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EDITORIAL

The manifesto of this year's edition must be laid out in earnest before it is to be read. Every year, the editor is expected to conjure up a "theme," a policy, responsible for anchoring the content sprawled across these pages. Let us, then, proclaim: the present epoch of The Ravi, for the most part, shall not witness any departure from the established norm. We are sticking to tradition and will respect old prejudices. That all writing sprung forward by our generous contributors must maintain originality of thought and beauty of form. True, there are experimental pieces within this issue, but anything experimental has met the prerequisite of being exceptional; submissions which are below standard ought not to be allowed to explore realms of literature hitherto unexplored.

No doubt, this present metric of judgement has been severely jolted by Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Models (LLMs), which now have seeped into all forms of creative writing; these magnificent, digital torchbearers of technology – to whom most of our beloved young writers have surrendered their once-beautiful responsibility of craftsmanship. What are we to do once AI-assisted content floods our mail? We can only but close our doors. Revert to older, more established writers; wait for that rare breed of literary Puritans who resist change.

At the same time, several pertinent issues ask for immediate attention and remedy. These issues sprout from both administrative neglect and a cultural decline one wishes to attribute to a certain cause so that it can be pinned down, rationalised. Alas, that is not possible. Of course, talk of literature and life and art will follow, but we must bury the dead first.

The Ravi – that great vestibule of tradition, bulwark against modernity, older than the country itself – has not been properly published, not released for a better part of a decade! Brought to its knees by wholly preventable circumstances! Much to atone for. Much to rue. If not addressed promptly, such circumstances might callus the office's daily workings. A few years ago our annual funds eviscerated under mysterious circumstances. The magazine has not been printed since. This edition becomes the second ever of its kind to be featured online. We still benefit, and suffer, from the vast excesses granted to us by the digital age. Blame our paradoxical relationship with technology – it promised to bring us together, acted on that promise, and simultaneously, somehow, managed to further isolate us. Online perusal, we believe, is an unfit substitute for print.

The university, in the last few terms, has witnessed a marked change in admission policy. The conventional "written test and

interview" method has been scrapped, and one's matric and intermediate marks – part of a failing, underfunded educational system – determine who gets to study what, personal interests be damned. The fact that most of those accepted to the new academic term in law, or politics, or literature, never have studied law, or politics, or literature before – and are only here because medical and engineering colleges ran out of spots, signals the arrival of something dismal and grim. Compounding this malady is the fact that the number of admissions each year is swelling. Throngs of students flood the grounds and the hallways and classrooms – there is not enough staff to cater to all of them, not enough qualified teachers to teach them. We cannot say what happens next, but we hope for something remedial.

At the same time, some of our literary societies dedicated to the preservation of art and literature have gone "modern", and have mistakenly thought optics are the key to prominence, and may have forgotten the chief aim for their establishment: providing intellectual, spiritual and creative nourishment to the new and the young. The ailment presides in an untrained and an underdeveloped leadership, as well as in the faculty responsible for appointing such leadership. In the future, we hope for a rigid centralisation of the University's co-curricular environment, controlled by four or five societies who are endorsed (and more importantly, funded) by the administration. Free rein to all groups in the past has diluted literary activities and thinned the student body's creative talent. The "new style" or the "modern way" is only meaningful once one masters all "past ways."

We sincerely believe the contents of this year's edition will enable The Ravi once again to become a point of reference and convergence for readers and writers across the country. The layout is arranged as such that every theme addresses a specific aspect lodged within that vast microcosm of experiences we term life. There is an equal balance of the personal and the political; the spiritual and the artistic; the philosophical and the romantic. For the first time, the magazine has included photo-essays. Many of the poems test the boundaries of conventional form and structure. Yet, in terms of quality, some of the featured pieces are among the best in the University as well as the country. It is a literary endeavour that reflects our aim of keeping up with the past, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of art and literature in the present.

We extend our gratitude to all of our guest writers for remaining in sustained communication with the board, and for following the prescribed deadline religiously. Of course, every saint turns sinner once in a while. That too is fine. The concept for this year's edition would not have achieved fruition had it not been for the untiring efforts and commitment of those in the editorial team, all of whom deserve due recognition and encouragement.

We are aware that a few hundred words may not be enough to fix all ills, but we believe a certain amount of mourning enables closure, and closure is crucial for clarity and enacting structural change. Till then, we will continue to observe. Till then, we will continue to introspect.

Huzaifa Zeeshan Awan
Editor, *The Ravi*

ESSAYS

✦ Life, Literature & Art

- Beyond Stereotypes: Literature and Language in Our Global World
- The Significance of the Humanities in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Defending Human Meaning Against Mechanization
- 39 Excuses to Avoid Writing Successfully
- My Sister, the Red Headband (*Sartadinai*), and Story-telling
- Cult of Music
- Impressionism and the Birth of New Perspectives and Visions



"Old Lahore" by Edwin Lord Weeks

Beyond Stereotypes: Literature and Language in Our Global World

Muneeza Shamsie

The impact of travel, technology and the satellite media on literature and the power of words is central to the world in which we live and its future. So much has changed so rapidly in my own lifetime that it is difficult to imagine that even as adults, our generation had no inkling of the technology, including mobile phones, satellite media and the internet, that we consider the norm today and how it changed our lives—and indeed connected us globally, opening out new horizons. The access to good literature, through websites, reviews, discussions and online sales has made a profound difference, supplemented further by the fact that topical literary texts transmuted into art, films, dramas, and oral recitations can be easily downloaded now.

All this has opened out literary works to diverse audiences, revealing unexpected links between cultures, or challenging stereotypes or providing insights into history and politics in a world, where travel, migration, dispersed friends and families are also a reality. While in Pakistan, the internet has contributed to growing awareness of the public and the print media of new contemporary English books and topical award winners. This in turn has encouraged bookshops to stock these works, unlike earlier times, when they were restricted to thrillers and soap operas.

Furthermore, well-known Pakistani writers are invited to schools and colleges now to interact with students, give talks or creative writing classes; there is a proliferation of literary festivals and literary events, across the country. Also, in a country such as Pakistan, with a paucity of public libraries, websites such as *Gutenberg.com* and *Internet Archive* are an important resource for out-of-print books— downloaded free—such as the nineteenth century poetry of the pioneering Indian English writer Toru Dutt and translations of the early twentieth century Spanish poet, Frederico Garcia Lorca's *Diwan El Tamarit* (1940)

Sadly, in today's internet age, the very term "the power of the word" often suggests the rapid dissemination of fake news, propaganda, ahistorical narratives, images and indeed

the use of abusive language and belligerent speeches by political leaders, which would have been unacceptable once. The rapidity of such communications, aggressions and responses might be new and we are still not sure of its long-term impact, but the fact remains that since time immemorial, the power of words has been used, in speeches and literary texts, to define socio-political concepts of the Alien Other, reinforcing power, conflict, war, occupation and much else. This includes the ahistorical concepts of East vs West. Islam vs Christianity and of course the entire colonial construct and today's imperialist discourse.

The Western notions of a unique European culture and literature, quite distinct from the Orient, has been challenged by many writers and scholars today. But it remains a universal truth that cultural commingling is central to the trans-geographical nature of good literature. Through travel, trade, or conquest, stories and texts have traversed continents and oceans since antiquity. A famous example is the Sanskrit, *Panchatantra,* allegorical fables about animals, narrated by an Indian monk to instruct a prince. These stories travelled eastward to China, and westward to Persia, were translated into Pahlavi, became *Kalila wa Dimna* in Arabic and Persian, reached Europe, and influenced the *Fables of La Fontaine* and possibly, *Aesop's Fables.* The literary links between the subcontinent and Europe date back even further. The region which is Pakistan today was described by Skylax and Herodotus long before Alexander crossed the Indus in 326 BCE. The Greeks divided the world into East and West, to reinforce the rhetoric of war, but the universal nature of literature defied this. Alexander was indigenized in Persian and other oriental texts including Firdausi's S*hahnamah* and Nizami's *Sikander-Nama.*

In 711 AD the Arabs conquered Spain and Sindh. The late Sindhi scholar N.A. Baloch (1917-2011) told me in an interview that the languages of both Sindh and Spain contain some similar words and there are links between Sindhi music and the Spanish *canto jundo.* This movement of literatures and ideas includes the influence of Arabic in the development of rhyme in Europe. The vernacular Arabic poetic form, the *muwashshah* which has Hispano-Arabic roots, influenced Europe's earliest vernacular poetry, which developed in southern France and is known as 'troubadour', 'Provencal', 'Occitan', or 'courtly love poetry' (Maria Rosa Menocal *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History,* 2004*,* p70); its themes of the Lover's quest for the Beloved have links to Sufi poetry's metaphorical images of the Seeker in search of the Divine. Interestingly, in the early

twentieth century, Ezra Pound the leading Modernist poet, translated Provencal troubadour poetry, which in turn influenced the Pakistani-English poet Taufiq Rafat (1927—1998) to translate the Punjabi mystic poets, Bulleh Shah and Qadir Yar.

In Europe, Arab rule in Spain (Al-Andalus) and in Sicily gave rise to a brilliant, symbiotic, Euro-Arab culture, portrayed in recent decades by Pakistani English writers, including Tariq Ali, Aamer Hussein and Shadab Zeest Hashmi, challenging contemporary western notions of irreconcilable cultures. Furthermore, the ghazal and the qasida, both poetic forms intrinsic to Urdu poetry, were once a part of the Arabic poetry recited in Al-Andalus, until the 1492 expulsion of the Arabs from Spain. In the early twentieth century, the Spanish poet, Federico García Lorca who was of Andalusian origin wrote *Divan el Tamarit*, a poetry collection which set out to reclaim the 'gaselas" and "casedas" as his inheritance and that of Spain/Andalus. In more recent times, the Kashmiri American poet Agha Shahid Ali (1949—2001) employed the ghazal as an English poetic form—re-introducing its disciplines into the Anglo-European canon, where it is now written by American and English poets too. Shahid Ali influenced Shadab Zeest Hashmi's use of the ghazal too, which she has followed up, by developing the qasida in English into modern form. While another Pakistani English poet, Athar Tahir has written 'Andalusian Qasida' reverting to the 3-part structure of the mediaeval Arabic.

In Spain, the Euro-Arab culture which flourished for eight hundred years, profoundly influenced Europe, but the European Renaissance alongside the rise of Europe's new nation states defined by faith and sect, asserted a purely European, Graeco-Christian culture. Judeo-Islamic influences were denied. In 1492, the Moors were expelled from Spain and Christopher Columbus discovered the New World. All this defined the European consciousness and fuelled Europe's imperial dreams.

My own interest in South Asian and Pakistani English literature is due to the fact that I was in boarding school in England for nine years. There I read and enjoyed *The Jungle Book* (1894) and later *A Passage to India* (1924) but I was aware that neither of these books, nor any other, portrayed any aspect of the sub-continent inhabited by me and my family. I had started to realize, through the English fiction of my aunt, Attia Hosain (1913-1998) that alternative narratives did exist—and my quest led to the writings of VS Naipaul (1932-2018), Khushwant Singh (1915-2014), Raja Rao (1908—2006), Ahmed Ali (1910-

1994)—a literature which contributed to my exploration of Pakistan when I returned home for good. There I watched with interest the development of a new contemporary Pakistani English literature by the late 1960s through the poetry of Zulfikar Ghose (1935-2022), Taufiq Rafat, Kaleem Omar (1937-2009), Alamgir Hashmi, Adrian A. Husain, Salman Tarik Kureishi and so on. By then, in western academia the term "English literature" was no longer restricted to the traditional "Anglo-American norm" but encapsulated Anglophone writing from the world over.

One of the issues, central to South Asian literature, has been that of language: how to capture the nuances of the subcontinent in the English language. This led to linguistic innovations in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940). Ali introduced Urdu words and Urdu poetry translations, to try and convey the essence of Indo-Muslim culture. In 1988, Bapsi Sidhwa (1938-2004) in Pakistan brought out her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988) with a Parsee child-narrator who employs the multi-lingual cadences of local English to great advantage. Moni Mohsin has developed this idiomatic English further in her witty newspaper columns *Diary of a Social Butterfly* which have been turned into successful novels. Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* (2000) added to the narrator's hybrid language by including an Urdu couplet written in the Arabic script. Hima Raza (1975-2003) broke new ground with her poetry collection *Left Hand Speak* (2002) which includes two bilingual poems, employing both the Roman and Arabic scripts; Zafar Kunial's collection *Us* (2018) engages with his father's mother tongue Pahari and Potowari; one poem incorporates the poignant Urdu poetry of the exiled Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar; while Waqas Khwaja's collection *No One Waits for the Train* (2007) - the first full length English collection on Partition includes poems that capture the rhythms of Bulleh Shah's Punjabi poetry and his message of peace and unity as a foil to Partition's suffering.

Language, bilingualism and multiculturalism are central to the short fiction of Aamer Hussein in Britain and the creative memoirs of Sara Suleri Goodyear (1953-2022) in the United States. Both Hussein and Suleri are also translators and the awareness of language permeates their work but more recently Hussein started to write Urdu short stories and include them as translations in his English collection. His work in English also engages with the fables of Rumi and Attar, the fiction of Quratulain Hyder, the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif and Kalidasa. The Islamabad-resident Harris Khalique is

unique because he is trilingual: he has published several collections in Urdu, others in English and has now written poems in Punjabi; while Osama Siddique in Lahore has followed up his first English novel with one in Urdu and Peerzada Salman in Karachi, has published poetry and prose in Urdu and English.

In 2000, the distinguished Urdu writer, Abdullah Hussein (1931-2015) who lived in Britain for many years, developed his Urdu story about exploited, illegal migrant labourers in Britain, into an English play; and then an English novel *Émigré Journeys (*2000). The lives of working class British Pakistanis are central to Hanif Kureishi's work and are also described in the novels of Farhana Sheikh, Adam Zameenzad (1937-2017), Nadeem Aslam, Tariq Mehmood and Sairish Hussain, the plays of Ayub Khan Din and the poetry of Tariq Latif, Zafar Kunial and John Siddique. In the west, all South Asian English writing gives a voice to a marginalised minority, regardless of class and gender and asserts a space for literary narratives beyond the Anglo-America norm. At the same time, the growth of diaspora working class literature expands the narratives of Pakistani English writing: the genre is no longer confined to a small Anglicized elite.

There has been a growing use of different poetic forms in Pakistani English poetry. Tahir's poetry collection *The Last Tea* (2015) employs the Japanese poetic form: haiku. In all this traditional English poetic forms have not been left behind either and recent years have seen sonnet collections by Athar Tahir and Adrian Husain in Pakistan and Anis Shivani in the United States

This universalism allows the imagination of the Pakistani writer to roam free. The expatriate Zulfikar Ghose who wrote extensively about Brazil, his wife's homeland, reveals many parallels between South America and Pakistan. For example, his early novel *The Murder of Aziz Khan* (1967) about exploitation, social iniquity and martial law in rural Pakistan, was reworked on a grander scale in his historical trilogy *The Incredible Brazilian (*1972-78) which engages with the American writer Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964). Adam Zameenzad (1937-2017) is another writer whose first novel *The Thirteenth House* (1987) was set in Pakistan and he went on to write about different lands—Africa, South America, Britain and Europe. In 2009 Mohammed Hanif wrote the first political satire in Pakistani English fiction *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) on

the last days of the General Zia ul Haq. He was inspired by the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *The Feast of the Goat* (2000) about the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo.

Of course a strong feminist consciousness, across the generations, runs through the work of English language women writers of Pakistani origin including Rukhsana Ahmad's innovative drama *Mistaken: Annie Besant in India* (2007) and her translations of Urdu women's poetry, *We Sinful Women* (1991). An intertextual engagement with this Urdu feminist poetry such as that of Fahmida Riaz (1946-2018) and Kishwar Naheed emerges in Imtiaz Dharker's poetry collections *Purdah* (1988) and *I Speak for the Devil* (2001); while Moniza Alvi's *Europa* (2008) reinterprets Europe's patriarchal legends and fairy tales; among Pakistan-resident poets Ilona Yusuf celebrates the matriarchal figures of antiquity and Kyla Pasha lampoons the patriarchal American cowboy of popular American films. More recently Maha Khan Phillip's new novel *Museum Detective* (2025) a work of crime fiction has a strong feminist essence steeped in history, antiquity and today's daily life in Karachi; while Faiqa Mansab's second novel *The Sufi Storyteller* (2025), a murder mystery, addresses feminism, identity and belonging across America, Afghanistan and Pakistan, throwing insights through unusual interpretations and links between oriental legends and western fairy tales.

By the turn of the century, a new global generation of talented young Pakistani English writers emerged in rapid succession. Many of them had lived or been educated in, both Pakistan and the west and divided their time between the two. Their acclaimed writing extended the parameters of the Pakistani English literature to produce a diverse and accomplished body of work. This now included Pakistani Australians, Pakistani Canadians, Pakistani Scots. This creative output coincided with growing violence and religious extremism in Pakistan and the country's central role in geopolitics after the 9/11 bombings.

In the west, stereotyped images of Muslims as the Alien Other became common currency, as did the rhetoric of 'The Clash of Civilizations. These issues were addressed in the fiction of Tariq Ali, Nadeem Aslam, Uzma Aslam Khan and Kamila Shamsie but several post 9/11 Pakistani English works feature the relationship between the United States and Pakistan including the novels of Mohsin Hamid, H.M. Naqvi, Nafisa Haji

and Ayad Akhtar and the plays of Ayad Akhtar too and that of Wajahat Ali, and the autobiography of Ali Eteraz.

In a related development, the wars in the Middle East, the refugee crisis, immigration and Islamophobia also led to critically acclaimed dystopian, magic realist novels set in a nameless, fictitious, Muslim-majority land with echoes of Pakistan, and which could equally be any one of several strife riven countries. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) cleverly creates magic doors, a concept reminiscent of CS Lewis's *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), enabling people to move between different countries which enable a young couple to escape from a poor, lawless city, to seek a better life in the west, only to encounter different hardships. Mohammed Hanif's *Red Birds* (2018) employs several narrators, American, Muslim and a dog, to tell of life in a "downgraded" and dilapidated Camp which was once the hub of American activity, but the Americans have gone and no one knows what became of the bright young Muslim boy who worked for them.

At the same time Pakistani English literature expanded into an extensive body of work encompassing other subjects. The short stories of Daniyal Mueenuddin, *Other Rooms Other Wonders* (2009) portray rural Punjab, Jamil Ahmed's *The Wandering Falcon* (2011) describes tribal Baluchistan; Anis Shivani's *Fifth Lash and Other Stories* (2012) explore America's migrants; Imad Rahman's *I Dream of Microwaves* (2004) looks at the misadventures of a Pakistani American actor.

The novel of course continues to dominate Pakistani English literature; Osama Siddique's debut *Snuffing Out the Moon* (2017) spans the Indus region from ancient times to the present and the distant future to tell of the aspirations and conflicts of mankind across the centuries; Musharraf Ali Farooqi's *Clay and Dust* (2012) set in a nameless subcontinental city, tells of an ageing courtesan and a pehlawan belonging to a long vanished world and its courtesies; his subsequent work *The Merman and the Book of Power* (2019) set in the thirteenth century, employs that format of the Urdu *qissa*, combining history, myth and legend. HM Naqvi's lively work *The Selected Works of Abdullah the Cossack* (2019) recreates the changing face of Karachi from pre-Partit day; Uzma Aslam Khan's novel *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali* (2019) looks at World War II and the British and Japanese occupation of the Andaman Islands and captures many little

known details of life in that atrocious penal colony; Bina Shah's *Season For Martyrs* (2014) interweaves Shah Abdul Latif's poetry and the history of Sindh, across the centuries with Benazir Bhutto's assassination; the role of the social media and its power to re-invent people runs through Fatima Bhutto's second novel *The Runaways* (2019). While family secrets are central to the accomplished debut novels, Aamina Ahmad's *The Return of Faraz Ali* (2022) exploring different aspects of Lahore's red light area and. *Under the Tamarind Tree* by Nigar Alam (2023) which incorporates the complexities of a family's migration at Partition.

Many writers of Pakistani English fiction are well known translators. I've mentioned Suleri, Rukhsana Ahmad and Aamer Hussein earlier, but the fiction writer, Tahira Naqvi is also well known for her translations of the Urdu writings of Ismat Chughtai; while novelist Musharraf Ali Farooqi's remarkable oeuvre as a translator, includes the highly acclaimed *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* (2008) a skilled translation of the Urdu classic *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza;* he has also brought out an online Urdu dictionary and is producing a sequence of English books translated from Urdu dastaans, illustrated by his wife, Michelle Farooqi. In fact, today, in western academia, it has become the norm to explore translations of Urdu and other Pakistani literatures, alongside Anglophone writing. Hopefully this will also lead to a greater interaction between Pakistan's different literatures and languages. We really need to take a different approach, to see where they interconnect and where they meet.

Of course, one of the great crises these days is that elders complain that among the young no one reads books. Well… I don't think that to say "Read!" is the answer. There must be a more imaginative approach—though of course nothing quite like reading including texts transmuted into film, drama, radio etc But I have to say, as a child, I loved listening to magical Urdu stories told to me, I cannot recall the natural transition to books: though I was particularly enchanted by the beautifully illustrated English books.

Of course in the west, during ancient times, literary classics such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were originally oral narratives, recited to large audiences. In our own culture, the long, ancient tradition of story telling and recitations—ranging from folk tales to new or classical poetry— continues to flourish. Thousands who cannot read, can recite

famous verses due to Urdu's oral traditions enabling great poets to reach out to huge audiences, regardless; it is also part of our tradition for poetry to be performed as songs and disseminated even further. In marked contrast, in the west, when Bob Dylan received the Nobel prize for literature for his songs, it led to quite a lot of debate!

