

Becoming A Problem¹

Rahma Muhammad Mian and Zahra Malkani

Dear Rahma,

In the past year or so, we, like so many other women at universities across Pakistan, have been engaged in multiple battles at our workplaces—against pervasive and unchecked institutionalised misogyny on one hand, and against the acceleration of surveillance and censorship on the other. We have spent so much time strategising, processing, reflecting, supporting each other as well as others—and though there is much processing and thinking and healing left to do still, I think we have learnt a lot: about the nature of power and resistance, about all the ways in which the neo-colonial university is an incredibly fraught and violent space, the ways in which it has been both a space of immense hope and deep connections, and yet a site of some very painful political becomings and unravellings. Sara Ahmed says that perhaps when we put these pieces back together, we are also putting back together ourselves. Or perhaps, a new self? As difficult as these lessons have been at times, I also believe that every lesson is a gift, and I am grateful to have had you and to have you still to do this learning work with. <3 <3 <3

Thinking through the theme of this volume, thinking about "concrete as material, method and metaphor", I immediately think of Sara Ahmed's writings on "institutional walls", "those hardenings of histories into barriers in the present, barriers that we experience as physical, barriers that are physical."² The wall is history made concrete. This invocation of a wall feels especially poignant to me not just as a metaphor for all the barriers we encounter in our attempts to transform the institution, but also as a reminder of the immensely securitised architecture of the university. We work in a space surrounded by literal walls that are over thirty feet high, covered in barbed wire and manned by dozens of armed guards. No one can see in from the outside and no one can see outside into the city from within. That the university is deeply entangled, invested, and complicit in the ongoing securitisation and militarisation of this city is so visibly inscribed into its form.³

We could spend forever thinking through and talking about what all these walls (visible and invisible) that we encounter at the neo-colonial university, look and feel like, how they work. One image I keep thinking of is from an artwork by Spanish artist Santiago Sierra. Sierra's work engages with the nature of labour in contemporary capitalist society, often to make visible invisible forms or conditions of labour. *THE WALL OF A GALLERY PULLED OUT, INCLINED 60 DEGREES FROM THE GROUND AND SUSTAINED BY 5 PEOPLE* was a work Sierra produced in

2000 at a gallery in Mexico City where five workers were paid to stand every day, for four days, holding up a gallery wall that had been pulled out and inclined at 60 degrees, to keep it from falling over. The work was an irreverent undoing of the pristine and perfect white-cube pretensions of the art gallery and an act of making visible the invisible and abject labour the gallery and the art world is built upon. It brought a sense of precarity and instability into the gallery space, highlighting the illusory nature of the clear edges and concrete walls of the white cube, of art institutions.

Which brings me to the precarious and unstable nature of the neo-colonial university, the aspirational world-class university in Pakistan. Its cold, hard, heavy walls held up by the constant labour of those who are treated worst by it—most often, women. How often it feels like that is all we are doing as university workers—putting everything we have into holding up these high, heavy walls that want to crush us, that are crushing us. Hard walls held up by soft bodies. And what if we let go, let it crumble and fall, let it shatter? Perhaps we could build something new, something beautiful in its place, from its remains. A feminist monument to the death of the university! What would that look like?

I'll stop at that thought for now!

<3

Dear Zahra,

Thank you. We have indeed built a beautiful friendship in difficult times. I am incredibly grateful for you, and for this opportunity to process in this way with you, to think through the walls we have both come up against.

