he would follow again if given another lifetime. The weeping sounds of the strings were so sweet and so bitter that all his pain would vanish. Despite the difficulty of mastering the instrument, neither player fell back on the easier stringed alternative, the guitar.

These accounts make clear that both players attained a spiritual awakening once they felt the soul of the *sarangi*, and therefore were not able to go back to its Western counterpart. Gul desperately tries to leave the *sarangi* but is unable to, attesting to the transformational and binding connection that ethnomusicologist Kevin Dawe describes: "musical instruments can transform minds and bodies, affecting states of mind as much as joints, tendons and synapses, ergonomics, and social interaction — the joy of playing musical instruments is a joy that comes from exhilaration felt at physical, emotional, and social levels."[18]

This speaks to another social dimension of the *sarangi*. There is an acknowledgement and even a blatant encouragement of 'friendship with pain'. Zohaib says:

> Roses also have thorns. If you want to touch pearls, you need to go into the ocean. To gain something precious, you need to endure pain... sweetness through pain. It is impossible to leave no marks on your fingers or body if you strive towards an instrument like the *sarangi* or sitar. It's the rule of nature.[19]

Where Zohaib encourages the merging of pain and pleasure, Gul states how he was initially unable to befriend pain and labels his early practice as not simply devoid of spirituality but an 'anti-spiritual' playing altogether. He hadn't yet "arrived";[20] he had not learnt the way a *sarangiya* enters the spiritual dimension that is integral to *sarangi* playing. To bring out the feel of a *sarangi*, Gul remarks, "one must befriend pain." There seems to be an unavoidable spiritual wealth that *sarangi* players inherit and consequently play with. It is one that guides the relationship between the *sarangiya* and their instrument.

The Gendered Sarangi

In the Indian classical music tradition, every instrument is assigned a gender which cannot change. The gender of the *sarangi* is female, so I occasionally refer to it with she/her pronouns in the essay. Zohaib Hassan also points out that she is called "*sarangi*" and "not *saranga*",[21] confirming her identity as female. Just as the *tabla* is male and the *Saraswati veena* is female, he explains, one can ascribe a female identity to the *sarangi*. Zohaib also goes on to say that the only way to befriend a *sarangi* is to make her your *saheli*.[22]

The *sarangi's* element is the desert and that is where she belongs. The spiritual passions of dwelling, wandering, and isolation that are found in the desert shape her. Zohaib narrates how these were the original traits of the *sarangi* and, over time, she took on a subcontinental aesthetic. The Indo-Persian Sufi musician, poet, and mystic, Amir Khusrau, is said to have invented the *sarangi*[23] in the desert, after which everyone adapted it to their own *gharana's rasa*.[24]

An instrument's pitch is one way to determine its gender.[25] Since the *sarangi* can be tuned from C sharp to F sharp, this wide range could suggest that she is female. The *sarangiyas* extend this female personification and describe the instrument as having a body and a personality that has particularly feminine traits. The body of a *sarangi* is divided into four parts — head, face, belly, and bottom — some of which can be considered feminine.

As described by both *sarangiyas*, and a third by the name of Khan Saheb Abdul Majid Khan of the Jaipur *gharana*,[26] traditionally the *sarangi* is seen as an 'accompanying' instrument rather than one which is played on its own.[27] In line with patriarchal notions that gender her female, the *sarangi* is expected to 'sacrifice her ego' in order for the singer to bask in the spotlight. Traditionally and historically, the vocalist is the most important performer of any musical gathering. *Sarangiyas* within the Indian classical music tradition further highlight the vocalist's significance and declare that the *sarangi*, as an accompaniment, must be female in nature. The *sarangi* is described as "adaptive" and "so perfect"[28] that she aids the *sarangiya's* performance by knowing exactly when to supplement the singing and respond to *sawaal jawaab*.[29] The *sarangi* is also a 'guiding spirit' and a 'humble companion' who must correct the vocalist when they miss a note or sing it incorrectly, almost acting how a 'good' mother or wife is expected to.