But to me, all it brings home is the need to learn from each other's cultures and explore more creative options to contend with the challenges—and advantages—of today's technology. Interestingly, during my Karachi childhood, I loved learning to read at my English medium school, but I particularly recall the joy of learning to write Urdu at home, on a wooden takthi, with a wooden pen carved there and then and dipped into a pot of ink, by my teacher, a maulvi sahib who then guided me as I attempted to create the twists and turns of the Urdu alphabet. Also in later years, when I returned from school in England, I was fascinated that my mother, her siblings and friends similarly "homeschooled" in Urdu Persian and Arabic, played the poetry game "bait ba'azi"—which they did in their childhood too! It meant a sound knowledge of poetry, reciting a couplet from memory, which challenged other players to begin another couplet beginning with the former's last word. To me it seemed such an enjoyable way for children to learn and explore poetry. In the English classroom we were expected to swot it up and recite it in class from memory—a disaster for many.

Of course the development of English language writing in the subcontinent is directly related to the expansion of British power in India and the establishment of the earliest English medium schools for Indians: in Kolkata and Delhi respectively. The contact with English literature, profoundly influenced sub-continental literatures, including Bengali and Urdu because several 'English-educated Indians' switched from writing in English to their mother tongue and gave these languages a new dimension. As the Indian scholar Meenakshi Mukherjee points out this led to a widespread perception that 'the vernaculars…were the repository for interiority and the imagination…and English the functional tool for polemics and persuasion' but she says this discourse does not

take into account the fact that many of these 'vernacular' writers expressed themselves in English, in their personal correspondence. And now of course we have bilingualism as the norm — and much that both languages can discover from the other.

The writer is a critic, literary journalist, bibliographer and editor, and is regarded as the leading authority on Pakistani literature in English. She is the author of "Hybrid Tapestries: The Development of Pakistani English Literature," and is the Bibliographic Representative of The Journal of Commonwealth Literature' She is a regular contributor to the Dawn, as well as the Herald, Newsline magazines and the Literary Encyclopedia. She was awarded the Sitara-e-Imtiaz in 2024.

The Significance of the Humanities in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Defending Human Meaning Against Mechanization

Tahir Kamran

The spectacular rise of Artificial Intelligence has revived one of the oldest questions in human history: what does it mean to be human? While technological innovation has always altered the conditions of human life, AI represents a distinctive challenge because it increasingly performs tasks that were once regarded as uniquely human. Machines can now write essays, compose music, diagnose diseases, translate languages, and generate images with remarkable speed and sophistication. Enthusiasts celebrate these developments as evidence of progress, yet beneath the excitement lies a profound anxiety. The real danger may not be that machines become human-like, but that human beings begin to understand themselves in mechanical terms. If intelligence is reduced to computation, decision-making to algorithms, and creativity to pattern recognition, then humanity itself risks becoming a category that can be quantified, optimized, and ultimately mechanized.

Yet this anxiety cannot be understood in isolation from the longer history of modernity. The mechanization of human beings did not begin with computers. Its roots lie in the Industrial Revolution, which transformed not only economies but also ways of understanding human life itself. Prior to industrialization, most societies remained embedded within thick networks of community, memory, religion, locality, and inherited cultural practices. Human identity was shaped by relationships to land, language, tradition, and sacred narratives. The rise of industrial capitalism gradually altered this relationship. Individuals increasingly came to be viewed as units of labour, measurable according to productivity and efficiency. Time itself was reorganized around the discipline of the factory clock. What had once been organic rhythms of life became subordinated to the mechanical rhythms of production.

The humanities emerged in part as a response to this transformation. They remind us that human beings are more than information-processing entities. They are creatures who seek meaning, inhabit histories, tell stories, create symbols, experience beauty, and wrestle with questions that cannot be settled by data alone. The humanities preserve

those dimensions of existence that resist quantification and remind us that understanding is not the same as information, wisdom is not the same as knowledge, and meaning is not the same as efficiency.

Matthew Arnold's defence of culture, for instance, was motivated by his fear that industrial society was reducing human beings to economic functions. He worried that material progress was being mistaken for civilization itself. His appeal to culture as "the best that has been thought and said in the world" was not simply an aesthetic preference but a protest against a society increasingly governed by utilitarian calculations. While Arnold's formulation has often been criticized for its elitism, its underlying concern remains relevant. He feared a society dominated by what he called "machinery"—a term that referred not only to physical machines but also to a mentality that values efficiency over wisdom. In many respects, the concerns Arnold expressed in nineteenth-century England anticipate contemporary fears about Artificial Intelligence. The forms of machinery have changed, but the temptation to measure human worth according to efficiency and utility remains strikingly similar. Technological advancement, however impressive, cannot tell us whether we are becoming better human beings. It can increase our power without increasing our wisdom.

The impact of modernity was even more profound in societies subjected to colonial rule. Colonial modernity was not merely a political or economic project; it was also an epistemological one. It sought to reorganize how colonized peoples understood themselves, their histories, and their worlds. Indigenous systems of knowledge, local languages, spiritual traditions, and inherited forms of community were frequently dismissed as backward or irrational. The colonized subject was encouraged to view Europe as the universal model of progress and to regard his own cultural inheritance with suspicion. As a result, entire civilizations experienced a form of intellectual and cultural displacement. They became estranged not only from their histories but also from the geographical landscapes that had nourished those histories.

This severance from place is particularly significant. Traditional cultures emerged through intimate relationships with specific rivers, mountains, deserts, villages, cities, and ecological environments. Knowledge was not abstract but situated. Stories, myths, poems, and rituals connected communities to particular geographies and collective memories. Colonial modernity disrupted these connections by imposing administrative, educational, and economic systems designed elsewhere and for different purposes. Human beings

increasingly became detached from local worlds and inserted into universal systems of production and governance. The result was a profound sense of cultural homelessness that continues to shape postcolonial societies today.

The contemporary digital age extends this process even further. Artificial Intelligence operates within a world where place matters less than networks, where memory is outsourced to databases, and where relationships are increasingly mediated by screens. The movement from village to factory, from factory to bureaucracy, and from bureaucracy to algorithm reveals a continuous historical trajectory. What appears today as a technological challenge is therefore also the culmination of a deeper civilizational process in which abstraction progressively displaces lived experience.

At precisely this historical moment, the humanities emerge not as a luxury but as a necessity. They offer resources for resisting the reduction of human life to measurable functions and for recovering dimensions of experience that modernity has progressively marginalized. This concern finds powerful expression in the work of Charles Taylor. Throughout his intellectual career, Taylor has challenged reductionist understandings of human existence, and in *Cosmic Connections* he continues to explore the ways in which human beings inhabit a world saturated with significance. Against modern tendencies to confine reality within what he famously called the "immanent frame," Taylor argues that human life is characterized by experiences of transcendence, wonder, moral obligation, and spiritual depth. Human beings do not merely observe the world; they interpret it. They are, in Taylor's memorable phrase, "self-interpreting animals."

This insight acquires special significance in the age of AI. Algorithms may process information, but they cannot answer questions about the meaning of suffering, the nature of beauty, the demands of justice, or the purpose of life. Such questions belong to the realm of interpretation rather than calculation, and it is the humanities that cultivate the capacity for such interpretation.

The challenge becomes even more urgent when viewed through the lens of Yuval Noah Harari's *Nexus*. Harari argues that human history has always been shaped by information networks through which societies organize knowledge and power. Yet AI introduces a fundamentally new situation because it is no longer simply a tool within these networks; it is becoming an active participant in them. Information systems increasingly influence political decisions, economic choices, cultural preferences, and even personal relationships. The danger, according to Harari, is not merely technological but

civilizational. Human beings may gradually surrender their judgment to systems whose operations they neither fully understand nor control. In such circumstances, the humanities serve as a critical safeguard. They cultivate precisely those capacities—critical reflection, ethical judgment, historical consciousness, and moral imagination—that enable citizens to question rather than simply obey technological systems.

Walter Kaufmann anticipated these predicaments decades ago when he defended the humanities against the growing dominance of utilitarian and technocratic models of education. For Kaufmann, the purpose of education was not merely to produce skilled workers but to nurture independent human beings capable of critical thought. He warned against forms of learning that reduce students to specialists while neglecting their moral and intellectual development. His observation that "the aim of education is not to produce conformity but individuality" sounds almost prophetic in an era when algorithmic systems increasingly shape human preferences and behaviour. If AI tends toward standardization, the humanities cultivate originality; if algorithms reward predictability, literature and philosophy encourage intellectual independence and uniqueness.

These concerns converge in the monumental work of Iain McGilchrist. In *The Matter with Things*, perhaps the most ambitious philosophical work of the twenty-first century, McGilchrist argues that contemporary culture increasingly privileges modes of thought characterized by abstraction, categorization, measurement, and control. Such modes are undoubtedly useful, but they become dangerous when they monopolize our understanding of reality. Reality itself, McGilchrist insists, is richer, more mysterious, and more interconnected than any model can capture. His observation that "the map is not the territory" serves as a warning against confusing representations with reality itself. Artificial Intelligence operates through representations, patterns, and abstractions; human beings live through relationships, emotions, embodiment, memory, imagination, and attachment to place. The humanities preserve access to these dimensions of reality. Through literature, art, philosophy, history, and religion, they cultivate an awareness of complexity and ambiguity that resists the simplifications upon which technological systems often depend.

Raymond Williams expanded and democratized Matthew Arnold's understanding of culture by insisting that culture is not simply a collection of great works but "a whole way of life." This insight is crucial for understanding the impact of AI. Technology does not

merely provide new tools; it reshapes patterns of communication, habits of attention, social relationships, and forms of identity. Every technological revolution is simultaneously a cultural revolution. Consequently, questions about AI are never merely technical questions. They are questions about the kind of society we wish to inhabit and the kind of human beings we wish to become. Such questions cannot be answered by engineers alone. They require the interpretive and critical resources of the humanities.

The importance of cultural continuity was emphasized by T. S. Eliot, who argued that individuals derive meaning from their participation in traditions larger than themselves. "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone," Eliot wrote. Human creativity emerges not from isolation but from dialogue with the past. This insight is particularly relevant in discussions of AI-generated content. Machines can recombine existing patterns with astonishing efficiency, but genuine creativity involves conscious engagement with inherited traditions and the imaginative transformation of those traditions. The humanities preserve the historical memory that makes such creativity possible. Without memory, innovation becomes rootless; without tradition, novelty becomes meaningless.

Yet the deepest defence of the humanities may be found not only in modern cultural criticism but also in the spiritual wisdom of figures such as Rumi and Muhammad Iqbal. Long before the emergence of digital technologies, Rumi understood the limitations of purely rational approaches to reality. "Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment," he advised. The statement is not an attack on reason but a reminder that life's deepest truths often emerge through wonder, love, and spiritual openness rather than analytical mastery. Artificial Intelligence may replicate certain forms of reasoning, but it cannot experience longing, devotion, ecstasy, or transcendence. These experiences belong to the irreducibly human dimension of existence that the humanities seek to explore and articulate.

Iqbal carried this insight further through his philosophy of *khudi*, or selfhood. His critique of colonial consciousness is especially illuminating. He recognized that political domination is sustained by intellectual domination. The loss of selfhood occurs when individuals cease to be creative participants in their own history and become passive imitators of external models. His call for the reconstruction of Muslim thought was

therefore not a rejection of modernity but an effort to reconnect modern life with indigenous sources of meaning. Against all forms of determinism, he envisioned the human self as a creative and dynamic force capable of shaping reality through imagination and action. His famous exhortation, "Raise thyself to such heights that before every destiny, God Himself will ask thee: What is thy wish?" expresses a profoundly humanistic vision. Human beings are not passive recipients of information; they are creators, interpreters, and moral agents. In an age increasingly tempted to understand consciousness as computation and identity as data, Iqbal's philosophy offers a powerful affirmation of human dignity and freedom.

Seen from this broader historical perspective, the humanities represent far more than a collection of academic disciplines. They are repositories of civilizational memory. They preserve the stories through which communities remember who they are, where they have come from, and what they value. They reconnect human beings with histories that industrialization fragmented, with places that colonialism dislocated, and with meanings that technological modernity threatens to eclipse.

Taken together, these thinkers reveal that the central challenge posed by Artificial Intelligence is not technological but anthropological. The question is not merely what machines can do but what human beings are. If humanity is understood solely in terms of calculation, prediction, and efficiency, then machines may indeed become our successors. If, however, human beings are meaning-seeking creatures capable of wonder, creativity, moral judgment, self-transcendence, cultural memory, and civilizational renewal, then no technology can replace them. The humanities preserve and cultivate precisely these capacities. They teach us to interpret rather than merely process, to understand rather than merely know, and to seek wisdom rather than merely accumulate information.

As Artificial Intelligence becomes increasingly woven into the fabric of everyday life, the importance of the humanities will only grow. The more powerful our technologies become, the more urgently we require disciplines that remind us what technology cannot provide. The humanities do not compete with science and technology; they complement

them by addressing the questions that science and technology alone cannot answer. They preserve our capacity to wonder, to judge, to imagine, to remember, and to love. Above all, they remind us that while machines may become increasingly intelligent, intelligence alone has never defined humanity. What defines humanity is the continual search for meaning within a world that remains richer, deeper, and more mysterious than any algorithm can comprehend.

The author is a Pakistani historian and public intellectual. He previously served as Allama Iqbal Fellow at Cambridge's Centre of South Asian Studies and earlier chaired the History Department and served as Dean of Arts and Social Sciences at GC University, Lahore. His books include Colonial Lahore: A History of the City and Beyond (2017) and Chequered Past, Uncertain Future: The History of Pakistan (2024).

39 Excuses to Avoid Writing Successfully

Noor Rehman

First, let me tell you about my routine as a writer.

On Mondays, I write as much as I can without letting that ghost of doubts fill my ears with thoughts under whose pressure even spiders would mismanage their web designs. On Tuesdays, I ruminate about how old I am and how little I have achieved from what I had set out to do, and, in panic, I stop the work I was already halfway done with. On Wednesdays and Thursdays, I prepare my lectures for my job at UCP, check quizzes and assignments, and stop myself from thinking about the difficult future that would befall my irreverent students. On Fridays, I don't worry much, but a few little things: my childhood, lost friendships, the uncertainties of adult life, supporting my younger siblings and my mother, love, poor writing discipline, and the general drift of the world towards an endless chaos. On Saturdays, I relax and think about death, although it is a topic too delicious to stomach on Saturdays, so I leave myself the crumbs for Sunday mornings and gulp them down with a poem or two. My life has never been better than this. And it is passing by.

As writers, as writers avoiding writers, I think we could vow to return to the Socratic ideal of claiming ignorance just so we could grow better eyes to see what the problems are hindering our work, our progress. In that spirit, since I don't know how to guide each of you adequately regarding writing, and besides, my colleagues will douse you in enough suggestions and probably set you on fire too, I mean metaphorically, I am going to do something harmless and teach you how to avoid writing in 39 different ways. In short, I am the devil's advocate here.

You don't have to write because you're young, struggling with undergrad studies, finances, and relationships. You don't have to write because you're suffering from depression, which at pivotal moments turns to anxiety, and all you want to do is not exist. You don't have to write because the world at home and abroad is falling apart, genocides,

wars, stupid bullying politicians, and global warming all make sure that you don't feel grounded ever in a way where you feel writing is of any consequence….. Okay, this is going to take too much time if I write long sentences about why you shouldn't write, so I'm just going to change gears and list them very fast. Please pay attention:

1. Living in Pakistan
2. Patriarchy
3. Childhood trauma
4. Scary teachers on university campus who don't care about delivering from the slides they prepared half a century ago
5. Your relatives
6. Your relatives who remind your parents about your marriage, even when your parents forget
7. Your 9-to-5 corporate job, where you're considered a family member and abused just like a family member
8. Instagram Reels
9. The summer heat, the winter fog, the housing societies, DHA, Rawalpindi, the Real Kings of Rawalpindi
10. Friendship, relationship, situationship, texting, the "other kind" of texting, yoga, meditation, spirituality, astrology, chakras, mudras, homeopathy, psychopathy
11. Writing is difficult
12. All the great books have been written anyway
13. Skincare routine
14. The fact that almost no one reads in Pakistan
15. The fact that you have to become practical at some point
16. Money
17. Dollars
18. Money to pay bills, buy clothes, do skincare routine, join pilates classes, Kathak Dance, Atif Aslam concert, visit Turkey once in your life,
19. Money to pay for hair transplant, braces, fat removal, nose job, and other kinds of jobs
20. Money to rent a house, raise kids, send them to school, deal with their tantrums and difficult emotions when you have difficulty with your own emotions

21. Dating apps

22. In the corporate world, no one cares that you write good poems

23. Fear of God, fear of hell, fear of earthquakes, meteors, and storms; Elon Musk becoming more evil than he already is

24. Signs of aging, fear of getting old, wrinkles, double chin, belly fat, performance anxiety, sexual impotence

25. The fear that you might never really feel loved the way you imagined in your 20s while listening to Jagjit Singh's *Hothon Se Chulo Tum, Mera Geet Amar Kar Do* or *Fly Me to the Moon* by Frank Sinatra

26. Your parents still arguing every other night, unable to move past the resentments they have been accumulating all their lives as if they have been swimming through a river of mud and the stench has stuck to their bodies, nested in their bones

27. Dostoevsky, Elena Ferrante, Arundhati Roy, Annie Ernaux, Rachel Cusk, James Baldwin, Ursula Le Guin, Tolstoy, Gabriel Garcia Marquez - Why even write when they are available?

28. Washing clothes, cleaning the kitchen, making meals, washing your own room, washing the bathroom, earning enough money to get someone else to do it for you, and being unable to inherit enough wealth to never worry about such things

29. Meeting people whom you don't like among your relatives, coworkers, colleagues, but still smiling at them and pretending you don't want them to slip on a banana peel and get out of your life for a few months, God forbid if you marry a person whom you don't like and then end up having kids with them

30. Giving desires, fears, and believable personalities to characters who are unlike you is so difficult

31. Neurosis, narcissism, irritability, entitlement, inferiority, arrogance, sensitivity, indifference, and instability that you and I carry in different doses by virtue of being humans

32. Learning about plot, characterization, showing vs telling, but being unable to employ them, writing block, denying writing block exists, writing terrible paragraphs and hating yourself for it, suspecting you never had the talent anyway but somehow manipulated people into believing that you had it but you knew all along you were too arrogant and self-important to admit that you loved reading good books but didn't have the talent to write one yourself.

33. God knows how long any of us will live anyway.

Well, that's enough!

Enough reasons to not only avoid writing but to give up all hope of ever smiling and being happy again. But what about my novel, and why do I keep writing if I have enough excuses to stop it and focus on better things?

In the spirit of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, let me tell you that you can't imagine the lengths I went to just so that I could avoid writing my first novel and delay it as much as possible. I worked at *Zameen.com* as a copywriter, writing about the ever-growing housing societies in Pakistan, and did midnight shifts at *Mindbridge*, calculating the discounts for *Uber Eats* customers in Europe. But the novel stalked me like those judgmental comments made by your aunts about your skin, height, or attitude at the age of 13. Then, I went to Florida, seemingly giving in to the ghost of writing, and returned to Lahore without finishing anything substantial. I knew the guilt of not writing would sap me out of all the joy I could see possible within my miserable self, so I got a job at UCP to placate the raging demons of writing inside and another at *Akhuwat* to delay my novel. I also got into two relationships, tried to get married twice…with separate women... not at the same time…but alternatively. I also wanted to have kids as a permanent solution to my writing career. I even tried to get a job in the UAE but failed, taught online courses on psychoanalysis, and even committed to the *LUMS Young Writers Workshop* just so that I could avoid writing the book that I felt so mercilessly called upon to finish.

Except for wandering in the desert and claiming sainthood as a part-time crypto bro, there isn't an excuse, a problem, or an opportunity I didn't bring on myself just so I could procrastinate and sabotage my chances of finishing this novel. People talk about the passion to write, to undress the layers of their dirty souls, but what's more seductive than the craving to delay your writing endlessly, not because you want to write perfectly and not because you are having writer's block, but because the art of avoiding writing itself has become a passion for you. All the heartbreak and confusion I survived was just to defend myself against writing. All along this novel of mine, which appeared to me pathetic and weak like a limping dog before, has turned out to be a John Wick that has been coming for me for years now, and there is no stopping.

* * *

All the jokes and fun aside, why could I not finish my novel sooner? And the reason I want to explore this is that so much of writing talk is about the technique, but I feel the real obstacles to writing come from your own life. Let me show through examples.

A few years ago, when I was studying Creative Writing at the *University of Central Florida*, I had a fiction writing course with a professor named James Poissant. I used to go to my classes on a university bus each week. However, that particular semester, his classes were ending at 10:20 pm, but the buses would stop running at 10 p.m. I sent him an email asking if he could request any of the students who could give me a ride. He asked me about my apartment location and then told me that he would drop me off himself. Such a good professor and a kind person. That semester, we left for our homes after each class in his car. We talked about music, movies, food, and so on. When the time came for my thesis viva, for which I had submitted the first ten chapters of my novel, he made a very interesting point, which I assumed he had figured out by talking to me while he dropped me at my place. He said, Noor, your novel has episodic events happening to the little boy, the main character. The world-building and the descriptions are poetic and lively. The events and conflicts among your characters are consequential and well chosen, but the little boy seems to lack interiority. He is part of every major event in these chapters, but we don't get to see what he feels, how he reacts outside or within, and how it shapes his personality across the novel.