In response to your question, the sad bit is that these walls will not crash and shatter because at its core the Pakistani neo-colonial university thrives on this brokenness. It is in the deception of appearing perfect, so modern, with its snazzy buildings held up by all kinds of exploited labour, that its power lies. It exists only to ensure that it appears functional; this fiction fuelled by insincerity and fear, driven by a base survival instinct. It will survive us leaving, just as it survived the departure of many before us who left. Just like all the other toxic workplaces I have already left. It will not collapse because it will and already has found other docile (mostly unmale) bodies to run it, hold the fiction aloft, and eventually those bodies will exhaust, and new bodies will be found. The cycle of (ab)use, exhaust, dispose, replace will repeat. In an email offering encouragement to students, a friend quoted Martin Luther King, Jr.—“the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice”—and it made me wonder about the use of hope. Wouldn't acceptance be a better ally here as we piece back ourselves? There is great power in acceptance. Accepting that what we are running up against is entrenched exploitation. The modern private university emerges from an incredibly patriarchal and racist past; and its world-class Pakistani extension can be no different. If anything, it makes for a unique twist: capital working in cahoots with forces that are powered by mediocrity, nepotism, and corruption. What is happening here is very much part of the global restructuring of higher education, which as pointed out by Mbembe is closely related to “transnationalization of elites and the reproduction of their hegemonic power”⁴.

It is almost as if there is a parallel structure to the securitised, barbed wire walls you speak of so beautifully, a skeletal frame of opaque, ghost walls. These invisible walls are what keep the modern institution standing, enabling it to stumble from crisis to crisis. Invisible walls we run into when we raise questions about the hyper-securitisation of the campus, about incidents of censorship and surveillance, are connected with the walls we come up against when negotiating the conditions of work here; how staff, students and faculty are treated; contracts, confidentiality clauses, student loan agreements and so on. We witnessed the way in which these invisible walls can suddenly become visible, concrete, when the institution is faced with resistance, a crisis.⁵ As complaints around gender and institutionalised misogyny start to seep through cracks, threatening to unravel the facade, the walls become harder, more apparent—making visible the invisible structure of exploitation at the heart of the neo-colonial world-class university project.

This visibility comes at great cost, not just for faculty who have battled institutional sexism but also for so many students who make themselves incredibly vulnerable, who put their pain out there for it to be met with "file a complaint" in broken systems, in lieu of sexual harassment processes and policies. The tears that were shed in each other's offices, and those of our other colleagues, the tears shed by students in our offices, in corridors—we all carry the pain of that, with the walls as our witness. Where the institution failed to support, we all found support in each other—beautiful connections formed in pain, because of the pain, and in spite of the pain. And we welcome that pain; opening up to our pain opens us up to so much insight, to equanimity and freedom.

Indeed, we have learnt a lot about power and resistance—like power, opportunities for resisting are also everywhere and there are many ways to resist. By walking in together to meeting rooms that are hostile, by speaking up when everyone else is silent and complicit in institutional *pardaposhi* and respectability politics,⁶ by writing killjoy⁷ emails pointing out inconsistencies and contradictions, demanding change and transparency even if its met with "who is she to ask for transparency?", refusing to serve on committees when the system is set up against victims, ultimately even by resigning. By refusing to be part of the structure of the institution, we refuse to be a part of that reproduction of power. The only way to succeed in the neo-colonial institution is to learn and know how to reproduce power, and we do not want that knowledge. To borrow from Audre Lorde: "your personal visions and connections, the shared experience is what has and will continue to lay the groundwork for our political action, for collective, transformative politics."⁸ Like true Millennials, "we found love in a hopeless place" and will continue to build this solidarity and connection outside the concreteness of institutions, where we can draw and redraw boundaries in collaboration and, importantly, with love and openness.

Love and peace,

Rahma

Dear Rahma,

Your last point, on refusal, reminded me of a quote from Jack Halberstam's introduction to Moten and Harney's *The Undercommons* that I really love. Halberstam writes: "The path to the wild beyond is paved with refusal."⁹ "The wild beyond", or what Moten and Harney call "the undercommons", is a site of connection and collusion for "the maroon community of the university". We connect and we collude, in struggle and in study. Against the alienation of work in the university, within and through the cracks in its walls even as they cave in, we find the thrill and pleasure of radical connection. I feel it was very much in this wild beyond that you and I came together! <3 Moten writes, "I believe in the world and want to be in it. I want to be in it all the way to the end of it because I believe in another world and I want to be in that."¹⁰ It was horrible, horrible to have to fight these battles, to struggle, to have to make incredibly difficult decisions. Of course, we broke. But Moten's words also make me think of the beauty in this break, the truthfulness of it, the beauty of an acceptance of and a commitment to this antagonism, the beauty and the thrill of the connections and care and collectivity that emerge from struggle, the thrill of inhabiting a space where their pervasive lies no longer hold: the wild beyond. :)