Gendering of instruments is not exclusive to the Indian classical music tradition, and goes back all the way to prehistoric times.[30] Gendered attribution is based on the perceived nature of the instruments, which are believed to either personify male or female spirits or 'abstract sexualities', as determined by the particular social context. For instance, instruments that were created from utensils used in the kitchen and around food were played only by women and were associated with women's music, whereas instruments used during warfare or hunting were attributed as male and mainly played by men.

In conversation with Zohaib and Gul, the presence of a musical environment with the care of women as its backbone is quite evident. I don't mean to create a myopic view of what it means to 'nurture' or 'support', but rather, offer an alternative acceptance of the role of the woman as a 'nurturer' within the current structures of limited female agency. Can we ask what it means to be female within this musical context? While questioning, can we re-own femininity? Is it possible to support the role of the nurturer or are the systematic divides at present too large, too complex of a matter? I don't have answers for these yet, but I still believe it is crucial to give voice to these perplexities. The following oral accounts illustrate these through the relationship between the *sarangi* and woman, and *sarangiya* and supporter.

I begin with the first case, where Gul Muhammad recounts his early childhood encounters with music through his grandmother.[31] When Gul was a boy, his *daadi* [paternal grandmother] would offer prayers early in the morning in the form of *ustayaan*, which is a form of song or singing.

She was the one who taught Gul's siblings and cousins how to sing and craft raags. Gul was a slow learner and was often criticised when unable to pick up the right notes: "You're a donkey! Idiot!" she would remark. Gul's eldest brother, however, was a keen learner and picked up the art as expected by their *daadi*. Unfortunately, that was not Gul's experience; his voice wouldn't match, so whenever his grandmother told him to sing, he would shy away and go out with his friends instead. Once he began his *sarangi* training, only then did he realise that his ear was already perfectly tuned. He attributes this skill entirely to his *daadi's* singing lessons, without which he would have been unable to pick up the *sarangi* as quickly as he did. His realisation comes with a tinge of regret though. He wishes he had been more present during those singing lessons.

Zohaib's mother played a similar role for him. When first starting out, Zohaib's *sarangi* strings would routinely break while playing, and it was his mother who would repair and replace them. Once, Zohaib's father told a wandering band of musicians that his wife re-strings his son's *sarangi*. The wandering band laughed at this preposterous claim; they thought it was not only ridiculous, but impossible. They believed that only a *sarangi-nawaz* could string a *sarangi* and no one else, let alone a woman. Zohaib's father, in a fit of both rage and pride, eagerly invited the band over that very second. This group of half a dozen male musicians arrived at their house and Zohaib's father ordered: "Break a string on your *sarangi* so that your mother can re-string it!" Zohaib did as he was told and tightened the string so much that it snapped under pressure. Zohaib's mother was put on the spot. She grabbed the coil of gut strings, arranged it over the instrument, mapped it neatly, cut the string at the right edges, and stitched it back on the *sarangi*. The musicians were shocked when they saw this and told Zohaib that with a mother like this, he would surely become a great *sarangi-nawaz* one day.

Zohaib's mother also possessed the talent to craft an entire *sarangi* bow from scratch. She was able to make the bow of the *sarangi* and effectively weave in horsehair, which many *sarangiyas* claim is difficult to manage. Again, the music community found this hard to digest as even Zohaib's *ustad*, Khawar Hussain,[32] had not acquired the skills to create a *guz* [bow]. When asked why no one believed his mother's capabilities, Zohaib replied, "because she was a woman." No one in Pakistan at the time knew how to make a bow, apart from *sarangi-nawaz* Faqir Hussain Khan, who passed this knowledge on to her because she was like a daughter to him. The process entails the following: once the horse's hair is shed, cleanse, compile, and carry it back home; burn it methodically; clean and comb the hair; stitch the hair in the frame of the bow, tighten, and finally, neaten. Zohaib's mother came from a family of tailors, so perhaps it is not surprising that she had the talent and wisdom to craft the *sarangi* bow and string.