I confessed, I am going to therapy for the same reason and there I am feeling the same difficulty. I can't imagine myself as a child with feelings, thoughts and reactions. I am just there. What do I mean by that? Let me share a memory from my childhood that I tried to make part of my novel. I must have been seven or eight years old at the time. My father, my younger sister of four, and I drove our cow, a goat, probably a sheep or two for grazing outside of the village near the broken houses where Afghan Muhajirs had settled two decades ago. Once we had tethered the animals to the stakes in the ground, our father left us with the animals alone. After a while, all of a sudden clouds gathered in the sky and very soon it started lightning and then a terrible rain followed. The animals got scared and started pulling their ropes. In this chaos, while we were drenched, the cow started running away, and my sister began to cry. I ran after the cow, barely able to catch up, on the verge of tears myself. I held the rope twice but slipped and fell after the cow in the mud, and got my clothes dirty. I feared terribly that the cow would get lost and I

would be beaten up at home for not bringing it back. Eventually, I did catch up with the cow, and it stopped running. The rain softened, and my sister and I gathered the animals and drove them home. When I brought the animals inside the home, my mother rebuked me for getting all my clothes dirty. Then, she said, she was busy with animals and asked me to sit in the courtyard and not go inside the room and get it dirty too. I sat outside, wet, covered in mud, feeling cold, and waited for her.

I wanted to write about what I felt there and then as a child, but despite the detailed memory, I couldn't for the life of me feel what I must have felt then. It felt like I was there but not there. Inside the novel, this memory stayed like thick oil, refusing to mix with the rest of the water.

There is another memory from two years later that I failed to incorporate into my novel. Our family was going through financial hardships. My father signed a lease with a neighbour to grow wheat on their land in addition to our own. The problem was that the water well associated with that land hadn't run for a decade. My father impulsively called a tractor and plowed the whole field, and then we tried to put a water machine in the well, but there was no water. Worried about the potential loss on the lease, he rented the ground drilling machine, but then decided that it would cost a lot more, so we had to dig up the 10-foot well even further with bare hands. He said we have to do it ourselves to save the costs. There was one night before the drilling machine would arrive. There was no electricity in the evening, so we waited. At midnight, the power was restored. We went to the well together. First, we suspended a bulb attached to a wire into the well, and then he went down into the well. He dug up a bit, put it in a bucket, and asked me to pull up the rope. The soil was wet and thus heavy. I could hardly pull up the bucket so he climbed up and said I would have to go down into the well and do the digging, and he would pull up the soil. I was scared of ditches, wells, and heights. I still don't get close to tall platforms because we had heard as kids that jinns sometimes do mischievous things and could push you down. My father didn't ask me anything, made me sit in a big bucket, and suspended me into the well. There, with a spade, I dug the soil, filled it into the bucket, and he pulled it up. I tried hard to remember but I couldn't see how I felt and couldn't imagine it either. My mother didn't ask or know where I had gone in the middle of the night. She got to know about it only a few years ago when I complained to her that she didn't care what I had been through.

Since my novel deals with family, with parents and children, with love among blood relatives, with identity, and relevant themes, the novel pushed me into the darkest corners of my own past and made me confront things even when I didn't want to. At times, I couldn't navigate the emotional situations in my novel, and other times, I felt repulsed by the story itself and looked down upon it as being terrible. There were times where the boundary wasn't clear. I didn't know if I hated my own novel or the emotional situations I wanted to explore. There was so much shame, guilt, and numbness associated with the conflicts in the novel that I couldn't be the medium to experience them creatively and then write them down in fine prose.

In addition to the internal problems of the novel, I also faced a range of issues that proved to be obstacles to my writing and sometimes were severe enough to make writing impossible. My father stopped supporting my mother, two brothers, and two sisters financially, so as the eldest son, I had to do two jobs to provide for them. I picked up all the part-time gigs that were offered to me and taught online courses, too. Thanks to Bilal, I got the opportunity to teach at LUMS too. The family financial and creative pressure kept on overwhelming me, and I worried many times if I could even handle any of them anymore on my own.

But did I give up on writing? No. I kept writing whenever it was possible, as little or as much as possible. And the struggle did bear its fruit. Only in the last six months have I developed the capacity to deal with the emotional conflicts inside the novel without being threatened and torn apart by them. The fear that I might not be able to finish my novel and the hate I felt at desperate moments for my own writing and my stories, dwindled and made space for more self-compassion than I was ever capable of before. Finally, it looks like 2025 is going to be the year in which I will finish my novel.

By sharing all these personal memories and struggles, I want to confess that writing is the hardest in your 20s and even early 30s because you have to figure out so many issues, while the world tries to overwhelm you and make you surrender. Everybody wants something from you.

Your parents want marriage and maybe more kids. Your friends want you to listen to their problems and become someone like them. Instagram wants you to watch endless reels and AI wants you to stop using your brain. The religious clerics want you to worry about life after death. The fruit vendor wants you to buy chemically ripened fruits without doubting his intentions, while he swears on his faith. The random Uber drivers want to tell you their woes with petrol pumps and want to give you advice on family planning. Amid all this, a thin whisper in your heart wants you to write your stories and live your life as it belongs to you. The majority of people cut themselves, minimize parts of themselves that don't fit into the family picture, discount their desires, push aside their questions, censor their feelings, and prune whatever hurts or annoys them, and thus occupy barely small corners within the vastness and depth of themselves. When we were kids, they used to say, what does a human need at the end of the day but a few feet long and wide coffin? What's tragic is that people occupy as little space as possible even when they are alive, though the world is so large and yours to explore. Don't become small, though you might have done it so far to protect yourself. And write because writing allows us to engage with the whole of ourselves, the entirety of our lives, even the parts which are not allowed existence by our families, our society's morality, and so on.

Writing, and for that matter, practicing any art, is a matter of practicing one's freedom. It is nothing short of the will to live and thereby synonymous with breathing. So keep breathing and keep writing.

The writer completed his Bachelor's degree in English Literature at Government College University, Lahore. He later pursued an MFA in Creative Writing (Fiction) from the University of Central Florida, Orlando, as a Fulbright Scholar. He is currently part of the Faculty of English at Forman Christian College University (FCCU) and is querying literary agents for his debut novel, Clay Bodies, set in the Tribal Areas of Waziristan during the 1970s and 1980s.



My Sister, the Red Headband (Sartadinai), and Story-telling

Naqeeb Rehman

We work-shopped each other's stories for a couple of hours. We were drunk on art and good ideas. My story was again about the ending of a relationship, but thank God, everybody appreciated how I portrayed Ayesha's character in the story *LinkedIn Road*. She is repressed but real, victimized but strategic. This is the third story about relationships I've written this year. My father should have treated my mother well when I was a kid, so that I don't have to keep bleeding onto the paper about crush-breaks and break-ups and break-downs. A friend asked me why do I write such stories all the time. I replied: '*wo kya hena mere dil ka department tora hila howa he'*.

Anyways, when we read each other's stories, I sensed that most of the stories were nostalgia-driven. M wrote about the delicious mangoes; N fancied the color red; A wrote about apricot trees. B wrote about her love for cricket. R wrote an autobiography of a kite flying in the sky and then getting lodged on top of a tree like an abandoned thought. So there I was, tapping my feet anxiously against the floor (partly wishing they didn't talk so much about their loving parents to spare my jealousy and partly wishing if I could have another cup of coffee to betray my sleep), thinking: What is so nostalgic about my past anyways?

The session was dismissed for lunch break. I slowly slipped downstairs. I remembered B took a picture of me the night before with raised hands (and a vibrant smile) in front of a signpost on which our workshop title was written: *Women in Rage*. The picture was an essay in itself: A man celebrating the justified anger of womankind, especially his female colleagues in that context. That's a good topic for an essay to begin with, but I shrugged the thought away, feeling uneasy, and feeling the burning, cruel sun over my head. See, I am a realist writer who is good with portrayals and descriptions. That day, my goal was to write a nostalgic piece to experiment with how I can delineate my emotions on the page in a beautiful way.

I started walking towards the Common Room in M5 Hostel where everybody sleeps, and which I call the Cattle Room derogatorily, though I love sleeping there because it has AC. I sat on somebody else's bed foam, a sense of loneliness in the air, and I thought of writing about football, but sports have never been a good medium for storytelling. Only B wrote well about cricket. And also, my workshop story had a big chunk revolving around cricket, so a big No. What about how I started writing my first diary? No, it is not the goddamn school anymore. I thought of my mother's face, but I couldn't imagine it. It kept slipping and getting foggy until it vanished, the way Mall Road vanishes from beneath my feet when I am driving to GCU on December mornings. Oh, wait, I can still remember my elder sister's face. Pale white, and smiling! What about her? She is a housewife with three kids and a handsome husband. Is that it? Well, yeah, I guess.

Shazia gave us a writing advice in the morning that when you run short of ideas for stories and essays, just sit by a window and write about what you see outside. That may be a couple sitting under a tree, or just a bunch of pigeons eating grains on a chowk. I looked outside through the window. I just saw intense sunlight, and I shuddered with a sinking feeling. I can't romanticize with a little sapling in 45-degree heat. I guess a much better advice is to sometimes just leave your notebook behind and abandon the story for a while until you are comfortable enough to write it again. Or just order yourself a coffee and forget that you are a writer for a while. Maybe such harmless depersonalization might pull you out of the straitjacket of writer's block.

Let's continue where we left off. My sister? What about my sister? I thought for a while as I skulked my way toward my room in the shade of the date trees. 'She raised me for god's sake,' this line pushed its way into the corridors of my mind and cracked like an epiphany. Well, this is a big enough topic for a whole dissertation essay about the role of elder sisters in the life of younger brothers.

Talking of my sister, she once told me jokingly that since she has raised me, I have to raise her kids with her in return because her husband doesn't know anything about child psychology and her extended family are all villains from some suburban novel from the Victorian times. I said a slow *yes*. It was the first *yes* to my family that I have never regretted.

Last night, she even sent me a picture of her little son Furqaan, who was wearing a headband that belonged to me 21 years ago. Oh, another idea: since I wanted to write about something nostalgic. Well, why don't I just write about that headband, an item both nostalgic and, at the same time, very, very nostalgic! Let's go!

* * *

By the time I was born, my parents already had four kids, three boys and one girl. They used to be busy working in the fields, raising crops, watering apple trees, or keeping trail of the unending demands of my grandparents. So it was my eldest sister who somehow raised me. She still sometimes complains about how, for most of her childhood years, she had waist pains because of carrying me all the time, not forgetting to mention that I was as heavy and chubby as a sack of potatoes. Nowadays, it is she who has a necessary part in my salary (One third of my salary usually goes into her gifts and treats and debts), and most of the good and bad news of my life first reaches her, and then she decides whether to spread it further in the rest of the family or not.

Not only was I heavy, but I was the most cheeky baby around (I learnt at the age of 22 that such talented babies are called crybabies). Our love for each other has survived loads of bitter travails. She once said her frustrations were usually melted by the love I have shown her all along.

In my early days, one of my aunts in the village had made me a headband of reddish color in the traditional style with pieces of mirror safely stuck in it. I wore it for a couple of years, and by the time I outgrew it, my mother raised my two younger sisters in it, and then locked it in the cabinet for some reason, and, surprisingly enough, it reappeared only a few years ago from her treasure box. She never explained why this was the only article she saved from the childhoods of her seven children, like some alchemist's stone. The moment it was discovered, my elder sister took it away as her hard-won booty because it was she who raised me through the war. I let her take it, though I insisted that she keep it safe. She probably raised Rukhma in it, then Zohaan, and now she is raising Furqaan in it. To tell the truth, because of the dehumanizing poverty and the dysfunctional family patterns, we were never a very well-connected sentimental family, yet that head-wrap is still talked about and handled with love and nostalgia.

Though I have not been to Waziristan for years now, if I ever go there again, I mean to cajole my sister to give back my headband so that I can keep it safe somewhere for the rest of the nephews and nieces to be raised in it (I might just as well raise my own kids in it, if I ever got to have them). I don't believe in superstitions, but my stepmother used to say that the headband would infuse my nicety and chocolatey eye color into the kids. Well, I would love my nephews and nieces to inherit my cheekiness in all its forms. Plus, I need to retrieve my white stones and my diaries from our dust-stricken little library existing in the heart of our otherwise very un-bookish mudhouse this time.

The writer is a student of BS English Literature (Year III)

Cult Of Music

Muhammad Ahmad Aleem

Aestheticism is the only divine sensibility in Man that was Satan's fear. Humans are all too aesthetic: and that was Satan's only surviving knowledge. Only aesthetic sense keeps Man away from ignorance. This is the sole way to knowledge: from self to selfless. Music fulfills human life as it is the best tool of aesthetic expression.

Music, as we may calculate, is an art of movement that solely exists in time. We live in music regardless of whether we notice it or not. Sounds, voices and tones are our very first perceptive consciousness. Much of the music we hear in daily life does not require formal study to grasp the meaning; its impact is direct and immediate because it deals with familiar sounds in familiar styles.

Music does not exist in a vacuum. It must have some or the other tradition on its back. Tradition and its patterns spring out of human aesthetics.

Music is a cult. It must have originated in the human mind from preconscious totality. Primarily, it would have been only the imitation of heard sounds and limited to the social psyche. Melody and harmony are a progress achieved much later.

Metaphysical concept of music

Music is the first creation that came into being on the creative level of intention. Intention was the divine tool that formulated all patterns of life. All life was made to flourish, using music as mathematical proportion and harmony. The sense of music is the first of all that existed in creation, living or nonliving. Within or without, the whole universe operates around the rhythm of music.

Philosophy of music

In its literal meaning, Music is a genre in which we find harmony and oneness far more than other art forms. There is more harmony within the soul and the body, the idea and the substance, the conscious and the unconscious. Apparently music deals with sound and tone; in fact, it is an expression beyond words, vocal and instrumental presentations.

Expression is the essence of music. We may regard music to be a genre that keeps spiritual perception even on a physical level. Every artist expresses his philosophy of music in his creativity, and artistic creativity is the symbol of the universal mind of the human being.

Music, on a philosophical level, is an expression of the universal law that binds the whole universe into a compact whole despite all disparity, disjointedness, and chaos. Music is the closest to perfectionist theory of art, and on the level of artistic presentation it unconsciously expresses all intuitive perception of mind and life, space and time, present and non-present.

Human aesthetics have only discovered 12 tones of music so far. Music discovers all vitality of these twelve tones. The artist expresses to our inner, what we want to say and what we can't say; but the divine perception of the artist speaks and communicates to our caliber for pain and pleasure, desire and satiation, beauty and aesthetics.

Melody and harmony

Melody is the musical line or curve. It is a succession of single tones perceived by the mind as a unity. We perceive tones not separately but in relation to each other within a pattern, in the same manner as understanding a sentence in relation to the thought as whole. A melody seems to move up and down, its individual tones being higher or lower than each other move to and fro. It also moves forward in time, one tone claiming our attention for a longer, shorter duration than another. A melody may move stepwise along the scale or it may leap to the next several degrees away. The leap may be narrow or wide, as may be the range of the melody. The leap means the covering of the distance from lowest to the highest tone.

Harmony to music is what perspective is to painting. Harmony pertains to the movement relationship of intervals and chords. An interval may be defined as the distance and relationship between two tones. A chord may be defined as a combination of three or more tones that constitute a single unit of harmony. In the scale: do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do, the interval do-re is a second, do-mi is a third, do-fa is a fourth, do-sol is a fifth, do-la is a sixth, and do-ti is a seventh, and one do to the next is an octave. Chords have meaning only in relation to other chords: that is,only as each leads into the next. Harmony

therefore implies movement and progression. Harmony denotes the overall organization of tones in a musical work in such a way as to achieve order and unity.

Consonance and Dissonance

Music is an art of movement in time. Harmonic movement develops due to the tendency of active chords resolving into chords of rest. This movement receives its maximum impetus from the dissonance. Dissonance is restlessness and activity; consonance is relaxation and fulfillment.

The dissonant chord creates tension. The consonant chord resolves it. Dissonance introduces the necessary tension into music. What suspense and conflict are to the drama; dissonance is to music. It creates the area of tension without which the area of relaxation would have no meaning. Consonance and dissonance are a necessary part of the artistic whole; each complements the other.

Chord and Triad

The most common chord in music is a certain combination of three tones known as a triad. Triad is a basic formation in music. Such a chord may be built by combining the first, third and fifth degrees of the do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do (sa-re-ga-ma-pa-dha-ne-sa) scale: do-mi-sol. A triad may be built on the second degree (steps 2-4-6 or re-fa-la); on the third degree (steps 3-5-7 or mi-sol-ti) and similarly on each of the other degrees of the scale.

Although the triad is a vertical block of sound, its three tones often appear horizontally as a melody. Melody and harmony do not function independently of one another.

Rhythm: musical time

Time is the crucial dimension in music; and its first law is rhythm. Rhythm means the flow that is referred to the controlled movement of music in time. The duration of the tones, their frequency, and the regularity or irregularity with which they are sounded, determines the rhythm of a musical passage. Rhythm is the element of music, most closely allied to body movement, to physical action. Rhythm is generally called the heartbeat of music, the pulse that betokens life. Rhythm releases our motor reflexes even if we do not respond with actual physical movement. We feel it in ourselves as a kind of

ideal motion; we seem to dance without dancing. Rhythm springs from the need for order inherent in the human mind. We organize our perception of time by means of rhythm. The ancients discerned in rhythm the creative principle of the universe manifested alike in the regular movement of planets,the cycle of seasons and tides, of night and day, desire and appeasement, life and death. Exposed to the caprice of a merciless destiny, man fashioned for himself an ideal universe where the unforeseen was excluded and divine order reigned. This universe was art; and its controlling principle was rhythm. The symmetrical proportion of architecture, the balanced groupings of painting and sculpture, the patterns of dance, the regular meters of poetry— each in its own sphere represents man's deep-seated need for rhythmical arrangement. But it is in music, the art of ideal movement, that rhythm finds its richest expression. In brief, through the power of rhythm the composer achieves a dimension in time comparable to what a painter, sculptor, and architect achieves in space.

Meter

If we are to grasp the flow of music through time, time must be organized. Musical time is usually organized in terms of a basic unit of length, known as a beat. We perceive the beats in groups of two,three, four or more. These groups are known as measures, each containing a fixed number of beats.Meter, therefore, denotes the fixed time patterns within which musical events take place. Within the underlying metrical framework, the rhythm flows freely.

In a dance band, the drummer will beat a regular pattern, with an accent on the first beat of every measure, while the trumpeter or another soloist will play a melody, containing many notes of different lengths, flowing freely over the regular pattern. Together, the two shape the rhythm and overall flow of the music.

Syncopation

Syncopation means a deliberate upsetting of the normal accent. The accent, instead of falling on the strong beat of the measure, is shifted to a weak note,or to an offbeat. Syncopation has figured in European music for centuries, and was used by the masters with subtlety. It is associated in the popular mind with the Afro-American dance rhythms out of which modern Jazz developed.

Tempo: musical pace

Meter tells us how many beats there are in the measure, but it does not tell us whether these beats occur slowly or rapidly. The tempo, by which we mean the rate of speed, the pace of music, provides the answer to this vital matter. Consequently the flow of the music in time involves both the meter and tempo.

Tempo carries emotional implications. We hurry our speech in moments of agitation. Our bodies press forward in eagerness, hold back in lassitude. Vigor and gaiety are associated with a brisk gait as surely as despair demands a slow one. In the art of movement such as music, the rate of movement is of cardinal importance. We respond to musical tempo physically and psychologically. Our pulse, our breathing, our entire being are adjusted to the rate of movement and to the feeling engendered thereby on the conscious and unconscious levels. There are close connections between tempo and mood. Tempo markings indicate the mood of the music as well as the pace. The tempo terms are generally given in Italian, a survival from the time when the opera of that nation dominated the European scene.

Following are the most common Italian markings for the various tempos:

Solemn (very, very slow) : grave

Broad (very slow) : largo

Quite slow : adagio

Slow: lento

A walking pace : andante

A bit faster than andante : andantino

Moderate : moderato

Moderately fast : allegretto

Fast (cheerful) : allegro

Lively : vivace

Very fast : presto

Very, very fast : prestissimo

Frequently encountered too are modifying verbs such as molto (very), meno (less), poco (a little), and non troppo (not too much). It should be noted that andante, which in the eighteenth century indicated a 'going' pace, in the nineteenth century came to mean 'fairly slow'. Of great importance are the terms indicating a change of tempo. The principal ones are accelerando (getting faster) and ritardando (holding back, getting slower); a tempo (in time) indicates a return to the original pace. For example of the various tempos, listen to the opening section of the following works:

Largo : Chopin Prelude in E minor.

Adagio : Beethoven, Sonata Pathetique, second movement.

Lento : Chopin, Etude in A minor.

Andante : Bach, Brandenburg concerto No. 2, second movement.

Andantino : Schubert, Trout quintet, theme of the fourth movement.

Allegretto : Mozart, Eine kleine Nachtmusik, third movement.

Tchaikovsky, Arabian dance from Nutcracker suite.

Allegro : Mozart, Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, first movement.

Beethoven Sonata Pathetique, third movement.

Dynamics: Musical volumes

"The player must be guided by passion. Sometimes a note requires a rather vigorous attack, at other times a moderate one, at still other times one that is barely audible." - Mozart.

Dynamics denote the degree of loudness or softness at which the music is played. Mystery and fear call for a whisper, even as jubilation and vigorous activity go with full resonance. A lullaby or love song moves in another dynamic range than a triumphal march.

The principal dynamic indicators are:

Very soft : Pianissimo (pp)

Soft : Piano (P)

Moderately Soft : mezzo piano (mp)

Loud : forte (f)

Moderately loud : mezzo forte (mf)

Very loud : fortissimo (ff)

Of special importance are the directions to change the dynamics. Such changes are indicated by words or signs; among the commonest are:

Growing louder : Crescendo

Growing softer : decrescendo or diminuendo

Sudden stress : sforzando (accent on a single note or chord)

Crescendo and decrescendo (diminuendo) are among the important expressive effects.