When we refuse to comply with the institution, we refuse to affirm—to uphold—the logic, the lies, the façade, the charade, the walls of the university. Halberstam writes "when we refuse, Moten and Harney suggest, we create dissonance and more importantly, we allow dissonance to continue."¹¹ Which reminds me of what Adrienne Rich says in her text *On Women and Honor*: "when a woman speaks the truth, she creates space for more truth around her."¹² I think also, as I write this, of Fanon, in *Black Skin White Masks*, writing, "these truths were a fire in me then. Now I can tell them without being burned."¹³ We know what it feels like to be burnt, to burn. To know, to tell the truth.

Which brings me to the multiplicity of lies and erasures upon which the façade (literal and metaphorical) of the neocolonial, world-class university is built. I find this new model of the world-class university in the third-world country very fascinating, even just in the visuality of it. Like Bahria Town, like DHA City, anywhere/everywhere identikit architectures, completely divorced from any local specificity, securitised, gated communities, global aspirations. As Paul Virilio argues in *City of Panic*, securitised enclaves and gated communities serve as a tactic to further immerse the city in a new militarised aesthetic and create forms and structures of living that divide, fragmenting any sense of an urban community fabric.¹⁴ Such transformations in the urban landscape serve to further entrench the city's populace in a state and sense of total war. This collusion in the militarisation of the city is of course extended through the discourse of the liberal arts university being committed to countering violent extremism through "liberal" education—thereby framing the university as a participant, weaponising the university in the

war on terror; placing the university at the service of the state, spreading panic, capitalising on war. The 30-foot-high wall encloses, covers, obscures us from seeing what lies within. But perhaps the walls are really all we need to know about the university; perhaps the most truthful account of the university lies in these outer architectures, these facades, and it is within these walls that we are all immersed in and enacting these lies, charades of liberalism and academic freedom. These walls, barriers, armed guards, barbed wire is the university at its most truthful about itself.

Lately we have seen again and again the ways in which the "liberal" private university in Pakistan frames itself as an endangered bastion of progressive thought under threat from conservative forces outside, and time and again deploys this narrative in order to censor and silence dissent within the institution—whether that is targeted at feminist students highlighting sexual harassment on campus or faculty organising lectures or conferences critical of the state. In the first case, it highlights the ways in which women are especially vulnerable with the increasing securitisation of the university, and how women are time and again called upon to make sacrifices, step back, and shut up for the sake of more noble/urgent/"progressive" causes (i.e. the university). The university is figured as a bulwark against the creeping ever-present threat of terror in the current everywhere war. The university is weaponised, at service of the Pakistani state in this war, and just like the state, it demands we make sacrifices and practice restraint during these unending "exceptional" times. In this imaginary, agitating campus, feminists are seen as being in cahoots with conservative forces, in the age-old spirit of identifying feminists fighting for safety as illiberal, prudes, killjoys etc. But we know the only one in cahoots with conservative forces is the private university colluding in the state's ubiquitous securitisation project.

Political becoming/becoming a problem: to fight pervasive misogyny, harassment, assault in the militarised, weaponised university, smack in the middle of a brutal, everywhere war. The stakes are so high. It feels almost unthinkable and yet women across campuses in Pakistan have been doing it: struggling, connecting, "staying with the trouble".¹⁵ As Donna Haraway puts it, a way of living (and dying) in these difficult times that embraces kinship and collectivity, and that is neither misguided by optimism nor paralysed by defeatism. "Our task," she writes, "is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places."¹⁶

I can't help but think about the *naara* [slogan] '*girti hui deevan ko/ ek dhakka aur do*'; how powerful and yet how outdated it can sound in this moment where the walls we encounter are so layered, so fortified by multiplicities of boundaries and barriers, visible and invisible. It almost sounds like a relic from another time. I guess we need to come up with some new *naaras*?