In light of these oral narratives, we can think about the missing role of women as *sarangiyas* even as they continue to facilitate the musical journey of *sarangi* maestros. The *sarangi* itself

moves between vessel and guide, and in both of these guises it is strongly gendered as feminine. The patriarchal context in which the *sarangi* lives manifests itself in both these narratives. As Zohaib says,[34] for women to become professional *sarangi* players in Pakistan, "*jaan maarni paray gi*."

Notes

1. Locally known as *sarangi-nawaz*, and traditionally as *sarangiya*.
2. A stylistic tradition or lineage in North Indian classical music or dance.
3. The standardised technique for classical *sarangi* is playing with three fingers. Zohaib's *gharana* incorporates the pinky as the fourth finger.
4. "Master Musicians of India: Hereditary Sarangi Players Speak."
5. Qureshi, Regula. *Master Musicians of India*, 10.
6. Although Bates uses this in the context of Turkish instruments, *saz* in Hindi-Urdu translates to "an instrument" and is the definition I derive from this quote and essay.
7. Bates, "The Social Life of Musical Instruments," 375.
8. Bates, "The Social Life of Musical Instruments," 365.
9. Ibid.
10. DeVale, "Organising Organology," 366.
11. Ibid.
12. Gul Muhammad. Interview with the author, 18 May 2022.
13. Grillo, "In the Comfort Zone: A Conversation with Tabla Virtuoso Zakir Hussain."
14. Otherworldly wisdom.
15. Musical practice.
16. Qureshi, *Master Musicians of India: Hereditary Sarangi Players Speak*, 278.
17. Hassan, interview with the author, 30 April 2022.
18. Bates, "The Social Life of Musical Instruments," 368.
19. Hassan. Interview with the author, 30 April 2022.
20. Muhammad. Interview with the author, 18 May 2022.
21. He refers to the event of naming a baby, how names that end with an 'ee' sound make for stereotypically 'suitable' female names, as the 'aa'-ending sound does for names for boys.
22. The English translation loses its cultural meaning, but the closest is 'female friend'.
23. Hassan. Interview with the author. 30 April 2022.
24. Musical expression that translates closest to 'nectar', 'essence', 'taste', or 'flavour', referring to a particular aesthetic of sound, music, or an instrument that evokes emotion.
25. Libin, "Gender attribution," 1.
26. He was the disciple of legendary vocalist Alladiya Khan, who was also the founder of the Jaipur *Gharana*. Found in "Khan Saheb Ustad Abdul Majid Khan."
27. Traditionally, the sarangi is either played with a vocalist or with other *sarangis*, not solo.
28. "Khan Saheb Ustad Abdul Majid Khan."
29. Literally, question-answer. Refers to the improvisatory call-response playing among musicians.
30. Libin, "Gender attribution," 1.
31. Samaa Originals, "Karachi Kay Aakhri."
32. Ali, "On a Sad Note."
33. Hassan. Interview with the author. 30 April 2022.
34. This Urdu phrase means that you will have to make extraordinary effort; literally it translates to "you will have to kill yourself".

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Shared Spaces

Shamama Hasany

Art practice is a space for reflecting on interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. As Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa notes, 'making' requires dualistic insight. One must be tuned in to their internal mental space as well as how their body and sense of being are engaging with the world outside. This dialogue between the two marks the threshold between the self and the world for all those who engage with the work[1]. It allows one to inspect closely the spaces shared with others and oneself. The creative process thus becomes a site to reminisce, reconsider, and reflect upon/in private moments — a soliloquy of sorts, making connections between the making, the work, and those that inspire it.