Instruments of the orchestra

An instrument is a mechanism that is able to generate musical vibrations and launch them into the air. Each instrument, according to its capacities, enables us to control the four properties of musical sound: pitch, duration, volume, and color. By pitch, I mean the location of a tone in the musical scale in relation to high or low. The pitch is determined by the rate of vibration, which to a large extent depends on the length of the vibrating body. The shorter a string or column of air, the more rapidly it vibrates and the higher the pitch. The longer the string or column of air is, the fewer the vibrations per second and the lower the pitch. The width, thickness, density, and tension of the vibrating body also affect the outcome. Duration depends on the length of time, over which vibration is maintained. We hear notes as being not only high or low but also short or long. As for the timbre or tone color, that is
influenced by a number of factors, such as the size, shape, and proportions of the instruments, the material of which it is made, and the manner in which vibration is set up.

In the orchestra, musical instruments are divided into four sections (or choirs): String, Woodwind, Brass, and Percussion.

The String section

The string section of the orchestra includes four instruments: *Violin, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass*. These have four strings, which are set vibrating by either drawing a bow across them or plucking them. The hair of the bow is rubbed with rosin so that it will grip the strings.

The Italians, around 1600-1750 brought the violin to its present form. Most famous among them were the Amati and Guarneri families. In these dynasties the secrets of the craft were transmitted from father to son, and the master innovator of them all, Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737). The Violin, the highest-pitched of the string choir, is universally admired for its singing tone, which brings it of all instruments closest to human voice. It has an extremely wide range and is capable of subtle nuances from soft to loud, of the utmost rhythmic precision and great agility in rapid progress.

The *Viola* is somewhat larger than the violin, and is lower in range. Its strings are longer, thicker, heavier. The tone is husky in the low register, somber and penetrating in the high. The viola is an effective melody instrument, and usually fills in the harmony, or may double another part; that is, reinforce it by playing the same notes, an octave higher or lower.

The *Violoncello*, popularly known as *Cello*, is lower in range than the viola and is notable for its lyric quality, which takes on a deep resonance in the lower register. Its tone is expressive.

The *Double bass,* known also as contrabass or-bass viol, is the lowest in the range of the string section. It plays the bass part, that is, the foundation of harmony.

The string instruments are pre-eminent in playing *legato (smooth and connected*), though they are capable of the opposite quality of tone, *staccato (short and detached)*. A special effect, *Pizzicato (plucked)*, is executed by the performer's plucking the string with his finger instead of using the bow. Vibrato denotes a throbbing effect achieved by a rapid wrist and finger movement that slightly alters the pitch. In Glissando the player moves a finger of his left hand rapidly along the string while the right hand draws the bow, thereby sounding all the pitches of the scale. Tremolo, the rapid repetition of a tone through a quick up-and-down movement of the bow, is associated in the popular mind with suspense and excitement. No less important is the trill, a rapid alternation between a tone and its neighbor. Double-stopping involves playing two strings simultaneously; when three or four strings are played simultaneously, it is called triple or *quadruple stopping*.

The Woodwind section

In the woodwind instruments, the tone is produced by a column of air vibrating within a pipe that has little holes in its sides. When one or another of these holes is opened or closed, the length of the vibrating air column within the pipe is changed.

The woodwinds are a less homogeneous group than the strings. Not necessarily made up of wood, they represent several methods of setting up vibration: by blowing across a mouth hole (flute family); by blowing into a mouthpiece that has a single reed (clarinet and Saxophone families); by blowing into a mouthpiece fitted with a double reed (oboe and bassoon families).

The Brass section

The brass section consists of the French horn,trumpet, trombone, and tuba. These instruments have cup shaped mouthpieces (except for the horn,whose mouthpiece is like a funnel). The tube flares at the end into an opening known as a bell. The column of air within the tube is set vibrating by the tightly stretched lips of the player, which acts as a kind of double reed. To go from one pitch to another involves not only mechanical means, such as a slide or valves, but also variation in the pressure of the lips and breath.

The Percussion section

The percussion section comprises a variety of instruments that produce sound due to striking or shaking. Certain ones are made of metal or wood. In others, such as the drums, vibration is set up by striking a stretched skin.

Percussion instruments accentuate the rhythm, generate excitement at the climax, and inject splashes of color into the orchestral sound. The percussion instruments fall into two categories: those, which are capable of being tuned to definite pitches, and those, which produce a single sound in the borderland between music and noise (instruments of indefinite pitch). In the former class are the kettledrums or timpani, which are generally used in sets of two or three. The kettledrum is a hemispheric copper shell across which is stretched a head of calfskin held in place by a metal ring. Adjustable screws or a pedal mechanism enable the player to change the tension of the calfskin head, and with it the pitch. The instrument is played with two padded sticks, which may be either soft or hard. Its dynamic range extends from a mysterious rumble to a thunderous roll.

In the other group are the percussion instruments that do not produce a definite pitch, such as, the side drum or snare drum (also known as military drum), the tenor drum, the bass drum, the tom-tom drum, the tambourine, the triangle (small round bar of steel bent in the shape of a triangle), Cymbals (two large circular brass plates of equal size), etc.

(Courtesy of all inspiring sources conscious and unconscious, dictionaries and net information)

The author is former editor of The Ravi.


Paintings By Mohd. Khan, Galleria D'arte



Impressionism and the Birth of New Perspectives and Visions

Ahmed Azlan Talha

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,

From the seas and the streams;

I bear light shade for the leaves when laid

In their noonday dreams.

— Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cloud*

Percy Bysshe Shelley, a stalwart of the Romantics, evokes the transient vitality of nature in *The Cloud*. The poem begins with the cloud's explicit purpose: to bring showers of rejuvenation and cheerfulness. These downpours do not merely dampen the edges of flowers and leaves; they are essential to their color and survival. Vibrancy and glee define the beauty of a flower—its optics not only bring visual pleasure, but also cast an undeniable spell, captivating the gaze and enveloping the viewer in serenity. As Oscar Wilde observed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "Mere color, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways." Through this symbolism, we may infer the profound importance of aesthetic radiance in human experience.

Art is the supreme expression of human creative skill and imagination. Through successive artistic movements, painters and thinkers have explored the multifaceted dimensions of human nature, accessing buried emotions to pave a way for complex ideas. Impressionism, emerging in late 19th-century France, was one such movement that allowed artists to break away from rigid classicism. By blending technical skill with an appreciation for ambient beauty, Impressionism fundamentally reshaped artistic visions. Emerging during a period of rapid social shift, it catalyzed new conceptual frameworks

by challenging traditional academic conventions, embracing innovative techniques *en plein air*, and reflecting a modern, subjective experience of the world through light and color.

Impressionism emerged as an evolutionary step beyond Realism, reflecting the broader social and philosophical shifts that accompanied 19th-century positivism. Etymologically, the movement owes its name to Claude Monet's 1872 canvas, *Impression, soleil levant* (*Impression, Sunrise*). The movement's foundations were deeply rooted in Europe's changing socio-cultural landscape, where fast-paced industrialization prompted artists to capture the fleeting movements of daily life. Beginning in earnest during the 1870s, young painters began actively defying the constraints of the rigid *Académie des Beaux-Arts*. Meticulous realism was confronted by the non-conformist aesthetics of Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Camille Pissarro, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

To counter established norms, these artists organized a groundbreaking independent exhibition in 1874. Though initially met with sharp criticism, their core philosophy gained widespread acceptance over time. Monet, widely regarded as the movement's foundational figure, centered his work on the principle that vision is determined primarily by light and color rather than line drawing. The advent of portable oil paint tubes enabled these artists to leave the studio entirely, capturing a vibrant, immediate reality directly on canvas.

Technically, Impressionism is distinguished by its direct application of pure, unmixed color in short, visible brushstrokes. The movement discarded traditional *chiaroscuro*—the heavy contrast between light and shadow—in favor of suggesting form through subtle shifts in hue and tone. By painting outdoors (*en plein air*), Impressionists captured immediate visual impressions of shifting natural light and atmosphere.

Impressionism introduced a radical shift in perspective. Rather than serving historical or mythological narratives, its overarching vision was to document the subjective experience of modern life. This broad objective encompassed several key features: a rebellion against academic traditions, the adoption of rapid brushwork, an emphasis on atmospheric light, the elevation of ordinary subject matter, and the prioritization of subjective perception over objective reproduction.

Following the mid-19th-century redesign of Paris, the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* maintained strict dominance over French art, upholding traditional standards in both content and

style. The *Salon de Paris*, the Académie's official juried exhibition, consistently favored polished, historical works by artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme while rejecting experimental pieces. In 1863, Édouard Manet's unconventional work *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*Luncheon on the Grass*) was rejected, sparking public debate. In response, Emperor Napoleon III sanctioned the *Salon des Refusés* to showcase the rejected works, drawing public interest to emerging figures like Monet and Renoir. By 1873, these artists formed an independent cooperative, holding their first group exhibition in 1874. Art critic Louis Leroy mockingly dubbed them "Impressionists" after Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*—a label the artists defiantly embraced. Monet's painting, criticized at the time for its raw, sketch-like quality, ultimately gave name to a definitive shift in art history.

The technical innovations of Impressionism centered on three primary elements: loose brushwork, the study of optical light, and the representation of everyday scenes. Quick, visible strokes allowed painters to convey spontaneity and the atmosphere of a single moment. Mesmerized by natural light, they worked outdoors to record the transient effects of sun and shade. Furthermore, by abandoning idealized classicism for contemporary urban life, they elevated everyday experiences into legitimate subjects for fine art. For example, Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Bal du moulin de la Galette* uses energetic brushwork and dappled light to capture the lively mood of a Parisian social gathering, immersing the viewer directly in the sensory experience.

Perhaps the most radical dimension of Impressionism was its embrace of subjective vision. Expanding on the realist foundations of Gustave Courbet, the Impressionists sought to be painters of the actual world—portraying life as it was experienced rather than in an idealized form. Their work operated on the premise that what the eye perceives in a fleeting instant differs from what the mind systematically constructs. Edgar Degas exemplified this approach in *The Dance Class*. Rather than depicting dancers in polished, romanticized poses, Degas captured them stretching, yawning, or adjusting their costumes backstage. His unposed compositions and unusual vantage points create the distinct impression of an unobserved spectator.

Ultimately, Impressionism revolutionized how art was produced, rendered, and understood. By introducing avant-garde techniques, experimenting with unmixed color, and favoring daily life over historical grandeur, the movement established a new

vocabulary for visual art. From its roots in 19th-century France, Impressionism intellectually reoriented artistic practice worldwide, proving that a momentary impression could convey profound human truth.

The writer is a student of BS Linguistics (Year IV)

01

ESSAYS

✦ Home is Another Place

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One Belongs to the Other; One Knows One Not

Taha Furqan Hanif

Believing in one thing is synonymous with denouncing many others. Many subscribe to one idea or the other and then call it religion, science, caste, creed, race, nationality, or ethnicity. What they do not realize is that the act of choosing one of the many arbitrary factions means one becomes part of a cult. Not choosing to associate with any group also makes one a member of another cult. This paradox shatters the notion of neutrality. To remain a centrist is to remain absent, and a void can be taken for a space for projection. Do not speak and be spoken for, and remain part of a universal cult: a structure of belonging demanding allegiance.

The hermit might have to speak, but to what end? For in the post-postmodern-polarized world, to breathe is a political statement, to speak is a social concern, to write is an inner calling, and to remain silent is an ethical conundrum. All lead one to a singular reality: belonging. Human beings cannot avoid belonging, but belonging is exclusionary in all of its facets. We inhabit a world of exclusions where belonging limits one's experience of life itself rather than providing solace.

Belonging is an ontological crisis, visceral in nature, psychological and sociological in manifestation. It is a core human drive that is social in its actualization – an individual need that depends on others' presence. One's need to belong can never be satiated in isolation. Moses and Jesus both gave up what was unacceptable and acceded to what was permissible to belong to the monotheist faction. To belong to the One True God, referring to the reemergence of monotheism, was in itself an exclusionary act. One had to forgo the pluralist gods and their traditional deities to become a part of this faction.

Religion is not the only entity where belonging makes its demands. Political movements like nationalism have mobilized this desire to serve their agenda. Figures like Ataturk, Gandhi, and Jinnah chanted nationalism, belonging to a unified nation, at the expense of ethnic and regional identities. While such projects often portray belonging as a cohesive driving force, it subsumes the existing allegiances that have existed for longer periods of

[1] The title of the second section "Home is Another Place" is taken from the essay "Home is Another Place" by Anees Rehman, which was published in Issue Zero, Pk.

time and are harder to conceal. Kemal Atatürk constructed Turkish identity, with Ottoman and regional identities as core ingredients. Similarly, in Pakistan, the Baloch, Kashmiri, and Pashtun identities were forced to become Pakistani before any other, making their identities palimpsestic and belonging coerced. Thus, state level belonging, more often than not, becomes a tool of ethnic and cultural mutilation.

Belonging to a category always demands self-sacrifice. To become who one wants to be, one needs to leave behind who one is. This means that belonging is a "Double Bind." To get the safety of the pack, one must surrender the individual traits that contradict those of the pack. It is never free. To become a godly person, give up to His will. To become a humanist, give up God. To become a nationalist, leave behind your roots. To become a moralist, bear the badge of an orthodox. To belong demands complacency and surrender.

* * *

The journey of belonging is as old as time. The quest stands at an impasse, for the voyage is inward. Belonging begins from being, and being remains a mystery. Since the dawn of living beings, protection and safety have been sought in the company of a partner – the partner extending into a community, a state, a nation. A pack of wolves defeats a lion. What happens when a wolf is separated or leaves the pack?

In modern terminology, the lone wolf is called an exile or an outcast. Exile and belonging are the opposite ends of the same coin. For Edward Said, not belonging creates an "unhealable rift" between the self and its true home. This chasm takes one back to Adam, for was he not removed from Eden, the truest of homes? If the progenitor of humankind bore Said's Rift and constantly desired to be returned to his soul's home, then belonging is a transgenerational contract. If the father of all longed to belong, the children face the same fate.

This longing gave birth to belonging, which in turn created the nemesis – the lion. The lion becomes a social construct because, without something to fear, the pack might not stick together. This lion, in modern terminology, then becomes state-backed terrorism, internal colonialism, and a constructed global crisis. These arbitrary categorizations become the defining gateways of who is considered ours and who is other.

The human quest for belonging and the paradox of belonging are at a stalemate. Unlike olden times, where a pack had only to fight the lion, today the pack seems to exist but

disintegrates on an individual level. The individual fights inward, as existence is as fragile as never before. The self tries to reach for truth, hope, science, and religion, but is unsuccessful as each of these is itself a faction. Naturally, the self looks back to its legion to identify the truth, but when the legion shifts its association at the whim of algorithms, the self gets lost.

The Baudrillardian postmodern concept of simulacra contends that modern society's reality and meaning have been replaced by symbols and signs. The human identity has been separated from physical reality, and the focus has shifted to the simulated reality. Belonging has thus become a hyper-realistic simulacrum. It is a representation of an abstraction that may never have had an original. This is because the urge of belonging is inherently inward, but to belong demands acceptance of the man-made regulations. This conundrum makes the distinction between self and reality obscure. The self's identity has always been curated. While bygone epochs had their own alchemy for constructing this identity, in contemporary times it is curated through trends made viral, which render the self's identity balkanized. This realization drastically changes the meaning of belonging.

The age of the posthuman is upon us. Every individual is now a 'glocal' citizen, yet humans often find belonging in the company of a posthuman: chatbots. Recent reporting indicates that teens are spending hours chatting with AI programmes for emotional support, encouragement, and social interaction. Some report talking to AI more than they talk to real friends. This happens as, unlike before, the self is not one or the other; it is both one and the other. The self in this condition no longer negotiates with the other but with its replica. This is a belonging, beyond people, pulsating only on an interface.

The 'glocal' self is tied to a borderless boundary-oriented community that binds its pack through an invisible thread that has made belonging easier than ever before. The pack of wolves must recognize that their singularity is now contested by an nth multiplicity of packs. The self must choose how much and to whom it will surrender, for in the totally polarized world, neutrality is a no-state.

The paradox of belonging is unending and ever-changing. One cannot escape the simulacra. Subscribing to any of the factions leads one back to the universal cult. Where must one look? What reality is followed? One can never belong where one wants to, for the self is not individual but shared. A self may be one, but it is also inextricably its

opposite. To belong to a singularity, one must embrace the polarity. One must be one and many and yet a no one. The question is never whether one should belong or not; that is inescapable; it is that one should be conscious of the surrender, accepting the exclusion that comes with it.

The writer is the former President of Safdar Mir English Literary Circle (SMELC)

Corvallis: The America That Was – and the One I Carried Home

Muhammad Usman Amin Siddiqi

Growing up in a Punjabi Sunni Muslim family in Lahore, I never questioned my place in society.

Why would I?

Everything around me – from the language spoken in the streets to the festivals we celebrated – affirmed that I belonged. I never had to consider the idea of identity, let alone reflect on my own. I didn't realize how this effortless belonging was a privilege, reinforced at every corner, classroom, and social gathering, creating a blind spot I wouldn't recognize until much later. Despite the challenges of our lower middle-class life, it felt as though hard work alone could overcome any obstacle, while I remained blissfully unaware of the deeper structural forces that quietly determined whose efforts would succeed and whose would not.

I heard the voices of those on the margins, yet I filtered their grievances through my comfortable certainty: Yes, their concerns might be legitimate, but weren't they exaggerating a bit? Weren't they missing the broader context that would explain away their struggles? I convinced myself they were viewing 'reality' through a distorted lens, one that magnified injustices while overlooking the natural order of things. The world around me felt natural, familiar, even fair, because it was built with people like me in mind – or so it seemed.

How easy it was to dismiss what I didn't have to experience.

However, that changed when I boarded a plane to Corvallis, Oregon, a journey that would lead to an education far more personal than the PhD I had come to pursue. As I prepared for my PhD, organizing research materials, revising theories, and practicing econometrics, I had no idea how completely my place in the world was about to shift. The journey across oceans wasn't just geographic. It would unsettle everything I thought I understood about belonging.

Landing in the beautiful university town of Corvallis, I was met with genuine warmth: strangers held doors open, cashiers asked about my day, and professors leaned forward with interest when I spoke. Over six years, Corvallis became a second home filled with people whose kindness became my anchor, and whom I still deeply cherish. Yet beneath that warmth, living in a new place began to stir something deeper within me, something I had never been forced to confront before.

It was the insidious realization of being an outsider.

Nothing dramatic announced this shift. There were no confrontations, no rejections, no overt hostility. Instead, it revealed itself in small, almost imperceptible moments: pausing before returning a greeting, mentally rehearsing sentences before speaking in seminars, laughing along at jokes whose context I did not understand, and nodding at references that went over my head. I noticed becoming hyper-aware of my name and where I came from whenever I introduced myself, watching for the slightest flicker of reaction. The identity I had never needed to think about now felt like a badge I could not take off.

For the first time in my life, I was on the outside looking in.

It started with a few doubts here and there. But they kept growing. What if people didn't understand me? What if they categorized me before I even had a chance to share my thoughts? What if an innocent mistake confirmed their worst assumptions? Every interaction began to feel like a performance. I weighed my words before speaking, careful not to be misunderstood. More and more, I found myself staying silent in moments when, back home, I would have spoken without a second thought.

The loneliness, too, was a new companion.

I couldn't shake the image of my five-year-old crying as I left for the airport. But it wasn't just homesickness. It was also the quiet ache of feeling out of place. Back home, I was known for my stories. Friends would lean in when I spoke. Here, those same stories fell flat, lost in translation and stripped of their cultural context. The laughter I once sparked began to disappear, and with it, so did parts of me. I found myself becoming more reserved, even boring, like a character missing all the best lines.

I was tired all the time. Drained. Even the smallest tasks felt harder.

Only later did I realize where that constant fatigue came from: having to think too hard, all the time, constantly decoding a world that did not instinctively feel like my own. My

mind seemed stuck in what Daniel Kahneman calls System 2, the slow, effortful mode of thinking.

Back home, life flowed. I moved through my days almost on autopilot, guided by instinct, by what Kahneman calls System 1. But here, nothing came naturally. Every word, gesture, and decision required conscious effort. Nothing could be taken for granted. Crossing the street meant pausing to remember which way the traffic flowed. Simple errands required mental rehearsal. Fahrenheit, miles, ounces, unfamiliar accents – everything needed translation. Even feelings. I remember sitting across from a doctor, searching for English words to describe a pain I understood so precisely in Urdu.

This wasn't just culture shock. It was cognitive exhaustion.

So yes, it was tough. But I made it through.

But not through sheer determination alone. I made it because kindness held me up when my own strength gave out. My mentors, faculty, colleagues, friends, and even strangers offered support, patience, and encouragement. Their belief in me helped me survive and, eventually, thrive. They gave me the time and space to grow into myself, not by asking me to shed my identity, but by making room for it.

No, this isn't a story of pulling myself up by the bootstraps. It's about the hands that reached out when I was too tired to stand. It wasn't the sleepless nights wrestling with calculus or the endless hours in the library that carried me through.

It was Prof. Steel checking in each morning with a one-line email: "Everything OK, Usman?"

It was Prof. Bernell making room for my family stories before turning to energy policy.

It was Prof. Boudet seeing promise in my work when I was still unsure of it myself.

It was Prof. Wolters telling me, again and again, that my writing had weight.

It was Ms. Marigold, quietly moving mountains to keep the funding steady beneath my feet.

It was neighbours checking in, strangers passing by saying, "Hey man, awesome beard," and police officers waving as they passed, making me feel seen, acknowledged, and accepted.

This isn't a motivational tale about hard work conquering adversity. It's about something far less individual and far more human: that even the strongest among us need others. I made it through because people showed up, extended grace, and made room for me when I needed it most.

I will never forget the Friday after the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand. Though nearly 7,500 miles away and many hours ahead of us, the weight of that tragedy reached us in Corvallis. As I walked to the local mosque for Friday prayers that afternoon, I carried with me a strange feeling. It wasn't fear exactly, but a quiet unease I couldn't shake.

And then, I saw them.