Love <3

Dear Zahra,

*Yunhi hamesha ulajhti rahi hai zulm se khalq
Na in ki rasm nayi hai, na apni reet nayi
Yunhi hamesha khilaye hain hum ne aag main phool
Na un ki haar nayi hai na apni jeet nayi
—Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Nisar Main Teri Galiyon Ke...¹⁷*

I think that last line is beautiful; what do you think, can it be our new *naara*? I am always moved by how he manages to leave us with a deep, joy-giving hope in the most hopeless of contexts. He truly is the poet for the extreme despair of advanced capitalism, because maybe it is precisely in accepting, acknowledging, and allowing the pain that we emerge victorious. Or how about from the recent feminist, post-humanist anthem¹⁸ *Humsaye Maa Jaye*¹⁹ that the fantastic sisters Bushra Ansari, Asma Abbas, and Neelam Ahmad Bashir have given us:

*Aja dowain ataman nu chullay wich paiye,
Phatday phattakeyan te thumke chalaiye,
Ral gidda paaiye, ral gidda paaiye²⁰*

The poem emerges out of a short but intense almost-war that was fought as much on and for social media as it was fought IRL, in the air, and on land (and behind closed doors in USA, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Pakistan, and India). Released independently on her *YouTube* channel but in the context of intense state/military-led misinformation, the poem becomes an important signifier for post-humanist blurring of boundaries: not just transcending the obvious India–Pakistan break but also the important material–discourse, nature–human, human–nonhuman (the bomb) dualisms. Humans (unlike neighbours actually), birds, water, sun, air, atom bombs (science), discourse (*TV-alay kende ne te tu meri weeri aye*), materiality (the securitised wall/ border/ LOC with the shards of broken glass) all connected in a network, all of us becoming via intra-acting²¹ with one another. Rosi Braidotti says today when advanced capitalism is cognitive, life has become "the" capital and capitalism is all that lives.²² Then why do we expect resistance to it to be extraordinary, one big final victory when it is in the everyday, where we are all entangled, that we must and should resist. In the video, when Bushra Ansari finally articulates the very real fear—if the atom bomb were to go off, it will wipe the neighbours along with the birds and the crows—Asma Abbas responds with urgency—*taap* the wall and come to me—to which Ansari responds resignedly:

*Kinj tappa kandnu
Kinj tappa kandnu*

*Kand utay lagga sheesha sanu chub jaye ga,
Cheer dega dil, sada lahu wi wagaye ga*

*Kaash koi aa ke veri sheeshiyaan nu kadde
Dilaan diyan zakhma te phaaye koi rakh de²³*

And here Neelam and her sisters give us the respite we need: it is okay if we run into these walls (soft or hard, metaphorical or concrete, institutional or national). If we can't break them down or transcend them, if we can't scale them, get to the other side—it is okay. It is enough to love, to long, to show love, throw our *chunnis* over—an exchange that not only defeats the purpose of the wall, it transcends and confuses notions of ownership and honour (yours or mine or ours?), ideas of winning and losing, of success and, in true Cyborgian sense, take pleasure in this confusing.²⁴ Let's dance, let's rejoice...