I. Aisha

My best friend Aisha and I have shared many moments: moments of closeness, of intimacy, and of peace. We both speak a lot about warmth. This is why we love soup. We often imagine having our own soup cafe where people can come and partake in that familiar kind of warmth, alone or with loved ones. Perhaps this is why we like to eat our food out of bowls instead of plates. Plates are open. There is no privacy about plates. The form of a bowl articulates closeness and comfort. Your hands curve around a bowl the way they curve around a baby's head as you hold it carefully, or around the face of a loved one when you draw it in to look into their eyes, or when you try to gather some water from a stream while hiking on a warm summer day. Your palms come together tenderly, knowingly.

Making involves moving between listening, feeling, and thinking. The more you listen, the more you can discern the sensory details of the moment. The feelings demand a form and that form is dictated by reason: you make conscious decisions about translating emotional textures into tangible forms through the physical characteristics of a medium[2]. I wondered what a bowl for Aisha could look like, feel like, be like. It must be small and compact to fit her hands but large enough to hold a single serving, though not as big as a regular bowl because Aisha's servings tend to be small. Not too wide open at the rim but not too closed either. Its form must exude a sense of intimacy and security. Round, but not too round; more of a sturdy, steady, gradual round. Not too heavy, not too light either, something that is easy to hold but has enough weight to be reassuring. A bowl expressive of Aisha's hand, her personality, and our relationship in its form/making.

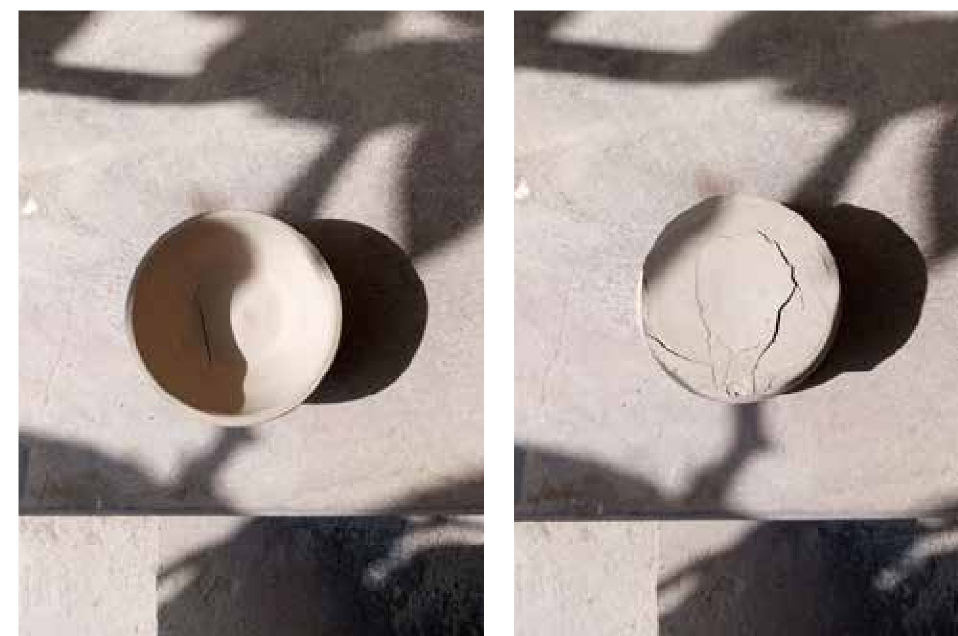
I decided to make a bowl for her. To make one, I needed to learn to throw clay on the wheel and make many bowls until I could get it right. That is easier said than done. Clay is a versatile medium. Multiple techniques can be employed to create a variety of beautiful forms. However, I learned that it comes down to the handling of the clay, as forcing the medium against its nature does not get good results. One must be receptive to the way a material responds and adjust accordingly. If it is not listening to you as you work with it, it means you are not listening to what it is telling you either. It reflects the state of mind being relayed to it through the body, when thoughts are tense, focus scatters and hands become unsure. A human being may be able to conceal how they respond to your energy when they come in contact with you, but a material never does. It responds according to its own properties. One must keep in mind various factors: the amount of moisture while kneading, the amount of moisture while throwing, the pressure you apply while shaping it, the angle at which you apply that pressure, and your own bodily posture. Clay is a primal medium which needs a truthful participation of both the self and body. The experience was so visceral that it forced me to confront my body and the resistance it was putting up to the conversation it was having with the clay.