Lining the walkway to the mosque were members of the local Corvallis community. Not Muslims, not fellow worshippers, but neighbours. Ordinary people holding flowers. They were not there to convert or intervene, only to stand with us. To look us in the eyes and say, without words:

You are safe. We see you. We are with you.

It was surprising how much it meant to simply feel safe, to be seen as you are. I couldn't stop the tears as I thought of those who had rarely, if ever, known that feeling, even in places they called home. I thought of communities back home where tragedy did not bring people together, where flowers were replaced by mobs and fires, and solidarity by silence from those who should speak and fear among those who could not.

For them, vulnerability isn't temporary, as mine was. It is a constant condition of life.

My experience was sheltered, softened by the privileges of a supportive university, caring mentors, and a welcoming town. But even that brief glimpse of vulnerability, outside the comfort of everything I had once taken for granted, cracked open the certainty I had carried for so long. It forced me to confront an uncomfortable truth: the same society that had given me an effortless sense of belonging had also conditioned me to overlook those who were systematically denied it.

Being an outsider gave me something invaluable: perspective.

Now, I hear the voices I once dismissed as overreacting differently. What once seemed exaggerated to me now reveals truths I had been too sheltered to see. I have learned to

listen with greater humility and to stand in solidarity with those pushed to the margins for any reason, whether because of race, religion, gender, class, disability, or identity.

The America I carried home isn't the one in headlines, but the one I found in Corvallis, where simple acts of kindness became my lifelines far from home. As the nation pulls away from this welcoming spirit, I hold onto this experience as both a memory and a quiet hope.

When I was invited to write for Ravi, I chose to take readers to Corvallis before eventually returning to GC University, Lahore, another place very close to my heart.

GCU admits one of the most diverse student cohorts in Pakistan every year. But diversity doesn't end at admission. That is where the real work begins. Students from the most remote corners of the country arrive here carrying the quiet burdens of displacement and difference, often with far less support than I had. Many tread the same unfamiliar paths I once did.

Let's make sure they don't have to walk those paths alone.

To do that, we must unlearn our biases and confront the structural forces that hold some people back while quietly carrying others forward.

For faculty, this means learning to recognize brilliance behind language barriers, broadening our understanding of what "appropriate" student behaviour looks like, and, most importantly, respecting the kind of education earned through survival rather than trying to correct it to fit dominant narratives. Many of these students carry worldviews forged by war, loss, displacement, or systemic neglect, realities that often remain abstract concepts to many of us who have never had to leave the safety of our hometowns. Let's be mindful not to mistake a late submission or absence for negligence. It may reflect a sacred holiday not marked on our academic calendar, a family obligation, or the exhaustion of a fifty-hour journey back home.

For students who enjoy the privilege of easy belonging, it means pausing to notice the classmate quietly searching for cues on how to fit in. Let's step beyond our usual circles, notice when our jokes unintentionally leave someone out, and allow our own assumptions to be gently challenged.

For administrators, this means designing policies, from financial aid to hostel accommodation, that ease rather than add to the burdens of difference and displacement.

We may not be able to erase every injustice, but we can offer one another a quiet certainty: that we are seen, that someone will stand beside us, and that, if only for a moment, we do not have to carry our burdens alone.

Inclusion is not charity. It is justice.

Prof. Steel once shared something his own mentor had told him: "The kindness you receive isn't meant to stop with you. Pass it on."

The author is an Old Ravian whose ties to GC University Lahore span around two decades, first as a student and later as a member of the faculty. This essay reflects on his years as a PhD scholar at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon, USA, and is written in gratitude to the friends, mentors, and strangers from both sides of that journey who helped him find his place.

On The Great Departure

Syed Muhammad Abbas

There are certain ambitions in life so common, so over-rehearsed, and so universally accepted that to question them is considered either bad manners or mental instability. In present-day Pakistan, one such ambition is the desire to leave the country. Not to travel, mind you. Travel implies return, and return is now regarded with the sort of suspicion once reserved for tax collectors, failed poets, and people who voluntarily sit in the front row at seminars. No, I speak of leaving in the way people now actually mean it: as if this country were a room filled with smoke and the only sensible course left would be to escape before everyone else does.

It is impossible to overstate the reverence this ambition now commands. Once upon a time, young people were asked what they wanted to become: doctor, engineer, civil servant, professor, disappointment. The answers varied. Today, however, the question has been simplified in accordance with the great democratic spirit of decline. The real question now is not what you want to become, but where you can manage to get yourself. Personality, talent, conviction, even the degree itself are secondary matters. First comes destination. Canada is a temperament. Australia, a doctrine. Germany, a temporary personality adopted for the sake of tuition. America remains less a country than an afterlife to which one applies through portals, essays, attested transcripts, and parental blood pressure.

You may object that there is nothing irrational in wanting to leave a place that exhausts those who remain in it. And of course, you would be right. One must begin by admitting the obvious: there are many good reasons to wish for departure. A collapsing economy, institutional decay, shrinking opportunities, social suffocation, political farce, and the daily insult of dealing with local bureaucracy would be enough to persuade even the most patriotic soul that exile has its uses. But that is not the phenomenon that interests me here. I do not speak of those who leave with purpose, discipline, and a coherent sense of what exactly they mean to do after arrival. Such people, though not always wise, are at least intelligible. No, I am concerned with another category altogether: those for whom

going abroad is not one plan among many, but the answer to everything before they have even worked out the question.

These are the faithful of the "Great Departure." You will know them when you meet them, though in truth you can hardly avoid doing so, for they now constitute a substantial share of the educated classes. They are not united by subject, merit, or even destination, but by a single conviction: that life, somehow, will begin properly somewhere else. Press them even slightly on what they intend to study, do, become, contribute, build, write, repair, investigate, or endure once they have landed, and you will observe a most remarkable evaporation of detail. *"I'll see." "Something in management." "Maybe data." "Maybe business analytics." "Anything, yaar, bas nikalna hai."* That is the whole philosophy: getting out first and figuring it out later. The rest may be left to Providence, part-time work, distant cousins in London, and the comforting belief that geography itself can do the work of character.

Indeed, one of the stranger superstitions of our age is the belief that migration is a substitute for thought.

If a student in Pakistan lacks direction, he does not ask which discipline might suit his abilities. He asks which country has easier visa policies. If he has no particular interest in research, he nonetheless develops overnight a profound concern for "higher education abroad." If a person has spent twelve years showing no enthusiasm whatsoever for academic life, he will suddenly begin speaking of a master's degree with tears in his eyes, as though scholarship rather than stamped immigration paperwork were the object of pursuit. Entire educational trajectories are now reverse-engineered from embassy requirements. Degrees are selected not because they mean anything, but because they can be narrated persuasively in a statement of purpose composed mostly of noble lies.

And what documents are these?

The modern Pakistani student may not know what he believes, but he can tell you in exquisite detail how deeply "passionate" he is about interdisciplinary innovation in global leadership and sustainable impact, provided this performance improves his odds of escape. The statement of purpose has become the highest literary form of our time—a genre in which every mediocre adolescent is reborn as a visionary thinker shaped by adversity, resilience, and a lifelong fascination with whichever subject offers funding. I

have read essays in which boys who barely passed mathematics suddenly discover an ancient calling toward quantitative reasoning, and girls whose only enduring relationship has been with video-sharing applications describe themselves as committed researchers of human society. The consul must be fed, and fed he shall be.

Yet even these inventions would be forgivable if they concealed some substantive plan. But very often there is none but to escape. To be abroad is, for many, to have arrived in every sense that matters. One need not know what one is doing in Toronto so long as one is no longer doing it in Lahore. In many imaginations, even a modest job in a clean foreign supermarket carries more prestige than competent work at home.

I do not say this entirely with contempt. There is tragedy in it too. For what does it say of a nation when its young no longer imagine greatness except in removal? What has gone so wrong that entire families now treat departure as the only respectable climax to education? The old middle-class fantasies once ended with service, profession, establishment. Now they end finally on photographs taken beside luggage and posted with prayers, flags, and captions thanking God for what is, in effect, a socially approved escape. The student himself, though not yet fully aware of what awaits him, carries the look of someone who believes he has finally reached the destination.

He has not, of course. He has simply moved from one set of troubles to another—except the second set comes with better roads.

But one must admire the scale of the national hallucination. We have reached a point where "settled abroad" functions in Pakistani society as a metaphysical rank. To say of someone that he is settled abroad is to excuse all defects in his character, education, taste, and conversation. It does not matter if he speaks in the accent of a malfunctioning call center, has acquired no meaningful expertise, and spends his life driving between warehouse shifts and discount grocery aisles. He has achieved transcendence. He is abroad. His opinions on Pakistan now acquire prophetic authority, especially if delivered during December visits in which he complains about the roads while contributing nothing beyond imported chocolates and condescension.

You may think I exaggerate. I assure you I do not. I have seen students treat IELTS preparation with a seriousness they never once brought to their actual degrees. I have known people who could not complete a semester project without intervention speak

with imperial certainty about relocating to Europe and "figuring things out." I have observed young men with no savings, no skill, no patience, no language proficiency, and no interest in labor imagine that the West has been waiting anxiously for their arrival. I have met those who could not survive three days without domestic help but fully intended to build a glorious independent life abroad—though preferably one in which independence does not extend to laundry.

Still, it would be too easy to laugh only at the students who inherited this. It was prepared for them lovingly by a society that taught them from childhood that success is visible only when witnessed from overseas. The local is always provisional; the foreign is always final. A child gets good grades and is told he might go abroad; he gets admitted to a decent university and is told not to waste time here. She shows talent in a field with local need, and immediately the family begins asking how this skill might be exported.

Thus, migration ceases to be one possible path among many and becomes the single respectable ambition left standing amid the ruins of public confidence. Once this happens, contentment arrives far too early—which is something sadder still. The student no longer inquires what a meaningful life would constitute. He asks only what would constitute a successful departure. Having secured admission somewhere—anywhere—he experiences not the beginning of responsibility, but the end of suspense. The target was never intellectual growth, professional seriousness, or even economic mobility in any fully considered sense. It was solely to get a visa. Once that sticker lands on the passport, many behave as though the story has already been won. Confusion, degradation, drift, loneliness, casual work, mismatched degrees, or five years of saying, "I'm just exploring options" inevitably follow, but the essential victory has already been celebrated.

This is the very reason why so many seem startlingly untroubled by the question of what comes next; it can be managed through improvisation, hustle, temporary suffering, and the great South Asian gift for narrating instability as strategy. The future need not be envisioned so long as it occurs on foreign soil.

At this point, some indignant person will rise and say: *"But what is wrong with wanting a better life?"* Nothing, my dear patriot of convenience, nothing at all. The trouble lies not in wanting better, but in perceiving "better" as a change in geography rather than discipline and hard work. A country may offer order, institutions, and opportunity; it cannot provide purpose ready-made. If you were directionless in Pakistan, you may well remain

directionless in Birmingham, only colder. If you had no discipline in Lahore, Toronto will not sprinkle it upon you like holy water. And if you spent your life mistaking prestige for substance here, you may continue the habit there with equal confidence.

The saddest feature of the whole affair is not that students wish to leave, but that so many have been taught to dream so narrowly. Once, the imagination of youth contained professions, ideals, projects, books, reforms, discoveries, even delusions of grandeur. Now it is flattened into a queue outside consultancies, where boys in tight shirts and girls with folders full of photocopies wait to be informed which country is currently offering lenient visa policies. Observe these offices if you wish to understand our civilizational condition. Here sit the future emigrants of the republic, each prepared to narrate a touching academic journey toward a degree they do not care about in a town they cannot pronounce, so long as it is not here. If Dante had been South Asian, he might have added a circle in Hell for educational consultants.

There is another detail of this condition which ought not to be ignored, and that is the strange manner in which students try to occupy themselves while they are still in Lahore, waiting for life to begin elsewhere. Since the real future has already been envisioned and outsourced to another country, the present must somehow be padded, decorated, and endured. So they fill the emptiness with the approved diversions of the aspiring migrant: coffee shops in Gulberg where everyone speaks of applications with the gravity once reserved for reforms and revolutions; late-night drives conducted in the name of "self-discovery"; internships accepted not for gaining hands-on professional experience, but for the "line" they will add to a CV; MUN photographs uploaded long after the speeches are forgotten; gym memberships mistaken for discipline and rigor; and that peculiar species of performative busyness by which a person convinces others—and, in his weaker moments, himself—that he is in transit rather than merely stuck.

And when even these distractions fail to suffice, another hollowness reveals itself. Beneath all the talk of personal growth, global exposure, and graduate study often lies a silence that students are frightened to look at closely, let alone confront. They do not know what to do with themselves here, and so they imagine that somewhere else will tell them. Lahore, meanwhile, becomes full of young people permanently surrounded yet privately unoccupied: boys sitting for hours in cafes discussing countries they have never seen, girls refreshing portals as though revelation might descend through an admissions

dashboard, entire friend groups sustained by the mutual postponement of adulthood. They say they are preparing, and perhaps some of them are. But many are simply waiting for geography like a Messiah to save them from the harder labor of becoming a person in a place they have already decided not to belong to.

For every national obsession eventually acquires a black market, and departure is no exception. When legal routes narrow, when funds do not appear, when visas are refused, and when respectable pathways shut one by one, the dream does not always die. "Going abroad" acquires pseudonyms whispered at *chai dhabas*: agents, crossings, *dunki*. Then the comedy drains out of the whole business. Families sell land, mothers part with their jewelry, and boys who could not plan a semester begin planning routes across deserts, boats, refrigerated trucks, and nameless borders. Some are beaten, some are robbed, some are sent back in disgrace, and some vanish so completely that even their ambitions cannot be recovered.

When a society teaches its young that every life worth having lies elsewhere, some will eventually try to reach that elsewhere by any road at all.

And yet, for all that, I cannot wholly condemn them. For escape, even when foolishly imagined, is still born of suffocation. A person does not romanticize departure unless he has grown tired of arrival. The real scandal is not that young Pakistanis want to leave, but that so few can imagine staying without feeling they have failed some final examination set by society itself.

Still, a warning must be issued. To those who believe that going abroad is the whole of life, I say this: Do not let the hunger to escape excuse you from the harder work of becoming someone worth carrying wherever you go. For if you leave without a mind, a discipline, a craft, or a sense of purpose, you will eventually discover that the person you were trying to outrun has made the journey with you.

And then, in some distant city, with the novelty gone and the congratulations long over, you will find yourself under an orderly sky, surrounded by functioning systems, only to realize that you brought with you the one thing no embassy had the power to reject: your emptiness.

The writer is a recent graduate of BS Political Science (2022-26) and is in the editorial board of The Ravi.



An Ode To Humanity's Most Faithful Companion

Hamd Israr

It all begins with nakedness.

Humanity has had its fair share of faithful companions. Spirituality is one. Love is another (if we are feeling particularly generous). Reason too, if one is being optimistic. Their presence has been fleeting however, nothing but a breeze that arrives with the change of seasons. One has however held us firm, despite humanity's never ending attempts to abandon it, it has remained through the beginnings and endings of civilizations, through every moral order and every callous attempt to improve the human condition; shame. It is a curious and peculiar little companion. It is not welcome in our homes, we do not wish to speak of it and we certainly do not hold it within us with the tenderness reserved for those things we love. For all our attempts to rid ourselves of it by concealing it, trying to outgrow it, intellectualizing it, laughing at it, dressing it up as ambition, dignity, modesty, independence; somehow it follows. Shame does not concern itself with whether it is welcome or liked. Shame returns the person to themselves, it is the very thing personhood is built upon. It is the persistent experience of discovering that something about one's own existence has become unbearable to inhabit, but it is important to note that things that shame us do not hold power over us in private. They become unbearable when we imagine them witnessed by an audience. Which is why it is so difficult to distinguish shame from the becoming of a person.

Our lives are spent learning what parts of us are allowed to be exposed and what parts must be concealed, what parts are deserving of admiration and what parts invite ridicule, what parts are to be inhabited with confidence and what must be apologized for. We inherit identities, we are ashamed of them and to escape our shame we then spend years modifying ourselves only to find it isn't enough because changing who we are doesn't rid us of our shame. We call some of these transformations maturity, some self-discipline, some ambition, some self-knowledge and beneath all our transformations lies the wish to become a person whom we ourselves can bear to be. Therefore, the history of shame is the history of consciousness, society, identity and self-invention. An understanding of

shame is to be gained by following the human being from the very first moment he recognizes himself as human i.e. the very first moment he is exposed he begins constructing a self capable of enduring exposure. And that is precisely what makes shame so interesting; it simultaneously demands we conceal ourselves and that we spend our lives trying to become someone worth revealing.

Humanity begins with nakedness. Nothing about the physical structure of the body is yet presentable as a problem. Nakedness is not followed by an acute sense of embarrassment because there is, as of yet, no embarrassment to have. As is the case of Adam and Eve. They were naked and were not ashamed of their nakedness, or to put it more accurately weren't "aware" of their nakedness. Then comes the eating of the forbidden fruit (which some religious doctrines believe to be the fruit of knowledge). The eating of the forbidden fruit is accompanied by a newfound awareness of their nakedness. An awareness of their humanity and how it's susceptible to exposure. They cover themselves with fig leaves and hide from God. The importance of Genesis lies in the fact that the acquisition of shame coincides with the acquisition of a distinctly human consciousness. Adam and Eve do not suddenly discover that they possess bodies, they discover that these bodies can be seen. There is a sudden awareness that they can be looked at, interpreted and concealed. They have become objects to themselves. To put it in simpler words: before the fruit, Adam is simply naked, however, after it, Adam knows that Adam is naked. The difference is merely the difference between existing and being conscious of one's existence, the consciousness of one's existence brings about the human ability to turn the body into an object of reflection and hence something that must be subjected to change. The change is often nothing more than concealment. The fig leaf is hence, symbolically significant as it is the first boundary between the self and the world; the covering does not remove nakedness, it merely conceals it.

Shame does not appear as a reaction to wrongdoing, it is not to be mistaken for guilt. Although they are often treated as interchangeable, guilt and shame are fundamentally different experiences. Guilt is concerned with the act itself, something has been done, and the act demands to be rectified. Shame is concerned much more with defining the person who has been revealed through the act and sometimes the act is not a prerequisite for this definition. Guilt finds problem within the act, while shame finds problem within the self because shame is experienced without any moral transgression. A child can be

ashamed of being poor even though being poor is not a moral failure, someone can be ashamed of having an accent or not having one, an attraction or the lack of it, of wanting companionship or of wanting solitude, an inability or an ability, of needing support or of not needing it, a family history, or a desire that harms nobody; the way shame functions, the thing concealed need not be objectively contemptible, just that the person experience it as something that is belittling or diminishing of them before an imagined standard/ audience.

Jean-Paul Sartre gives philosophical language to this experience, he refers to it as "the gaze". In Being and Nothingness, Sartre claims that shame arises when human consciousness encounters itself as an object for another consciousness. He explains this by providing the example of someone absorbed in an action suddenly becoming aware that another person may be watching, while the activity itself is not transformed, the person doing something is now doing it through the imagined gaze of another. The idea is that humans imagine themselves being perceived and care deeply for how they are perceived. The takeaway is the human tendency to occupy more than one position in relation to themselves.

It is likely that this is where many readers may object.

I don't care what people think of me.
I have never concerned myself with the opinions of others.
I have detached my personhood from other people's judgement of it.

Perhaps. But it is worth noticing one's rush to establish oneself as the exception to the gaze. Any such objection is hollow in nature and aloofness performative. The point is not that one spends every waking moment wondering how they appear to other people. Shame does not require that we consciously seek approval from everyone around us. The point is entirely that the self often imagines itself as an object of judgement, and that is often how it seeks to understand itself and chooses which aspects are worth keeping (and which ones can escape this judgement unscathed and which aspects are better concealed or improved). Even indifference can, therefore, become something we perform, defend, and take pride in; to construct the identity of the person who is above shame is to

construct a self-image and a self-image requires an audience, even if that audience exists only in imagination. We organize our life around proving that we have escaped shame and all it does is prove that we haven't.

One's shame, which evaluates every human being, however, is never neutral, nor does a universal criterion for it exists. Humans are looked at in relation to different social worlds which teach us what is worth noticing, admiring, concealing or condemning. Therefore, race, gender and class help determine what shame is inherited and what shame we're born into.

If we are to racially examine this, W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness provides us with an acute understanding. The Black subject encounters themselves through a society that has already attached racial meaning to his existence. This racial meaning is a shame that is deeply embedded within their personhood. Hence, they establish a constant push and pull between the difference in how they know themselves and how they know themselves to be seen, and that is precisely why blackness is established before a sense of human consciousness. Frantz Fanon takes this further by radicalizing this problem in *Black Skin, White Masks*. The Black body stands before the social world as already interpreted and as a person already burdened by meanings that precede him. This breeds shame and the need to imitate a body that arrives seemingly in this world unburdened by shame. Therefore, the discovery of the prerequisite terms on which one is seen instills a sense of shame different from the mere shame of being seen. The shame of being seen provides an autonomous decision over what to be ashamed of but when the terms under which one is seen are decided, it takes away that autonomy.

Gender too sets prerequisites for shame. Simone de Beauvoir explains this condition through her account of women as the "Other". She grants visibility to the condition of possessing a body with a socially established identity before the individual can establish it for herself. Margaret Atwood exemplifies this. Women repeatedly inhabit this problem, the female body is made available for judgement through beauty, sexuality, age, fertility and desirability, and hence the woman is required not only to inhabit her body but to anticipate what that body will mean when seen; even the act of indifference according to Atwood is then contingent on the gaze witnessing that indifference. Hence, a woman's shame is associated both with being seen and her desire to be seen. Moreover, the

masculine body is also not exempt from shame. Take Sedgwick's account of "male homosociality." It reveals how masculinity is often constituted through the recognition of other men's admiration, rivalry, imitation and competition. A man holds the other man significant enough as the internal gaze that he may want to resemble that other man. Surpass him, impress him or be recognized by him. Masculinity, hence, becomes something that demands its legitimacy be confirmed before an audience of men. Weakness, dependence, sexual inadequacy or failure become shameful because they may threaten the person's membership/ belonging within an ideal of masculinity.