*Hor kuj nai chal chunniyan wattaliye,
Mahiye tappay ga kay ral khushiyan manaliye²⁵*

"We live in a post-Aurat March 2019 Pakistan" read a story about the sexist *Facebook* group run by male students that prompted a protest at a private university.²⁶ I smiled at that thinking that Pakistan is very young—it has not even been a month since the Aurat March. But, clearly, we are finding ourselves in an alternate space-time because two days later, at least a hundred students showed up to protest. This visual is a powerful one: as an elite private university, this is a site of power, and of knowledge dripping in power—contesting here is contesting in the heart of the machinations of power. So today is a special day for me, for us, and for all young non-male students in private educational universities across the country. Even if "nothing big" comes of it, no normative indicators of success—policy change, due process being followed, punishment etc.—I take it as a win. That it happened is enough—it has set a precedent, it will always inspire, give us joy. As the Undercommoning Collective says,

The undercommons deserves to enjoy and reinvent all that it produces, which is to say everything. It is our collective labor and knowledge that university-as-such prepares, consumes, digests and uses to reproduce itself: we are mobilizing to reclaim that labor and knowledge, within, against and beyond the university-as-such, in the name of producing something monstrous.²⁷

What we and our friends across Pakistani campuses dealt with last year and continue to deal with today is trying to create this monstrous New. And we are not alone; this reclamation is part of a larger story, a story emerging from all corners of the world, of resistance, a rising tide because time's truly up. Of course it is, and it has been confusing and painful—we are in the eye of the storm. Yes, our pain in staging the resistance against institutional misogyny has come at a great cost. But what birth is pain-free? Creation and change are never easy, and we are

creating change. And of course we don't do this because it is easy; in fact, we do this precisely because it is painful, difficult work.

*Haan talkhi-e-ayyam abhi aur barhay gi
Haan ahl-e-sitam, mashq-e-sitam kartay raheinge
Manzoor ye talkhi, ye sitam hum ko gavaara
Dam hai to mudava-e-alam kartay raheinge²⁸
—Faiz Ahmed Faiz, *Loh-o-Qalam**

We will continue resisting in whatever ways we can. And when all else fails, we will dance and say to each other:

*Kehnde zamanay nu jo vi kuch kehna hay
Sada ek gawand sada saday liye gehna hay*

*Choti moti gal howay dil nu nai laidi
Tuayn meri maa jayi, meri hamsai n²⁹*

We are ready for this total war, this never-ending battle; hell—it is our home, and we are winning. Community is our asset in this; you, the feminist *sangha*, are the assets we need. And the acceptance that there is no one big battle that has to be fought. We fight millions every day; we win some we lose some but we keep going, together, as we walk away from the concrete walls of the neo-colonial university into the wild beyond.

Love and peace,

Rahma

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Special thanks to Rabia Mehmood for helping with the Punjabi.