Shamama Hasany, 2021, *Friendship, Centering, Practice*, Karachi. Photos by Shamama Hasany

Listening is closely related to being centred within yourself. It means being in tune with both your body and mind. If one is slightly out of sync with the other, it reflects in how you handle the material. I found that when I was not aligned in my body and mind, I was unable to centre the clay on the wheel. I was not listening to its resistance. All I could hear was my own rigidity. Struggling. In some instances, I was able to force it into a form. And then it would crack upon drying. It is the same with people — imposition creates dysfunction, whether with oneself or others.

Perhaps that is why I was drawn to pottery-making: it called attention to things I had been ignoring. When the clay work became tiring for me, I realised I needed stronger arms. I was not eating or sleeping properly, I was not taking care of my body as much as I was demanding it to perform. Far away from Aisha, distant from my mother, and distant from myself, I pushed myself to create while feeling emotionally depleted.

Creativity is a struggle when I am in low spirits. For years I had led myself to believe that artists create the best or most powerful work as a consequence of grave suffering. I realised that I like making art out of curiosity, not out of pain or anger. The less I was able to make, the more agitated and unproductive I felt. Forcing myself into a version that pushed me more and more out of alignment. That sort of wound-up mindset was what I was bringing to the process of learning to work with clay as well. And it showed. Pushing myself too hard makes me crack too. I struggle to make art. I struggle to do my job. I struggle to be myself.



Shamama Hasany, 2021, *Friendship, Centering, Practice*, Karachi. Photos by Shamama Hasany

II. Amma

My mother always says, 'be yourself and listen to your heart'. She leads with her heart and swears by the 'tiny voice', a subtle intuition which serves as a compass for all decisions and choices in life. It is a characteristic we both shared until I started silencing that tiny yet incisive voice in my heart. I adopted this habit when I met him while living away from home for a few years. I stopped listening to my heart as it raised the alarm for dangerous energy that made it feel uncomfortable over and over again.