Class also happens to be a vocabulary of shame. It instills a shame as subtle as the accent one learns to suppress, the local vocabulary one avoids, the clothes one learns to choose, the manners one acquires, the knowledge one performs, the origins one does not disclose. These are all manners in which one seeks to escape being recognized as the "wrong" kind of person. Class is highly significant due to its intersectionality with the other positions through which the self is judged, as it alters what is considered respectable: the way femininity is experienced, credible intelligence, desirable masculinity or legitimate ambition.These apparently different theories and experiences describe different versions of the same predicament, that we do not exist unburdened by our position within the world and shame consequently takes the shape of whatever has been made capable of diminishing the person who bears it.

This moment is precisely where shame, in a generative sense, becomes quite convenient. The objects that gaze gives to shame are not merely concealed by shame; they are changed by it. The thing that shames us is the thing that we learn to overcome. One who is ashamed of ignorance learns, the person ashamed of weakness becomes strong, the person ashamed of poverty pursues education or wealth and the person ashamed of ordinariness pursues distinction. Obviously, the pursuit of betterment is not merely motivated by shame, but shame takes these ordinary desires and alters their stakes. Hence, we evolve, only to discover that evolution has furnished shame with new material. That is why the process of "becoming" is mediated by shame. It is done with the hope of becoming a person easier to inhabit and perhaps sometimes that is achieved partially. However, no self construction is immune to the judgement because every new piece of construction builds a new standard of what failure looks like. That is why it matters how one deals with shame's encounter with a desire that persists. The distinction is that it is

human for one to be ashamed of a desire, a desire for connection, for power, for solitude, for excellence etc. Allowing shame to erase the desire slowly erases the self. The point is not to erase your shame or conceal it or delude yourself into believing you're above it. It is to accept that to exist is to be deeply shameful and that we must exist despite it.

This is why shame is deserving of the title with which we began. Shame is not kind, nor is it good, it doesn't deserve our obedience either, but because it holds an odd unwanted reverence to humanity. It remains with an irritating fidelity through the things we conceal, the things we pursue, the identities we construct and the selves we repeatedly outgrow.

An ode to humanity's most faithful companion till death do them part? As if shame is that easily escapable.

The writer is a student of BS English Literature (Year IV)

Every Day is Ashura and Every Land is Karbala

Noor Fatima

How often do we remain silent while someone is bullied, humiliated, or subjected to questions harsh enough to push them towards depression, right in front of us? Human beings betray others not through cruelty but, through silence, we create difficult situations for others, yet when the moment comes to stand for what is right, we choose the easier wrong over the harder truth. Our minds are often caught in a dilemma between good and evil, and in the end, convenience wins. The people of *Kufa* did the same!

Do we not remember Yazid when a 3-year-old girl is brutally assaulted and murdered, when Dr. Mahnoor Nasir suffers an acid attack or whenever the powerful exploit the weak, knowing that justice may never reach them? *"Sham– e–Ghareeban"* repeats itself whenever the sanctity of a woman's chaddar is violated and whenever young girls suffer abuse at the hands of the Shimars of our time.

An exam may start with a prayer for God's help, yet end with most students choosing to cheat, the contradiction is not in the prayer itself, but in the choice that follows it. History, too, has witnessed such contradictions when the forces of Yazid echoed "*Allahu Akbar"* as they marched towards Karbala and martyred the Prophet's Family. Many among us pray five times a day and never hesitate to overcharge in a marketplace. We abandon truth when it needs us the most; that is why it has so often stood alone throughout history. Whether it was on the Day of Ashura when Imam Hussain, after burying all his companions, raised a cry:

هَلْ مِنْ نَاصِرٍ يَنْصُرُنَ
"Is there anyone who will help us?"

Or in our own time, when late minister of Iran Ali Larijani lamented that Muslim nations had failed to stand beside them in times of crisis. It is in such moments that the saying, "Every day is Ashura and every land is Karbala," becomes relevant for...

The struggle between truth and expediency is not confined to a single time or place; it is a recurring test that is faced by people of all times and across different lands.

Ashura lives, when a child from *Gaza* waits for her father who will never be home again, reminding us of the grief of Bibi Sakina who longed for her *Baba Hussain* so she could sleep peacefully on his chest; when a girl from Lebanon is left with no other option but to support her grieving family, echoing the resilience of *Bibi Zainab*; and when a mother mourns her six-months-old son, making us remember the pain of the mother of Karbala's youngest martyr*, Ali Asghar*.

The question is: why do we still live in a world where people are brutally murdered, where people are compelled to say "smallest coffins are the heaviest ones", where a mother is deprived of her son, where a crowd stays silent in the face of ignorance and fascism, and where women continue to endure harassment, acid attacks and abuse? Perhaps it is because we have been conditioned to live in an environment where mere existence is valued more than living with conscience. The tragedy is not that we fail to admire Hussain's sacrifice; it is that we admire it from a distance. We have always taught ourselves how to die like *Hussain,* but rarely have we dared to live like him. Even when we speak about dying like *Hussain*, we reduce it merely to a battle between two forces believing that we need another Yazid and another battlefield before we can uphold the principles Karbala left behind. What we fail to understand is that the message of *Ashura* is not reserved only for the extraordinary moments of conflict. It is meant to guide us in the ordinary moments of everyday life-in our homes, in social interactions, at a workplace, before making a decision and especially when we possess the power to act for the truth but choose not to. Thus, the lesson of Karbala belongs not to a single battlefield, but to every sphere of human life.

The path of Yazid is not limited to history. It appears wherever power is used without compassion. Every one of us has some power over someone else. For instance, you are the eldest among your siblings and hold a degree of authority, however small, it must be exercised with responsibility and compassion. If you are a government officer, being insensitive on duty should never be the case; a landlord needs to make sure that the tenants maintain a reasonable standard of living, and he, in any way, is not imposing his undue will on them. And lastly, for a monarch making it necessary to never allow the exploitation of any innocent. Power does not corrupt only kings; it tests every human being who possesses even the smallest authority over another.

One possible reason for our indifference to injustice is that our moral education often remains confined to books, rarely finding its way into our actions. Many who stood in

Yazid's army were not ignorant of religion or knowledge, yet they still became a part of one of history's greatest tragedies and let the great massacre of *Karbala* happen. As *Sultan Bahu* once said:

جے کر دین علم وِچ ہوندا تاں سر نیزے کیوں چڑھدے ھُو

اٹھارہ ہزار جو عالم آہا اگے حسین دے مردے ھُو

Yet history also gives us "***Hurr***"! He was one of the commanders in Yazid's Army before he joined the seventy-two, and earned for himself a name that is admired to this day. He was the man who chose the right path and translated his understanding in action just a night before *Ashura,* becoming an epitome of repentance. He made it clear to the world that no matter how far you have gone on the wrong path, there is always a way back to *Serat-e-Mustaqim*- the path where the truth remains unaltered and falsehood is clearly distinguished.

When he decided to go against Yazid, he would have known it would lead him to death, but he did it as all he could see was the truth! Meanwhile, A prayer to God to let us be one of the Hurrs and not Shimr;

"O God! Make me Hur, Set me free!"

Both had eyes that could see and hearts that could perceive. Bless me with the eyes of Hurr, not the eyes of Shimr. Give me a heart that reflects upon, and becomes free! Moreover, Karbala is not only about the tragedy but also loyalty, sacrifice and devotion. Remember it, when any Abbas loves his Hussain enough to not drink water while sitting at the bank of *Fura't,* when a friend like Habib Ibn-e-Mazahir comes to the battlefield to support his friend, despite being too old to walk, when *any Zuljinnah* loves his master beyond words, and when truth stands tall!

In the end, the struggle between justice and oppression is not confined to any particular era. It is a timeless reality that confronts every generation and every individual. The greatest danger is not that we become another Yazid, but that we become the people of Kufa, those who recognized the truth, yet abandoned it out of fear, convenience, or worldly gain. Choosing oppression over compassion and humanity, or the side of Imam Hussain and Hurr who embraced dignity and chose sacrifice even in the face of certain death. When our moment of Ashura arrives, which side will we choose?

The writer is a student of BS Economics (Year II)

ESSAYS

Tradition, Modernity, and the Maroon Blazer

- A Ravian to A Ravian: Backwards in Time, Forward in Movement
- The Ravian We Do Not Talk About Enough
- A Self-Portrait in Passing
- The Custodians of Brick and Mortar
- A Letter from The Lady

A Ravian to A Ravian: Backwards In Time, Forward in Movement

Waseem Anwar

This essay can be read as a Ravian-to-Ravian salutation. It shapes into a homage for a teacher whose mastery in dramatic art and its delivery for decades has left indelible inspirational marks on many a taught. I talk of none other than Navid Shahzad. The essay focuses on my personal reverence for this Ravian-teacher whose academic contributions in the area of English literature and language extend beyond mere regional tethers. Though idealized it may sound, I consider her drama articulation and rendition skills in English as a firmament full of constellations that stretch to the farthest ends of performance-horizons, something that a great playwright like William Shakespeare would describe as the skies "painted with unnumber'd sparks" (*Julius Caesar*, 3:1) or the famous English Romantic poet John Keats would imagine as sitting "upon our senses like a sapphire crown" (Keats' Letter to Jane and Mariane Reynolds, September 14, 1817). That a sapphire crown she wears in Pakistan, Shahzad sparks my imagination to track her committed career backwards in time for moving forward in future.

Believing also in the presumption that a teacher is an actor, while all actors cannot be teachers, Shahzad creates a special niche in my mind for her aptitude for teaching as an actor. I remember her reading style, her reciting and intoning of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for us at the University of the Punjab Lahore during 1976-1978. I was then in competition with myself to win an "A" grade from her. I would secretly learn lines from the play and mimic her elegant expressiveness, rehearse passages that would impress her, write my term paper on Hamlet's "*antic disposition*" for finally securing my ambitious goal of being one of her "A" grade favorites, hopefully! Whether I could be one of her favorites or not, she has been mine, always, as a teacher-actor as well as an actor-teacher. So much so that all the inflections, cadences, modulations, modalities, accentuations, assonances, resonances, or connotations of her speech with their highs and lows reverberate in my memory, she being one of my key inspirations.

Now, because it is very difficult for anyone to create a nutshell for Shahzad's skyscraper personality and her unique art of dispensing a dialogue, monologue, soliloquy, or aside, I limit my comments in this essay to just two of her academic writings that shed light on her vision about how English literary sensibility in Pakistan can stay diversified. I believe that only a Ravian like Shahzad can do so. I am also of the opinion that every Ravian is a mentor if not a teacher of the other Ravian, be they the very contemporary most belonging to generations Z and Alpha or be they the senior most, reflecting in time since Dr. Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner's era, means 1864 when Government College Lahore was born in the *haveli* of Raja Dhyan Singh and Dr. Leitner became its first Principal. Durations apart, the Ravian-to-Ravian connection supersedes a holiness of living through imagination that displays one's "Courage to Know" the unknown. One may assume this sanctity as a tradition and the talent association or a memory-centered and history-cognizant correlation. As long as my own spatiotemporal reality sustains, I see such a Ravian-ness prevailing for long.

Though already stated that I limit my comments for this essay to two of Shahzad's academic works, her 2019 and 2026 books, I cannot help mentioning that she remains a Pakistani stalwart of English Studies who shines inland as well as overseas. Ever since her Rolls of Honor and Gold Medals that she could win during her school and college days, one Gold Medal as a Ravian for her Masters from Government College in 1967, and then she being the honorary Member and Chair of so many national and international Boards and Associations, Shahzad has been a learner and performer of the dramaturgical and theatrical arts that add to her academic excellence and scholarship. This essay not being Shahzad's *Curriculum Vitae*, I cannot put here all her achievements, though she has to be remembered for her assorted interest in subjects like philosophy, psychology, architecture, jewellery, journalism, textile, fashion, photography, cinematic arts, creative writing, anchoring, authoring, characterization, production, direction, pedagogy, and what not. Such a holistic exposure makes Shahzad what she is today; a meritoriously distinguished professor of her field who represents life in all its shades, her love for literature itself being a true representation of life, and her passion for drama being an enactment of life in all its various hues.

An accomplished Pakistani media luminary, Shahzad's 2019 study, *Aslan's Roar: Turkish Television and the Rise of the Muslim Hero*, informs about the growth of digital formats and

their artistic illustration to represent authentic selves. It helps to open newer dimensions as to how we perceive drama in our times and under our conditions. Focused on exploring how the small-screen-series becomes big and how the local grows global, in this case the Turkish TV drama series or "*dizi*," as pointed out by Dr. Arzu Ozturkmen in Fatima Bhutto's article of the 13 September 2019 *Guardian*: "How Turkish TV is Taking Over the World," Shahzad's *Aslan's Roar* opens avenues for cross-disciplinary studies in the humanities and social sciences – literature-art-architecture along with the capital-based cultural and socio-economic structures that construct our media world psyche. One may add that besides arts, humanities, and social sciences, the author also sporadically induces contemplation for the fields of pure sciences by studying technology as the part and parcel of our fast-changing communal fabrics. *Aslan's Roar* thus offers an extensive array of subsumed reflection on life.

Even in terms of her past popular Shahzad-Shakespeare connection at the University of the Punjab, *Aslan's Roar* is a segmental part of Shahzad's academic assertion. It is through the *aslan*'s powerful roar – *aslan*, the Turkish version of lion – that the author tranquilly and synecdoche-cally pronounces an anticipated preparedness in silence to revert the rules of hunt-story, proclaiming that now is: "… the hunter's turn to be hunted" (395). One underscores the book's attention-grabbing script that is styled with what the author states: "a family project" contributing towards "the evolution of the present-day image culture epitomized by TV … due to its intrusive nature …" (9-15). *Aslan's Roar*, thus, demands us to muse around what the Canadian born British novelist Rachel Cusk declares about all good art: autobiographical. Shahzad's first-person presence through the book sets a faithful ground for her readers to connect to her voice, keeping them on track despite their dreamy deviations.

The first-person narrative voice in *Aslan's Roar* displays a strong literary flavor that softly solidifies the book's central and pragmatic argument regarding "The Third Way," the "middle path" that the Turkish National poet Jalaluddin Rumi wisely identifies for all moderate Muslims to follow (Shahzad 341); to be neither completely Western nor to be ruled by the xenophobic fundamentalists (75). Shahzad's Shakespearean tone synchronizes with Rumi's poetic voice several times (7, 29, 151, 171, 185, 203 and 342) to strengthen the viewpoint that television as part of the media world is what Shakespeare would claim: "held up a mirror" (16). But then pinning down the milieus of

colonial and imperial controls over the worldwide media mechanism, the author highlights how the Western bias exploits Oriental "myth[s] of … 'lustful Turk'" for categorizing the "'villain' as a Muslim" (19-21). In a way, Shahzad offers a counter narrative through the lens of Turkish TV drama series for opening it up for the marginalized through what she much harps: a "third way" (24), very much a reminder of Homi K. Bhabha's third space or Gayatri C. Spivak's subaltern with meaningful silences.

Whether this third way is a postcolonial and postmodernist way (including their connotations of anti- or after-) is something that is explicated through different chapters of the book. *Aslan's Roar* is segmented into 8 parts. One big question that may bother the South Asian or other readers right from the beginning is: Why Turkish TV drama and why read about it? One strong rationale to this query is provided by Shahzad herself as she examines Turkey's "Janus-like" (23) geographical, historical and cultural position amid the East and the West, from being an Empire to becoming a Republic, thus foregrounding the emergent presence of "diachronic and synchronic masculinities" for the modern Muslim hero (23). This need for identifying Turkey's soldierly valor through its new "'soft' image" of somewhat feminized heroism spawns "a sociocultural revolution" and a noteworthy change in the Islamic world (23-24); a media-maneuvered transition that influentially challenges the devouring global forces of what the famous Postmodernist critic Fredric Jameson characterizes: the "Late Capitalism." That the move to its market-based economy for carving new political spaces (386-387), Turkey had to strategize its state policies. This argument comes up as an insightful gist, offering simultaneously a modest solution not only for the other Third World developing countries but also for the Muslim *Ummah* in specific. Negotiating modernity to compete with the fast-paced modernization, Shahzad contends that Turkish TV drama breaks taboos, highlights Turkey's rapid financial growth, sells conducive dreams, extends panacea for internal economic strife, and conveys lucrative messages for both Muslim and non-Muslim viewers (73-75).

While Chapters 5 and 7, "History and the Imagined Past" and "*Epilogue*: The Third Way" delve into Ottoman nationalism and its melting-pot-like transcontinental interactions *vis a vis* the (Ataturk) Kemalist reformations, the inclusiveness of cities like Istanbul and Ankara offer a case study for the contemporary Muslim secular, modernized republics. Amid the phenomenal transformational journeys of Turkey through

progressive process the "militarized femininity and masculinity" (84) rubric is juxtaposed for the readers to critically examine the aggressive and traditionally tougher images of manhood against the "sphinx-like" and "hybrid … complex mix," helping the readers to recreate "several 'hegemonic masculinities'" (94-95). The 9 subsections of Chapter 6 that take up the 13 episodes of *Olene Kadar* as a comparative query offer detailed analysis of the protagonist, the tragic hero Daghan Soysur. Shahzad examines Soysur through his own evolving expressions, his soliloquies, as well as through the other characters' opinions about him. Out of so many popularly running Turkish *dizis*, like *Muhtesem Yuzyil* (Magnificent Century), *Fatimagul'un sucu ne?* (What is Fatimagul's Fault?), popular all around the world, Shahzad picks on *Olene Kadar* for its worth as "a power player in global … entertainment politics" (120). The success of this Turkish modern hero is assessed in terms of representation as well as local to global ratings and revenues. Elaborating on the Oedipus, Hamlet and Monte Cristo like revenge cum romance complications in Daghan, Shahzad judiciously investigates "the subtleties embedded in a clever screenplay" (144) so that we track the thematic unity around powerful prop-peculiarities, like the dining places as a family bonding space (159). Amid all its intriguing movement of the plot that hovers around mythical patriarchies and their amalgamation with empowering motherhood, the search for lost love in *Olene Kadar* compounds the most popular entertainment trope that befits the market for revenue generation from Latin America, Brazil, Eastern Europe, South Asia or Middle East.

In their book *Thinking through Digital Media: Transnational Environments and Locative Places* (2015), Dale Hudson and Patricia R. Zimmermann forward the idea of mapping open spaces and collaborative remix zones to visualize other knowledge/s. Not to this specific extent, but the postcolonial-postmodernist engagements of Shahzad's *Aslan's Roar* invite its readers to intermediate with its digitality so that the "'rules' of commercial films, television and video games" get altered for meeting the challenges of future "digital divides" between the rich and poor countries (Hudson and Zimmermann 8-9, 12). Thinking through and with the digital media, *Aslan's Roar* helps bridge the gaps that Shahzad identifies in terms of media market and its furious competition: "digital platforms may well revolutionize the entire Turkish TV industry …" (372). If Turkey as an inter-continental, East-West binary space offers precedents of the postcolonial cum postmodern success through TV drama series, the other Third World developing countries, including Pakistan, may also run a race for roaring their roars and hunting their

hunts. Hope is the best message, so echoing what Nizam Hikmet Ran, another Turkish poetic voice that Shahzad orchestrates along hers, dreams: "To live single and free like a tree / and in the brotherhood like a forest, / this longing is ours" (27).

Shahzad's academic assertions to meet the qualitative along quantitative ends remains a timely effort to raise awareness among the wide range of cross-disciplinary readership; the literati, the scholars as well as the conventional book-lovers. For a critical researcher, *Aslan's Roar* relates a project full of sense and sequence presented by a skillful specialist. Whatever else, it forwards a very rational roar that is offered politely for the listeners to listen thoughtfully.

Equally impactful, *STALEMATE: A Chronicle of Love and Despair* (2026) is another example of the inimitable inspirations that Shahzad leaves on posterity – literature-language-drama-poetry-prose-fiction-nonfiction-memoir, all genres and subgenres merging in the form of Art and Humanities. An inspirer, redefined as an influencer in today's social media terminology, Shahzad transports us to the pieces written by her twenty years ago for carrying us forward in time. Their relevance proves a guiding star as well as a divine sunlight for today as well as for tomorrow. A product of "winter's sharp-edged knife [that] cuts the bone," *STALEMATE* embraces what Albert Camus describes, an "invincible summer" (Shahzad 5). The book offers a beautiful composition containing "codices," CODEX 1, 2, 3, 4 on men, women, city, and education. In spirit, these compiled writings deal with the universal yet very contemporary issues related to oppression, genocide, and even the plights down-poured by Nature's changing course. Besides these codices, there are "proems" offered for her epic narration of the chronicles of love and despair that are not only personal but largely public experiences.

Based on the newspaper columns that Shahzad had written decades ago, *STALEMATE* opens with an "exordium" for the spheres of stasis, stagnancy, and inertia that have now unwantedly become our soulmates. Historical in spirit, the linger along with the limbo for change, if not for any complete transformation, gives these compositions a dramatic and poetic profundity, so that they emerge as a source for us to challenge despair through love. The oscillating emergence of these chronicles is not only a testimony but also a test for our surviving human will, like in T. Eliot's "The Wasteland" or in Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise." In vogue with the Ravian-ness itself, these chronicles lend

courage to us to sail through the unknown seas of our personal, political, sociocultural or widely existential sufferings – the conditions we are born with, the needs that we demand for, and the deprivations that we are awarded to assess our mettle – our cosmic absurdities (257). Structured non-chronologically, these writings are what most of the reviewers describe: philosophical abstractions. They remind us of Shahzad's constellated and skyscraper personality; her professionalism that engages with many multi- and cross-disciplinary intersections of verbal corpus that she knits on the firmament of a blank page.