Notes

1. "When we give problems their names, we can become a problem for those who do not want to register that there is a problem (but who might, at another level, sense there is a problem). You can become a problem by naming a problem." See Sara Ahmed, "Introduction: Sexism - A Problem with a Name," *New Formations: A Journal of Culture, Theory & Politics* 86 (2015), p. 9.
2. Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 136.
3. Something I have been exploring with my collaborator Shahana Rajani as part of our project Karachi LaJamia, and which we have written about here: "The Militarized University and The Everywhere War," *Karachi LaJamia*, 2018 <<http://karachilajamia.com/index.php/project/the-militarised-university/>>.
4. Achille Joseph Mbembe, "Decolonizing the University: New Directions," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15(1) (2016), p. 37.
5. I struggled with what to call and how to refer to the series of incidents we experienced, the struggles around institutionalised misogyny that led us into these conversations—and I ended up using "crisis" in the end despite Sara Ahmed's encouragement of the act of naming: "When we put a name to a problem, we are doing something. A name comes after an event. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde describes the words racism and sexism as 'grown-up words'. We encounter racism and sexism before we have the words that allow us to describe what we encounter. Sexism and racism: if they are problems we have given names, the names tend to lag behind the problems. To give a problem a name can change not only *how* we register an event but *whether* we register an event. To give the problem a name can be experienced as *magnifying the problem*; allowing something to acquire a social and physical density by gathering up what otherwise remain scattered experiences into a *tangible thing*. Making sexism and racism tangible is also a way of making them appear outside of oneself, as something that can be spoken of and addressed by and with others. It can be a relief to have something to point to, or a word to allow us to point to something that otherwise can make you feel alone or lost." See "Introduction: Sexism - A Problem with a Name" (2015), p. 9.
6. Writing an important piece about the critiques of Aurat March by feminists like Kishwar Naheed, Sadia Khatri warns against the "boundaries of respectability" and feminist gatekeeping. See Sadia Khatri, "Should Feminists Claim Aurat March's 'Vulgar' Posters? Yes, Absolutely," *DAWN.COM*, March 15, 2019 <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1469815>>.
7. Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects) in Polyphonic Feminisms: Acting in Concert," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 8.3 (Summer 2010) <http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed_08.htm#end1>.
8. Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House, Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), p. 113.
9. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Studies* (Wivenhoe: Autonomedia, 2013), p. 8.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
12. Adrienne Cecile Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (London: Virago, 1980).
13. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Press, 2008), p. 2.
14. Paul Virilio, *City of Panic* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).
15. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2016.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
17. In just this way has humanity tangled with tyranny always
Nor are their traditions new and nor are our beliefs new
In just this way always have we bloomed flowers from fire
Nor is their defeat new nor is our victory new.
Maniza Naqvi, "Expressing Fidelity Through Sorrow's Hope," *3quarksdaily.com*, February 21, 2011 <<https://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2011/02/expressing-fidelity-through-sorrows-hope.html>>.
18. Bushra Ansari and Asma Abbas, "Humsaye Maa Jaye," *BushraAnsariOfficial YouTube*, accessed May 20, 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IffLUlwY0AE>>.
19. Bushra Ansari, in an interview, says the title "Humsaye Maa Jaye" comes from the South Asian tradition of thinking of your neighbour as your sibling, as having the same mother—*HUM News*, "In Conversation With Bushra Ansari On Her New Song," accessed May 20, 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifmqLMJrhuhw>>.
20. Come, let's throw these bombs into the stove
And when they explode, let's dance to the beat
Let's dance, let's dance.
21. Intra-acting instead of interacting. Feminist theorist and theoretical physicist Karen Barad in offering her agential realist framework uses the neologism to signify "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies": unlike interactions which assume that there are independently existing entities or agents that preexist their acting upon one another, intra-actions "queers the familiar sense of causality (where one or more causal agents precede and produce an effect), and more generally unsettles the metaphysics of individualism (the belief that there are individually constituted agents or entities, as well as times and places)". See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 33.
22. Rosi Braidotti, Keynote Lecture - Posthumanism and Society Conference, Program of Liberal Studies, New York University, Centre for the Humanities Utrecht University, *YouTube*, May 2015, accessed May 19, 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3S3CulNbQ1M>>.
23. How do I climb this wall?
These shards of glass on the wall will cut me
Tear through my heart and make me bleed
I wish someone would come and take away these shards
Heal the wounds of the heart.
24. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 150.
25. If nothing else, let's exchange our scarves
Sing our melodious songs and rejoice.
26. Ramsha Bhatti, "Guys At LUMS Are Being Called Out By Female Students For This Disgustingly Sexist Closed Group," *MangoBaaz*, April 6, 2019 <<https://www.mangobaaz.com/guys-at-lums-are-being-called-out-by-female-students-for-this-disgustingly-sexist-closed-group>>.
27. Undercommoning Collective, "Undercommoning within, against and beyond the University-as-Such," *ROAR Magazine*, June 5, 2016, accessed May 19, 2019 <<https://roarmag.org/essays/undercommoning-collective-university-education/>>.
28. Yes, the bitterness of time will keep on spawning,
just as the tyrants will persist in their cruelty.
Cheerfully I'll give in to bitterness, this tyranny too I'll endure
so long as there's breath, I'll seek ever new cures for torments.
Shiv K. Kumar, in "Poets About Poetry," *Ghazala's Weblog*, June 16, 2008 <<https://ghazala.wordpress.com/2008/06/16/poets-about-poetry/>>.
29. Let the world say what it wants
Our sweet neighbourhood is precious to us
Don't take this to heart
You are like my sister, my neighbour.