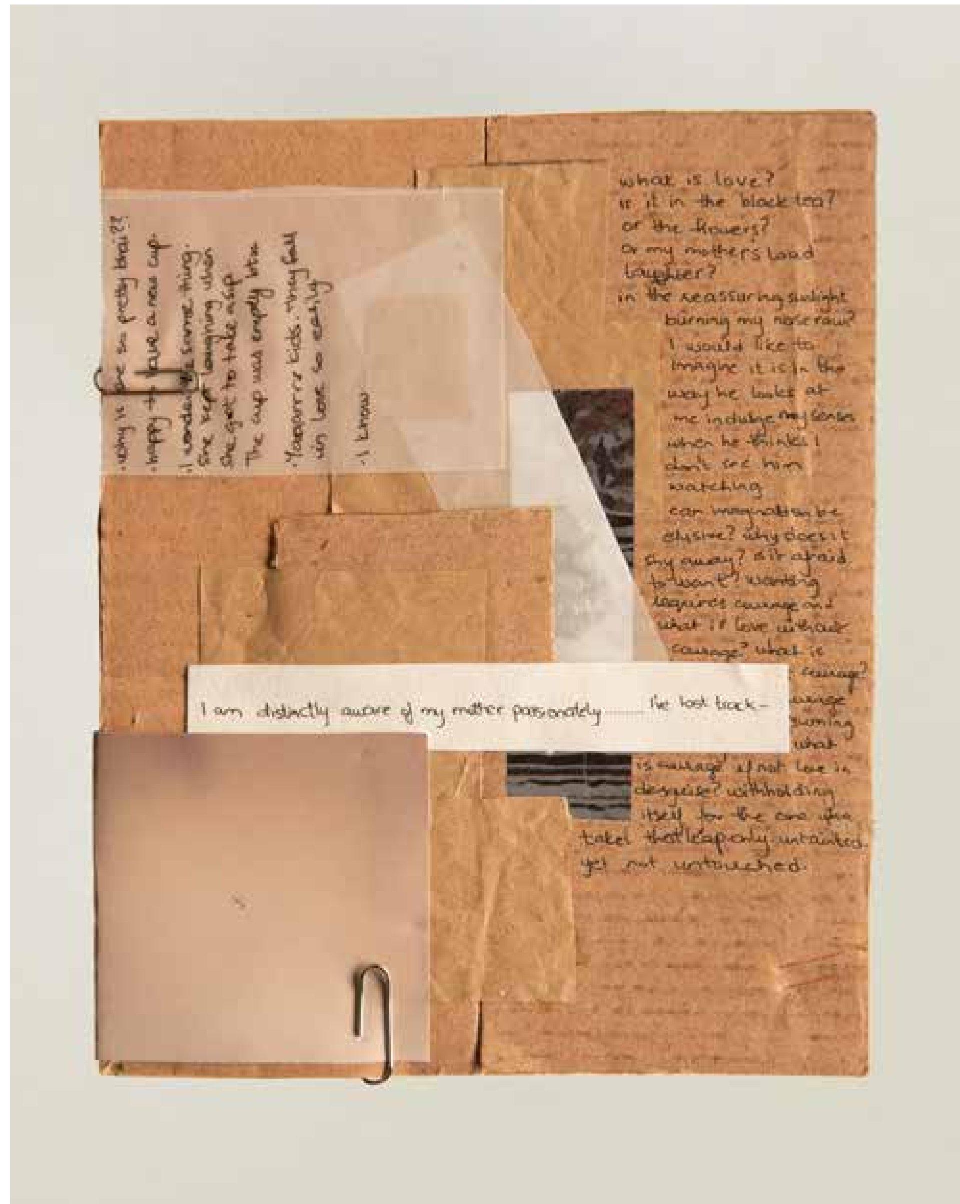
After a while it became difficult to distinguish how I really felt in almost every aspect of my life. It appears now that when my heart had clarity, my thoughts and my work were more coherent. Stifling my intuition, the source of this clarity, left me deeply disoriented and unable to channel any feelings or ideas into creative expression. My mother, seeing this dissonance upon my return, resolved to help me find my voice and myself again. Generous with her love and unafraid to share, she rented studio space for months even though I was barely able to make much art for a long time.

What is love? I think about it often. What can it look like? Is it in the black tea I make for myself? Or the flowers my sister and Aisha give me? Or in my mother's enthusiastic singing? Or in her loud laughter? Or in the reassuring sunlight burning my nose raw? I used to have a clear picture of what love was. I had a lot of it for her. I used to talk to her for hours: curled up on the bed, side by side at the dining table, on the phone when we were away from each other. I could feel her warmth and presence intertwined with mine in every space I occupied. I used to tell her everything until he came along and I could not understand what love was anymore. An emotional distance grew between us as I stopped sharing with her the details of my life. I could not be honest and tell her he made me sad. Years have passed since he left, yet I am unable to say to her what I really think and feel.

I hope now, as we share a home again, that love can exist in the absence of complete transparency. I hope now, as we mostly share check-ins — a sentence-long text or a momentary lingering in the doorway — that love still exists without hours of conversation.

To find my way back to where and how I first felt loved and understood its nuanced but transparent nature, I form a breadcrumb trail with fragments of conversations and images of spaces around our home. The practice becomes a way of acknowledging this fractured relationship with the idea or feeling of love and 'collecting' places or moments where I glimpse reminders of it. Directly in her expressions of unselfish concern and service towards me, indirectly around my physical surroundings in the play of light and shadow, quietly evoking a sensation of estrangement and normality simultaneously.