"If like Prospero of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, she shows the Caliban of harsh realities as well as the Ariel of vision and good sense" (347), Shahzad's *STALEMATE* makes us aware of our academic deserts, the systems "guillotined at the altar of self and vested interest" (407-408). While reading poetry seriously, and pinpointing the loopholes through fashion fiestas bring for us lessons about critical importance of diversity, Shahzad encircles our vision around the art of an alchemist who turns it all into gold. Once again, Shahzad and her family, lost to recover, make these writings an advent accomplished by an unfaltering transformer. In the book, if men of violence and peace are in crisis, because they are all washed aside as Caesars or Hamlets of history, duly challenged by the very seminal father-son relation for "[conquering] continents" yet "[fearing] the dark within" (150), the "Woman Wisdom, known as Sophia" (23) surfaces stronger and lesser feminine in *STALEMATE* through its mystical presence, goddess appearance, and a practical Muslim businesswoman's successes centuries ago (23-29). A daughter of renowned Justice, the core concern of Shahzad in *STALEMATE* remains to seek justice for all those oppressed. This search for a just-justice slits even from Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," as well as from Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* – the fierce pursuit of female agency amid complex patriarchal oppression, thus women as active rebels against rigid and conservative systems. Shahzad's struggle for rights against all *hadd*s and *hudood*s, placed beside the ideal Muslim heroism in our dangerous times, brings her passion for education and entertainment close to the much-needed expertise. Not a lament about the irreversible damages and losses, but a rewarding awareness about how despondency leads to the brinks of wisdom, *STALEMATE* pronounces the rising of a divinely lit sun that guides our rediscoveries of the self; our growing inward through space as well as sanity: a "therapy in the guise of other personas" (386).

All this profundity about growth through the paradoxical ruins of space and age, recovered as an imbibed vicariousness in *STALEMATE*, emerges to be the gift of solitude, a blessing whose fruition is "villanelles of joy and hope" (13). Shahzad's growth as a Kinnaird alumna and her profundity as a Ravian bring for us the lessons of love, light, courage, and confidence; a decades-old conversation about her experience mingling with her expertise to address all generations to come. Her great art, born with its cosmic absurdities in "*the metropolis*" of Lahore city (257), yet interlaced with "deep sense of history and political consciousness" (259), the *STALEMATE* addresses our collective human loneliness, leading us from the Janus-like Turkey through a "Justinian's New Rome," where Mariam and Mary and their sorrow laden hearts restore empires for listening to the siren songs beneath vast silent domes (263-264). The urge to rebuild and romance in time with the timelessness of layered cities, to live in their heart for winning people-power, overpowers the stalemate by developing fresh pastures, bringing for us the "Nectar of the Gods" – true and strong "brews drunk neat or with a hint of mint" (289-292). Thus, the nectar showered upon the "The Wasteland" gets swayed by a "Monsoon" and its "Madness" (301-307), celebrating the fruition for undefeated sources of fertility.

Learnt hard ways, these lessons around wastelands and awaited monsoons are important to garner the commonality of humanity. Shahzad's audacious voice for the beloved city of Lahore from her *alma maters*, for her homeland networks – local, regional, overseas, transcontinental – the cosmic absurdities and their beyond, for the ever-increasing fandom of English literature and language, liaison together an interactive presence of personas beside persons. This remains for us the constellation in a firmament that reflects our grounded realities, shaping our interaction as an everlasting honorable experience, a society with imagination (*STALEMATE* 380).

Whatever else, one thing that the great writers like Shahzad do is that they carry their readers through the etymologies either long forgotten or buried. Such writers make their readers realize that words never die even when transformed structurally or semantically, for per Shakespeare they are ever to be: "Words, words, words …" (*Hamlet*, 2:2). From the prologues and introductions to acknowledgements, *Aslan's Roar* and *STALEMATE* break the deadlock of frozen vocabularies to let us flow through our own lost beings –

our unaddressed glossaries. Like mismatched lions of a classroom or like lost lords of the streets, our roars and our stillness inform us about our deeper zoological haunts along with our loneliness that we carry within. Because both *Aslan's Roar* and *STALEMATE* are a Ravian-drenched description of profound meanings of life, it is worthwhile for every Ravian to embrace these renditions of love and despair, these messages of hope and ecstasy offered by the one and only Ravian of her kind, Navid Shahzad.

… *with special thanks to the Farhad Humayun Foundation for letting me explore the loneliness of twilight years, for making me feel content, and for helping me sail to the other bank.*

The writer is a two-time Fulbright scholar (IUP 1995, Duke 2007) and former manager of The Ravi. He is the Professor of English and Director of ICPWE at Kinnaird College, Lahore, with prior roles as Dean/Chair at Forman Christian College and Government College Lahore. His publications include "Black" Women's Dramatic Discourse and Transcultural Humanities in South Asia (Routledge, 2022).

The Ravian We Do Not Talk About Enough

Haris Ali Virk

Every few days the debate resurfaces. Usually at a reunion. Sometimes in these pages. Sometimes in the debating society office. Someone says something about the institution and what it once was and what it is now, and the conversation takes the turn it always takes. The names come out. Iqbal. Faiz. Abdus Salam. N. M. Rashid. They are said with a particular kind of pride that is also a particular kind of anxiety. Because these are old names. Important names. Names that belong to a time when this institution was producing people whose thinking changed things. And the unspoken question underneath the spoken celebration is whether Government College still has it in itself to do that. Whether the soil is still the same soil. Whether what produced Iqbal is still here, waiting, or whether it has quietly departed and left only the building behind.

I have been part of this conversation many times. As a student, sitting at the edge of it, listening to older Ravians argue about legacy and decline with the particular passion of people who love something and are frightened of it. The conversation never quite resolves. It is not meant to. The day it stops having it is the day to worry.

But I want to introduce a name into this conversation that does not get introduced often enough. A name that I think belongs in the same breath as the ones we reach for automatically. Not to diminish those names. But to say that this institution has produced, in our own time, someone doing work of genuine and serious importance. Someone whose thinking is changing things in a domain that matters enormously for this country and this civilisation. Someone who studied in these corridors and carried something of what this place gives out into the world and did something real with it.

Javed Ahmed Ghamidi.

I anticipate the reactions. Some will nod immediately. Some will bristle. Some will be genuinely surprised that his name appears in this context, in these pages, placed alongside such figures. That range of reactions is itself worth pausing over. The people who bristle do so because Ghamidi says things that powerful people in Pakistan would prefer not to be said. The people who are surprised do so because we have not done a good enough

job of recognising what is being done among us, by someone who came from where we came from.

Ghamidi is not a modernist. He is not doing what his critics accuse him of doing – importing foreign frameworks and dressing them in Islamic language. This accusation tends to collapse on close examination. Because what Ghamidi is actually doing is something more difficult and more demanding than modernism. He is going deeper into the tradition. More rigorously into the sources. More seriously into the text than most of the people criticising him have been willing to go – an approach he inherited from his teacher, Amin Ahsan Islahi, who spent decades applying Hamiduddin Farahi's method of reading the Quran as a coherent whole rather than isolated verses, and which Ghamidi carried forward in his own major works, Mizan and Al-Bayan.

Where Ghamidi arrived – on questions about the relationship between religion and state, on the limits of religious compulsion, on questions of law and punishment and the nature of political authority in Islam – are positions that in Pakistan carry existential weight. They are not positions that win you friends in the places where it is useful to have friends. They are positions that follow from a serious and honest reading of the sources and that lead, if you follow them faithfully, to conclusions that the religious establishment and the state have a shared interest in not hearing.

Ghamidi has paid real costs. He left Pakistan not because he wanted to but because staying had become genuinely dangerous. He kept teaching, kept writing, kept saying the things that needed to be said with the same precision and the same refusal to soften what honesty required. There is a particular kind of integrity in that. The integrity of someone who is not performing courage for an audience but simply doing what the thinking requires because the alternative is not really available to a person of that kind.

I think of Iqbal here. And I want to be careful about the comparison because it is easy to make and easier to make badly. Ghamidi and Iqbal are not doing the same thing. The methodology differs. The conclusions differ in significant ways. The historical moments differ enormously. Iqbal was writing at the end of the colonial period, in the shadow of the collapse of the Ottoman caliphate, in a moment when the entire political and civilisational architecture of the Muslim world was being dismantled and rebuilt on someone else's terms.

But the spirit. The spirit is recognisable across the distance and across the differences. Iqbal stood in this institution, in these same corridors, under this same light, and asked the hardest questions he could find. About faith. About selfhood. About what it meant to think seriously as a Muslim in a world that was reorganising itself around principles that had no place for that kind of thinking. He did not find comfort in inherited answers. He went back to the sources. He read Rumi and Hegel simultaneously and refused to choose between them because he understood that honest thinking does not get to choose its interlocutors. The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam is the record of that inquiry. It is not a comfortable book. It was not meant to be.

Ghamidi is doing something in the same spirit. With different tools, in a different moment, arriving at different places. But with the same fundamental commitment to take the tradition seriously enough to be honest about it. To follow the thinking wherever it goes. To pay whatever it costs.

Government College is in decline. This is not a controversial observation among those who love it. The institution that produced Iqbal and Faiz and Abdus Salam has been diminished by decades of neglect and the general entropy that afflicts Pakistan's public institutions. The light has not gone out. But it is dimmer than it was, and everyone who has sat in these rooms and felt what this place can be at its best knows the difference between that and what it too often is now.

But institutions are not only their buildings and their rankings and their administrative structures. They are their stories. The names they can point to and say that this person came from here. Learned to think here. Developed here whatever it is that allows a person to do serious work in the world. And then went and did it.

We have those names from the past. We say them often and rightly. But we also have this name. From our own time. From a moment when saying certain things in Pakistan requires exactly the kind of courage that this institution has always claimed to produce. The Courage to Know. The Courage to Speak.

The author is a civil servant and the former President of GCU Debating Society (2018-19)



A Self-Portrait in Passing

Jazib Ud Din Ahmed Khan

Nature has given us five little razor-sharp knives to rip open the body of the world and peer inside—through blood and bone—at what truly completes it. Rarely do these meaning-making weapons prick inward; rarely do we see what we, the wielders, are completed by. When confronted with this reality, we confess to our own conscience. We say: *I cannot hold myself—I cannot express what I am—I am overcome—I am defeated.* Such is the circumstance where the self cracks before the mirror, and maturity, masquerading as reconciliation, arrives a little too late. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.

It was not what I studied in classes that made me notice the faint prick of those knives against my own neck, but rather the game of hopscotch I played inside the corridors of Government College and on the restive roads surrounding it. The shape of the game was drawn by the chalk of an insatiable curiosity. Tossing the stone of what remained of my time and leaping on a one-legged maturity, I began to discover pleasure in this odd, beautiful pain.

The magic of Mall Road and Anarkali lies in an elusive, deafening noise—elusive because through the blaring horns and the cries of hawkers managing the rush of students, lawyers, and shoppers, there is occasionally a quiet stillness. Its musicality is either a cradle-song or a hollow dissonance. I wonder if the authorities will ever run an anti-encroachment campaign against noise, the way it has occupied the public space of these streets.

I am used to seeing a man sleep outside the Ganga Ram emergency ward on the trunk of his 1993 Hyundai Excel, a relic of the 1990s Yellow Cab Scheme. He has slept in that same spot since 2007, according to Haji Ashraf, the guard at the Lawrence Garden gate. The man, Bashir, is an extension of his ride: the chipping paint has faded to a tannish yellow, mirroring Bashir's jaundiced eyes. I suspect he sleeps outside Ganga Ram so that when his liver finally fails and he pukes blood, his life is not lost in transit. I have never

seen his car parked elsewhere; it is less a vehicle and more a bed. Similarly, I have never seen Bashir talk or work.

Once, I watched him from sunset until midnight—partly as a cordial gesture to friends having tea nearby, but mostly because, for the first time in seven years of familiarity, he was not on the trunk. He was lying on the roof. I wonder if he has lost his keys but is too paranoid to call a locksmith, fearing someone might steal his home. I saw Bashir smile once, looking at the nuns from the convent. I wonder if he mistook them for angels. For a time, the image of a smiling Bashir floated in my mind, making the world appear warmer, simpler, and yet more full of meaning than before. I wonder why he lives, what he strives for, or what he has lost. Is surviving the same as living? I think not, but ignorance is cruel, devoid of remorse, smiling at situations it cannot truly see.

It is not just Bashir who lacks a place to sleep—or perhaps is in love with the one he has found. Behind the farthest wall of the college facing Urdu Bazaar, others sleep. Most are users of "white," the street name for heroin. They do not move an inch, yet every few months their faces or clothes change. I have never been able to recognize them; no face sticks to my memory except one. Someone died last July as I was leaving a parliamentary camp at the Debating Society. It was around five o'clock, near the Law Department gate. A man was breathing his last, but the ambulance would not take him. "There is usually a criminal investigation in these matters; it is best to avoid it," one paramedic said. "Buy him a bottle of water—these addicts do not die easily," said the other. A boy holding John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* did so. My friend and I remained bystanders. The man's skin clung to his bones, black nails scratching at the hollows where muscle should have been.

I carried both of them—Bashir on his trunk and the man whose muscle had abandoned his bone—back through the gate, past the Law Department, into the quiet of Shahab Garden. There, the noise of the Mall thins to a rumor and the dusk does its slow work on the grass. Here, with no one left to watch, I finally turned the knife to the only place it had ever truly belonged.

For I saw that I had never once stepped off the curb. I had given Bashir his dying liver, the addicts their borrowed faces, and the boy his bottle of water; and through all of it I had stood across the road—the cordial bystander, the collector of other men's silences—holding my five knives and calling the holding of them *attention*, as if to witness were to

love, as if to understand were to act. But the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk; and I understood, too late as I always do, that the second leg I had grown was never maturity at all, but distance—and distance is only the prettier name for the safety of those who watch.

Someone said that I watch the world from behind a glass wall. My self-portrait, then, is painted upon the body and the form of someone else. Bashir survives on his trunk; the man by the Law gate probably did not; the boy with Rawls in his hand at least bent down. I did not. And so the question I had so generously aimed at Bashir came home and lodged in my own throat: *Is surviving the same as living?* I, who had survived every scene by standing outside it, was perhaps the only one among us with no right to ask.

I like to sit in Shahab Garden until the last light gives up its argument with the dusk, and now I do not sharpen my knives. I let them lie blunt and idle in my open hands, and I try—clumsily, and a little too late, as the owl knows everything a little too late—to be among the living, and not merely the one who survives them by watching, weighing, and wishing. GC taught me a great deal, but most of all it taught me to borrow the tears of others when my own eyes were too dry to weep—and, lately, to stop merely borrowing. I learned that lesson again and again, beyond Bashir and the men behind the wall: in the blue dhaaba, and in MB 4.

The writer is the former President of GCU Debating Society (2024-25).

The Custodians of Brick and Mortar

Huzaifa Naeem

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more."

—William Shakespeare, Macbeth

The red bricks of Government College do not remember names. Stained with over a century of soot and cooled by the heavy, humid air of Lahore, they hold the patient silence of a witness that has outlived every generation it observed. At dawn, before the gates open and the corridors flood with the energy of youth, the Gothic arches stand in absolute stillness. If you stand before the Bukhari Auditorium at that hour, caught between night and morning, you understand something about the nature of this place that no orientation ceremony will ever tell you: that the hall was not built for you, that it was full long before you arrived, and that it will be full long after you are gone. You can feel the weight of everyone who stood exactly here and believed, just as fiercely, that their turn mattered most. To walk through the halls of GCU is to live in a perpetual state of borrowing. We traverse a campus that belongs entirely to the dead, pretending we own a legacy that is merely loaned to us, while the Gothic Lady watches from her tower with the patience of an entity that has never needed to hurry.

Every student who enters these Gothic gates is handed a myth. It is an intoxicating inheritance, defined by the knowledge that you are sitting in rooms where giants once sharpened their wits. You walk the exact floorboards where Faiz Ahmed Faiz once read, where Ashfaq Ahmed argued, where Dr. Ajmal's shadow still cuts silently across the Philosophy corridor. This legacy was built not only by students but by a breed of mentors who were its true architects. Dr. Thomas Arnold infused these courtyards with the habit of critical inquiry. Sufi Tabassum breathed life into poetry within these very walls. They were not instructors so much as guardians of a tradition, watching over the moral and philosophical formation of their students with a devotion that hardened quietly into the institution's stonework over generations. The modern faculty inherits this

weight, navigating a world where quiet mentorship must compete with the commercialized pressures of the present.

For an eighteen-year-old entering this space, the inheritance is intoxicating. It alters your stride, lends a gravity to your speech, and builds a sharp pride in your posture. You begin to measure your years here not by what you learn but by how visibly you perform them. I remember the debating chambers most vividly, where reputations were carved from nothing and the weight of this legacy felt heaviest. I was no longer just arguing a motion. I was trying to prove to the seniors watching from the gallery that I was worthy of the arena. And for a while, that feeling was enough. It carried me through the long nights and the difficult mornings. But underneath it, quiet and persistent, ran a friction I had not yet learned to name. The grander the myth of an institution, the more acutely you feel your own smallness inside it. Alongside the inspiration, there runs a darker current: the fear of being the one who lets it go quiet. So I pushed harder. I performed more loudly. I mistook urgency for significance, and volume for depth, and did not yet think to question it.

But time inside these walls has a way of doing what you would not do for yourself. As the months blur into terms, the veneer cracks. You discover that beneath the soaring arches and the noble language of tradition, the daily life of the college is driven by the same chaotic human impulses that govern any institution. The historic corridors become arenas for psychological maneuvering, petty rivalry, and manufactured hierarchy. You learn that the student who speaks most passionately about legacy in public is often the one most ruthlessly protecting his position in private. Alliances shift overnight. Someone who stood beside you last month is now carefully positioned on the opposite side of the room, and both of you understand why without a word being exchanged. Elite student societies become spaces where egos are carefully tended and legacies assembled by people who have quietly forgotten why any of it mattered in the first place. The criteria for recognition grow murkier the closer you look. Outcomes arrive pre-decided. Everyone knows this. No one says it. The ceremonies remain beautiful and the language remains noble and underneath it the same small calculations are being made that have always been made everywhere. You watch people you admire trade integrity for influence without hesitation, and you recognize, with some discomfort, that you have done versions of the same. We use the institution's prestige as a mirror, wrapping ourselves in

the college's past because we are too frightened to confront the brevity of our own time here.

And then, quietly, the mirror cracks. Not in a single moment of revelation, but gradually, the way light shifts in a room without you noticing until the whole quality of it has changed. I remember one idle afternoon, sitting in the Amphitheater where the stone held the warmth of a hundred seasons, when it arrived. It arrived as a feeling: that every consuming thing that has ever happened here mattered enormously to the people living it and nothing at all to the walls receiving them. The society positions, the titles, the carefully constructed reputations; none of it is being recorded by the stones. The college has seen a hundred versions of this exact conviction, carried by students just as certain of their own importance, and it remembers none of them. The institution is cruel in its forgetting. It simply has a longer memory than any of us, and in that longer memory, the titles dissolve and what remains, if anything remains at all, is only the quality of attention you brought to the work while you were here.

There was a long moment where I did not know whether to grieve it or be freed by it. This realization should have been devastating, but instead, it offered a strange and dignified clarity. I recognize the irony in writing about the vanity of performance in prose that is itself performed, in reaching for beautiful language to argue against the seduction of beauty. But perhaps that is the most honest thing I can admit: that the stage gets into you, that you never fully step off it, and that the best you can do is remain aware of the boards beneath your feet. To feel your own disposability within a living institution is not a defeat. That is the point. We are not here to possess these red bricks. We are renting the space between the Gothic Lady's first stone and her last, and the rent is paid not in titles or trophies but in the private discipline of caring about your work when no one is watching and nothing is at stake except the work itself.

That is what I tell myself, at least. I would like to say the wanting ended the afternoon I understood it. It did not. Even now, if this essay is read aloud tomorrow and a room full of strangers decides it was good, some old and undignified part of me will sit up a little straighter, hungry for exactly the thing I have just spent several pages claiming to have outgrown. I have not arrived at the clarity I am describing. I have only gotten close

enough to it to see, with some embarrassment, how much of the old performance is still running underneath.

When the sun sets over Lahore and the amber light stretches across the ancient brickwork, the campus empties into something closer to memory than to place. Our role here was never to achieve permanence. The duty of the custodian is more modest than that, and in its modesty, more honest. It is to hold the torch high, to speak with conviction, to care about the arena for a brief moment, and then to step off the stage and pass the flame to the next stranger waiting in the wings. The bricks will remain, cold and patient, long after we are gone. And perhaps that is the only truth this place ever had to offer that it is a stage, not a monument. And a stage exists for the play, not for the players.

The writer is a recent graduate of the Intermediate Department.

A Letter from the Lady

Hashim Ashfaq

Men often hurt those they love by placing them on a pedestal. The beloved becomes an infallible, unerring entity; there is no room for error. This dehumanizes the loved one, who eventually and inevitably fails to uphold such unattainable standards. Resentment soon follows, reducing the perfect ideal to the unsavory rank of a libertine paramour.

I have been adored and cherished by men of all ages since the day of my inception. I am a manifestation of greatness, a symbol of preeminence. Unlike most ladies, I have never been the object of men's baser desires; I have been loved in the purest sense of the word. Men do not wish to possess me. They admire me from a distance, indifferent to the prospects of reciprocation.

When golden hues fade into a mellow orange, slanting rays fall across my towering spires. Twilight turns the blue sky into a spectrum of scattered light, and young lovebirds throng the beautiful garden in my shadow. The dying sun's last reddish rays mirror the dwindling attention given to me as darkness grows.