Shamama Hasany, 2021, *Excerpts from Shared Places*, Mixed Media, 10cm x 14.5cm each, Karachi. Photos by Humayun Memon



Shamama Hasany, 2021, *Excerpts from Shared Places*, Mixed Media, 17.5cm x 14cm, Karachi. Photo by Humayun Memon

Choosing what is included in the frame and what is left out helps me set the scene. Things like angle, temperature, and contrast articulate the mood, while the placement of images with each other and the text sets the tone. The types of paper surfaces and their contrasts against each other allow me to layer different emotions together in one piece. White is matter-of-fact, translucent is pensive, cardboard represents the mundane. The small scale of the images and text draws one in to engage with them. Making creative choices is an exercise in listening to my intuition as I attempt to communicate closely the very personal nature of the experience.

Shamama Hasany, 2021, *Excerpts from Shared Places*, Mixed Media, 9cm x 7cm, Karachi. Photos by Humayun Memon

III. Ammijan

In his book *Thinking Architecture*, Peter Zumthor describes the atmosphere of a moment and how memories of his deepest experiences inform his design choices[3]. He draws upon his memories as a child, of the details in his aunt's kitchen – from the lighting, to the feeling of the tiles beneath his feet, to the smell of oil paint – that link its atmosphere 'insolubly' to his idea of a kitchen[4]. I think about how memory inspires and materialises into work, and whether I can make work which is fully representative of the essence of my memories.

My memory of my grandmother is strongly connected to her favourite *motia* [jasmine] flowers. When I picture her face, it reminds me of her subtle scent of *motia*, of *paan*, her gentle smile, brave, steady gaze and classically-trained singing voice. I remember her singing *Ranjish Hi Sahi*; later, when I was quite a bit older, I discovered a man known as Mehdi Hasan sang it originally. I was so used to hearing certain songs in her voice that it was disenchanting to come across the original versions of *Chaap Tilak* and *Man Tarpat Haari Darshan Ko Aaj*. When I was six, she used to have me and my sister sing *So Ja Rajkumari So Ja* along with her before our afternoon nap. When I found *So Ja Rajkumari So Ja* was a song from an Indian film, *Zindagi*, from 1940, I dared not listen to the original.

I often wonder, with a wistful sense of longing, how it would have felt to have her around now. Now that I have grown up enough to consciously appreciate a much older female presence in my life. To learn from or confide in. Perhaps I am drawn to reconciling a longing for her by giving my memories of her a tangible form. But since she is not here and I can only imagine what it could have been like, I oscillate between a memory of her reassuring presence and a daydream of how it would have felt today. What could a sense of imagined reassurance feel or look like for me? I am unsure about the medium that would help me articulate it aptly. A *siyah qalam*[5] rendition of a handful of *motia* on 300gsm cold-pressed Arches paper, perhaps. Or tiny paper *motia* flowers? What type of paper would best represent the memory of her warmth? Would fabric be better? Perhaps silicone? Plaster of Paris casts? Ceramic? How would I preserve the structural integrity of the delicate flowers for casting? Or should I carve them myself, bit by bit?

I keep returning to a poem I had once written about what Ammijan's loving memory felt like. I wrote it in ten minutes and, many months later, began thinking about what physical form my memories of her should take. I decided to title it *White*. Sometimes the title comes before the form, and the moment comes before the title. It is all in flux until it forms over time (sometimes hours, sometimes months) around one anchored sensation. The sensation stems from various associations related to the idea or memory of the subject.

Shamama Hasany, 2021-2022, *Excerpts from Shared Places*, Digital Photograph, Karachi. Photos by Shamama Hasany

The colour of the morning paper
And the sunlight falling on it
Through the window panes
From between the tree leaves
Half the color of old, faded photographs
of times when love flowed freely
Among neighbors and relatives
The color of sugar generously stirred
into hot cups of tea shared by
friends and family
All the more sweeter
The color of Gajak which was Nana's delight
And kheer which Choti Khala made
And of Motia, delicate and reassuring
Just like Ammijan who loved them
The color of flour which makes warm,
crispy parathas to go with pickles
in the morning
And the talcum powder my grandparents'
room smelled like
The color of dupatta's and ghararas
all grandmothers wore
of safety, reassurance and love
Simpler times and simpler joys

_white

Shamama Hasany, 2021, *White*, Digital Photograph, Karachi. Photo by Shamama Hasany

The visual form must be delicate in a strong, enduring way. Like she was. Gentle in her fortitude even with the cancer that took her eventually (more than a decade ago), but not until Nana passed away some days earlier. She knew he could not have lived without her, so she held on for just a little while longer. I saw love in her quiet devotion to him, to the *paan* (*Dhaka ka Sanchi*) she deftly put together for herself, to singing, to loving. I suppose that is where Amma learned it too, this generous way of loving that is her compass in life.

The process of making thus becomes a way to reflect on the self as one reflects on relationships, whether it culminates in the form of a resolved piece or not. In attempting to hold space for, and answer questions about the way a bond with another is experienced, it draws attention to the preoccupations of one's self. Bringing together what one has known thus far and what one may discover along the way, it makes space for new ways of thinking about the same person as time passes. Sometimes the process requires significant back-and-forth, sometimes it is short and straightforward, and sometimes it has to be left alone for a while until there is greater clarity. It all comes down to listening closely and holding space, for another and for yourself, for what one works on and by extension, for the things one values most in life. In my case, it is a search for reconciliation with my experiences of love.

Notes

1. Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand*, 19-20.
2. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 11.
3. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 6.
4. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 5.
5. *Siyah Qalam* (Persian: *Siyah* - 'Black', *Qalam* - 'Pen'): A miniature painting technique in which the image is created by gradually building up the value using black pigment greatly diluted with water.

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Zumthor, Peter. *Thinking Architecture*. Bael: Birkhauser, 1999.

Zehra Nabi is a writer based in Karachi. She earned her MFA from Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, where she also taught creative writing and served as Assistant Editor at *The Hopkins Review*. Her non-fiction and fiction writings have appeared in *Dawn, Newsline*, *Herald*, *The Express Tribune*, *Subtropics*, *Glimmer Train*, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of two All Pakistan Newspapers Society awards for her investigative features published in *Newsline*. She presently teaches courses on literature, film studies, and academic writing at the Institute of Business Administration, Karachi, and the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVS), Karachi.

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Sarah Ahmed is an Assistant Professor of Health Sciences and Women's and Gender Studies at Providence College, Providence. Her research lies at the intersection of global health, gender and development, and has been published in *Gender and Society*, *PLOSOne*, and *SSM-Population Health*. Her current book project examines the structural and cultural dimensions of an internationally funded healthcare initiative — the Global Polio Eradication initiative — through the everyday lives of female health workers in South Punjab, Pakistan.

Arooj Aurangzeb is a socialist political organiser and a Punjabi street theatre artist based in Lahore. She is a strong advocate for the restoration of student unions in Pakistan. Arooj's interests include pedagogy of alternate learning, anthropology of revolution, performative politics, and culture of protest. She is currently working as a Research Assistant on a project called 'Partition of Identity'.

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Zehra Jabeen Shah is a poet, writer, and oral historian based in Karachi. For the last four years, she has been learning to play the *sarangi*, under the mentorship of Gul Muhammad of Hoshiyarpur *gharana*. She is currently working on a project that traces the sound of the folk *sarangi* in interior Sindh and Tharparkar, with a focus on women in music. She is also a faculty member at Habib University, Karachi, where she teaches literature and writing. You can find her on Twitter/Instagram: @zehrajabeenshah

Shamama Hasany is a multidisciplinary artist based in Karachi. She received her BFA from the National College of Arts, Lahore. Her practice explores themes of intimacy, memory, and the self through the mediums of painting, drawing, photography, and text. She has exhibited her work in Karachi and is currently pursuing her M.Phil in Art and Design at IVS.

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