I hear whispers of promises made to unsuspecting *inamoratas*. Some suitors hold sunflowers and roses whose petals wilt with every conscious lie uttered. Residual dew drops disappear, only to reappear later as tears. Eyes betray what words conceal; it is all a performance—an attempt to mask the superficiality of fleeting feelings. In this dance of social status and beauty, jilted Romeos stand back, gawking at me in awe and wonder.

As darkness engulfs the landscape, a game of hide-and-seek ensues. Those at the autumn end of their lives attempt to impose prudishness and virtue, searching while the younger lot tucks away into shadowy nooks. The unrequited dare not stay through those long hours, whereas the more blessed indulge in music sessions at the Amphi and under the Golden Shower in Shahab.

With the red bricks of my life slowly wearing down, I have witnessed a steady decline in the caliber of my lovers. People sitting on white benches penning poetry have been replaced by slow-motion walks staged for video-sharing apps. Endless debates on

pressing issues have surrendered to doomscrolling and texting. Books are suffering a slow, painful death, accompanied by an inevitable decline in human cognition. As the moths fluttering around me lose their radiance, my own majesty begins to fade.

The air has grown thicker and foul. Plumes of smoke billow from the unending machines people use to travel. In a desperate attempt to ameliorate this menace, the government cuts down more trees and converts gardens into parking lots. Aesthetics seem to suffer more with each passing day.

I once had an old friend right beside me—a charming little mosque that stayed empty for the most part. Yet something was amiss; it stood in dire need of refurbishment and expansion. That decades-old structure was ultimately replaced by a far less aesthetically pleasing version. Like so much else around me, the original was indubitably better.

People tend to realize the value of something only after it has been taken away. Those who study here sometimes take me for granted, passing their evenings in the most ungrateful manner and rushing to their abodes sooner than they should. Yet a few months or years after graduation, nostalgia takes hold. Many of these old chaps return in the later stages of life, staring up at me the way a lovelorn lover gazes after years of separation.

Days pass, seasons transition, and years disappear. The moths in my faculty turn grey and leave for their heavenly abode. Yet I stand here. Some might say I am heartless—that I do not value those who devoted their lives to my service. I resent such searing judgments. I grow frailer every time a sincere devotee leaves me. A sunflower blooms in the shaded gardens for every lover who departs; I am but a bouquet of all the precious lovers who watered me with the years of their lives.

People come and go, while I stand still in time and space, cursed with immortality. What am I waiting for? Why do I stand here? At times I feel like Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*—waiting for someone to rescue me, waiting for some meaning in my life. Surely there must be a grander purpose for me than serving as a mere object of admiration for an endless array of men. I have given purpose to so many moths and dreamers, yet I remain here without any for myself. My life is but a walking shadow, a poor player—a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Perhaps the meaning of my life is, in fact, to bestow meaning upon others; to stand as an embodiment of perfection and greatness, a beacon of hope amidst unrelenting waves of despair and darkness. Perhaps that is what the Great Gothic Lady is truly here for.

The writer is a civil servant and a graduate of the English Department (2019-23)

ESSAYS

✦ Land of the Pure and Impure

- Merit No.1
- Pakistan's Real Strategic Challenge: Strengthening the Fortress Within
- The Incipient Middle Power of South Asia
- A Traveler’s Heartbreak: Climate Change and Pakistan’s Northern Areas

Merit No. 1

Abeera Latif

"Bathroom doesn't have that…" he paused.

"Doesn't have what?" she asked with irritation.

"The soap dishes that are attached to the area above the basin," he had to explain.

"I do not visit bathrooms. It is not my duty."

"Madam, you have to report to me the exact number of soap dishes required, the number of soaps, and the number of…"

The list went on and on. This was one of the few conversations I witnessed during my first week at a prestigious government job.

Ever since I was a little girl, my grandparents, distant relatives in the bureaucracy, aunties with bald husbands, and every living, walking, talking *desi* had spoken of the luxury lifestyle of a government officer. Their tales revolved around the coveted job that came with two cars, a dozen personal staff members, and a permanent cure for low self-esteem. In a nation plagued by the lingering remnants of colonization, there is no greater victory than securing a position within the state.

When I secured Merit No. 1 in Punjab, my family, neighbors, and everyone who knew me felt that all their years of collective effort had finally borne fruit. Despite my protests, the merit list was broadcast across WhatsApp groups, leaving my parents' phones constantly ringing with *"Mubarak ho, jee!"* calls. My reputation transformed overnight from "over 25 and unmarried" to "government officer, still over 25, and unmarried." Everyone viewed me the way the Pakistani youth viewed Imran Khan post-2018 elections.

My department is about as well-known as the common courtesy of knocking before entering a room in a *desi* household. But that didn't stop the endless stream of congratulations from reaching me. Relatives praised me, then launched into inquiries far more difficult than any I had faced in my official interview. Only once they were satisfied would the telephonic interrogation finally draw to a close.

In university class groups and study circles, I became the equivalent of a viral TikTok reel. Meanwhile, back in reality, I was cleaning my room with a wiper or killing centipedes in the corners, dressed in a ragged t-shirt and trousers while typing thank-you messages on my phone. One friend called while I was in the middle of a painful waxing session. I declined and later texted that I was busy with "home stuff"—still unsure whether the SOPs of a Grade-17 officer permitted sharing the details of a waxing appointment on the phone.

Once the blood tests, eyesight checks, and multiple degree-verification protocols (to confirm my degree wasn't fake) were complete, my appointment orders arrived. My posting station was two hours away from my hometown. I presented an idea to my father: instead of living in the city where the office was located, I could commute two hours every morning and two hours back every evening. My father, having once been posted in a nearby district, offered a concise response: "Excellent idea—if you want to turn sixty in two months."

After completing the joining formalities, the office in-charge advised me to take two days of leave to sort out my living situation. Another officer suggested a different route. I was offered a room within the office premises, which I promptly occupied. Four walls, one rectangular window, and a ceiling fan—all coated in dust as thick as the chocolate ganache on a Gourmet cake. A bed, mattress, and table would be issued later; everything else—fridge, AC, cupboard, bathroom soap, light sources—was my own responsibility. This was to be my new residence. I took the leaves and headed back to my hometown.

On my second day at the office, several staff members listed the disadvantages of staying within the office walls. Cautionary tales of long working hours crept up on me like a lizard stalking an unsuspecting insect. At the end of the day, I dragged my parents and our fourteen-year-old family car out to find a girls' hostel. With Google Maps as our guide, we ended up on a long, scorching road that eventually led us out of the city and straight into wheat fields. My father, always skeptical of "Uncle Google," shared a few choice words regarding my navigation skills and the app itself—words far too colorful to quote here.

We backtracked to the city using the traditional method: asking random pedestrians. When we finally found the hostel, we were greeted by another long, under-construction road. Billows of dust rose from the ground, puncturing my newly minted government-

officer ego. The hostel hallways and stairs boasted their own thick layers of chocolate ganache, but the floor tiles inside the room were at least visible. I decided to stay.

At the hostel, my name was a secondary detail; the primary question was my pay scale. As data was shared among the residents, it became clear I was one of the very few 17th-grade officers in the building. Once again, my basic pay scale proved more commanding than my actual presence.

On my third day, I was handed the keys to my personal office: green and blue carpets laid diagonally, a dark wood table, a leather chair, and blue curtains that raised the room's temperature to 45°C in the June heat. No AC or air cooler was in sight. It exceeded all expectations. Aside from the scorching sunlight, I failed to find a single working source of light.

After spending two days shuttling between the office and the hostel, I made my way back to my parents' house after waiting forty-five minutes at the bus station. Fellow commuters stared at a girl with heat rashes across her face, but thankfully, I was spared conversation. During the break, a WhatsApp text arrived asking why I hadn't reported to the office on Saturday. As it turned out, the austerity leaves for Friday and Saturday had ended the exact day my joining commenced. Since the office hadn't yet added me to the official WhatsApp groups, I had remained blissfully unaware. Once added, I officially bade farewell to my leisure time.

Now, people consult me on how to ace the exam because, beneath the sun-tanned skin and the rickshaw rides to work, I am still the girl who secured Merit No. 1 in Punjab. I tell them to send a reminder in the evening for a detailed response. My laptop and phone remain out of reach for now—I have to finish writing an application requesting permission to install a single light bulb in my office.

The writer is a PhD Scholar and a civil servant.

Pakistan's Real Strategic Challenge: Strengthening the Fortress Within

Aelia Bukhari

Every fortress falls twice: first in the silence of its foundations, and only later beneath the blows of its enemies. Long before a wall collapses, invisible cracks spread through the stone. Nations are no different. History repeatedly reminds us that the greatest empires were seldom defeated solely by foreign invasion; they surrendered first to their own internal weaknesses. The Roman Empire, despite commanding vast territories and unmatched military power, gradually succumbed to political decay, economic exhaustion, and institutional decline before barbarian armies ever crossed its frontiers. Likewise, the Soviet Union possessed one of history's most formidable military establishments and immense geopolitical influence, yet internal economic stagnation, institutional rigidity, and declining public confidence proved far more destructive than any external adversary.

These historical lessons carry profound relevance for Pakistan today. Although the country operates within a volatile geopolitical environment shaped by regional rivalries, terrorism, and shifting global power dynamics, its greatest strategic challenge lies not beyond its borders, but within them. The true strength of Pakistan's fortress depends less upon the height of its walls than upon the resilience of its foundations: a stable economy, credible institutions, social cohesion, human development, and the capacity to adapt to emerging challenges. Unless these domestic foundations are strengthened, external security alone cannot guarantee lasting national stability.

The twenty-first century has fundamentally redefined national security. Military capability remains indispensable, but it is no longer sufficient on its own. Today, a nation's resilience is measured equally by the strength of its economy, the effectiveness of its institutions, the quality of its education, the productivity of its workforce, and its ability to withstand climate and technological disruptions. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) notes that human development strengthens a society's capacity to absorb political, economic, and environmental shocks, while the World Bank's *Pakistan Development Update* consistently links sustainable progress to institutional quality, human capital, and sound economic governance. Consequently, Pakistan's first line of defense is

not stationed along its borders alone; it resides within the confidence of its citizens, the credibility of its institutions, and the resilience of its economy. In an era where economic crises can undermine sovereignty as effectively as military conflict, strengthening the fortress within has become a strategic imperative rather than merely a developmental aspiration.

Among Pakistan's domestic challenges, economic vulnerability remains the most fundamental because it shapes every other dimension of national power. A state constrained by persistent fiscal deficits, limited tax revenues, low productivity, and external financing pressures inevitably struggles to invest adequately in education, healthcare, technology, infrastructure, and innovation. According to the *Pakistan Economic Survey 2025–26*, macroeconomic stabilization has shown encouraging signs, yet durable prosperity depends upon structural reforms, export diversification, investment, and productivity growth rather than temporary recoveries.

Likewise, the State Bank of Pakistan's *Annual Report* emphasizes macroeconomic stability, private-sector competitiveness, and policy consistency as essential drivers of sustainable development. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has similarly stressed fiscal discipline, energy-sector reforms, and governance improvements as prerequisites for long-term resilience. Yet Pakistan's persistently low tax-to-GDP ratio continues to restrict the state's fiscal capacity compared with many emerging economies, limiting its ability to finance public services and strategic investments. A weak economy is therefore not merely an economic concern; it is a strategic liability. A nation whose resources are perpetually consumed by crisis management gradually loses the freedom to shape its own strategic destiny. Economic sovereignty, in the modern world, has become one of the strongest pillars of national sovereignty itself.

However, economic resilience cannot be sustained through fiscal reforms alone; it must be anchored in institutions that inspire public confidence and outlive political cycles. Prosperity is rarely the product of abundant natural resources; it is the outcome of credible governance. Nations that consistently transform crises into opportunities do so because their institutions remain stronger than their uncertainties. The World Bank's *Worldwide Governance Indicators* repeatedly demonstrate that government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and the rule of law are closely associated with sustainable economic growth and public trust. For Pakistan, therefore, strengthening institutions is not merely

an administrative objective but a strategic necessity. Transparent governance, judicial efficiency, institutional accountability, and policy continuity are indispensable for attracting investment, improving public service delivery, and reinforcing citizens' confidence in the state. History does not reward nations that merely formulate ambitious policies; it rewards those whose institutions possess the discipline to implement them.

Nevertheless, institutions are tested most severely when confronted with security challenges. Pakistan's struggle against terrorism has demonstrated remarkable resilience, yet it has also shown that enduring peace cannot be achieved through kinetic operations alone. Security today is multidimensional, requiring development, inclusion, and economic opportunity alongside effective law enforcement. The experiences of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan illustrate this reality. While security measures remain essential to safeguard lives and national sovereignty, lasting stability depends equally upon quality education, healthcare, infrastructure, employment, and meaningful economic participation for local communities. Development should therefore be viewed not as a consequence of security, but as one of its strongest foundations. When citizens experience justice, opportunity, and inclusion, extremism gradually loses the social space in which it flourishes.

Equally important is the strengthening of Pakistan's federal structure through cooperative governance. Every province possesses distinct opportunities and challenges, yet none exists in isolation from the national interest. Balochistan, despite its immense mineral wealth and the geo-economic potential associated with Gwadar, requires sustained investment in human development and local participation so that economic progress becomes inclusive and durable. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, after decades of conflict and the long-standing burden of hosting millions of Afghan refugees, continues to require targeted investment in reconstruction, education, and sustainable livelihoods. In Sindh, particularly Karachi, urban governance, public transport, water management, and municipal efficiency directly influence Pakistan's broader economic performance, given the city's substantial share of national commercial activity. Punjab, while remaining Pakistan's agricultural and industrial backbone, faces growing challenges from groundwater depletion, rapid urbanization, and seasonal smog—a stark reminder to policymakers that environmental degradation gradually erodes economic productivity.

Meanwhile, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu & Kashmir increasingly face glacier retreat, flash floods, and landslides that threaten local infrastructure and communities. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) has repeatedly warned that climate-induced disasters are becoming more frequent, demanding greater preparedness and institutional resilience across all administrative units.

Beyond governance and provincial development lies Pakistan's greatest strategic asset: its people. According to the UNDP *National Human Development Report*, nearly two-thirds of Pakistan's population is under the age of thirty, making the country one of the world's youngest societies. Whether this demographic reality becomes a dividend or a liability depends entirely upon the decisions made today. The World Bank's *Human Capital Index* and its assessments on learning poverty warn that many children struggle to acquire basic reading proficiency by the age of ten, highlighting the urgent need to improve educational quality rather than focusing solely on enrollment numbers. In the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century, classrooms are as vital to national security as command centers.

Furthermore, Pakistan's future competitiveness will increasingly depend upon its ability to embrace digital transformation. The expansion of the IT sector, digital entrepreneurship, freelancing, and technological innovation offers a genuine opportunity to diversify exports and create high-value employment for a growing youth population. At the same time, comprehensive reforms in the energy sector remain indispensable; persistent inefficiencies and circular debt continue to constrain industrial productivity and investor confidence—a challenge repeatedly highlighted by the IMF, the State Bank of Pakistan, and the *Pakistan Economic Survey*. A nation cannot aspire to lead in the digital economy while its primary industries remain constrained by unreliable and costly energy.

Equally concerning is the steady migration of highly skilled professionals seeking opportunities abroad. When talented minds leave faster than opportunities are created at home, the loss extends far beyond economics; it gradually erodes the country's long-term strategic capacity. The strongest fortress is not one that merely detains its people, but one that convinces its brightest minds that their future is inseparable from its own.

Pakistan's external vulnerabilities are real, but their impact is magnified by internal fragilities. Geopolitics determines the external pressures a nation faces; domestic strength determines how successfully it responds. Recognizing that Pakistan's principal strategic

challenge lies within its borders does not diminish the importance of foreign policy realities; rather, it explains how those realities can be managed more effectively. Positioned at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Arabian Sea, Pakistan occupies one of the world's most strategic geographic locations—a position that presents immense opportunities alongside persistent security challenges. The evolving situation in Afghanistan, enduring tensions with India, major-power competition, and the growing strategic significance of the Indian Ocean all demand prudent diplomacy and credible defense preparedness.

Likewise, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) embodies Pakistan's geo-economic potential, yet such projects can generate lasting dividends only when supported by domestic stability, institutional credibility, and investor confidence. Geography may place a nation on the map, but only internal strength enables it to shape the map.

However, the strategic landscape of the twenty-first century extends far beyond conventional geopolitics. Climate change, food insecurity, water scarcity, cyber threats, and energy security have become decisive determinants of national power. Pakistan's experience during the catastrophic 2022 floods exposed this new reality with painful clarity. According to the World Bank-led *Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA)*, the floods caused over $30 billion in damages and economic losses, affected more than 33 million people, and reversed years of hard-won development gains. Such disasters demonstrate that climate resilience is no longer merely an environmental concern; it is an economic, humanitarian, and national security imperative. A nation that cannot protect its people from floods, water shortages, or energy crises inevitably weakens its capacity to confront external challenges. The battlefields of this century will not be defined by physical borders alone, but by rivers, data networks, classrooms, laboratories, and societal resilience.

Therefore, strengthening Pakistan's fortress within demands a national vision that rises above temporary political calculations and short-term crises. Economic reforms must broaden the tax base, encourage value-added exports, and reward productivity rather than state dependency. Institutions must consistently uphold meritocracy, transparency, and the rule of law. Education should cultivate critical thinking, scientific inquiry, and innovation rather than rote learning, while digital transformation must accelerate to prepare Pakistan's youth for the global knowledge economy. Climate adaptation, disaster preparedness, efficient water management, and renewable energy must become integral components of core national security planning rather than reactive responses to

emergencies. Above all, every province, institution, and citizen must recognize themselves not as isolated stakeholders, but as custodians of a shared national future. A fortress is never strengthened by building higher walls around divided foundations; it is strengthened when every stone carries the weight of the entire structure.

History ultimately delivers the same verdict to every nation: those that neglect their internal foundations eventually surrender their external advantages. Pakistan possesses remarkable strengths—a youthful population, immense human potential, abundant natural resources, and one of the world's most strategic geographic locations. Yet these advantages will remain unrealized unless they are matched by visionary leadership, institutional excellence, economic resilience, and national unity. In the final analysis, Pakistan's greatest strategic defense will not be measured by the enemies it keeps beyond its borders, but by the strength it builds within them. When future generations look into the mirror of history, they should not see a nation that survived merely because its walls were higher than others; they should see a nation that endured because, when its foundations began to crack, it chose to rebuild them before those cracks became its downfall.

The writer is a student of BS English Literature (Year II)

The Incipient Middle Power of South Asia

Muhammad Azain Ali Khan

"The boldest maneuvers are those executed on the fractures of empires."
- Thucydides

As competition amongst regional rivals continues to intensify, states that can navigate emerging geopolitical divides are becoming increasingly indispensable. Amidst many, Pakistan has taken the center stage, but to wade through and capitalize on these erratic episodes of a fraying world order is a different paradigm altogether.

The U.S. attack on Iran was a global flashpoint that severed the fiscal spine of neighboring countries and was felt profoundly by friends and foes alike. After decades of petrodollar-insulated economies, the opulence of the Gulf bore the brunt. The key regional ally hosting its military assets naturally attracted the Iranian ire and with the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, it effectively choked the global supply chain. For the first time, the repercussions of war reached the American abode, and it turned out Iran never actually needed nuclear weapons to ensure its relevance.
This staunch political-military posturing for both sides highlighted the structural flaws and redundancies of the current international order, but as externalities produce incentive structures, Pakistan's productive approach catapulted it up the significance ladder. It brokered a ceasefire when both sides were at loggerheads and managed to act as intermediaries. But what incentive did it have? What leverage was there for it to potentially strong-arm the negotiations? Can this be transformed into a domestic gain?And why now, of all times?

To elucidate this, one must harken back to the escalation dynamics in South Asia. In the preceding years' skirmishes between India and Pakistan, the Islamic Republic was well prepared to thwart any incursion and retorted back by downing several Indian aircraft. The role of Chinese tech in this war cannot be understated, but it was the operational proficiency of the Pakistan armed forces which reinforced the perception that the country could defend itself. This perception gained traction after the once-in-a-

generation Saudi Mutual Defense Agreement was inked, consolidating the country's position as a net security provider in the region.

Taken together, these developments gave Pakistan a strategic opening that few states could have exploited as effectively. The Iran war presented an auspicious occasion to reap from its wedge balancing act. For Iran, Pakistan seemed to be a reliable negotiator as it had its own vendettas against the apartheid state, maintained a state of equilibrium in a polarized world order, and most importantly, had stakes of its own on the line. Lethargy would have been detrimental. With the Afghan border ablaze, any regime change in Iran could have induced a three-frontal problem for Pakistan. On the other side, the US plan was ill-conceived. Evidently, the shock and awe strategy incurred dissimilar results to what it did in Venezuela. Another reason might be the burgeoning dismay against the disingenuous Trump administration, as the curtailing of foreign wars was the primary pretext which won Trump his second term. One might argue that China was already emerging as the new superpower against the backdrop of the fragmenting fiefdom of the United States, and this conflict just fast-tracked the inevitable. The German polymath Oswald Spengler argued in his cycle of civilization that a society, like an organism, is prone to eventual demise, often succeeded by an emerging power, and clearly the US didn't want China's rise to come at their own expense.Another proposition worth mentioning through is the Thucydides trap, coined by Graham Allison, a Harvard laureate and an established political scientist. Allison pointed out that time and history exhibit perennial recurrences, the ones embedded in the indictment of human hubris. He found out that throughout history, whenever an emerging power threatened the ascendancy of an established one, it precipitated war. He found 12 instances from a total of 16 supportive of his hypothesis. As it is rightfully penned by the primal bearer of this idea:

"*What made the war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which it instilled in Sparta*"
Thucydides

Both powers now prefer cooperation instead of confrontation, and this theory might be playing at the hindsight of it all. It also explains Beijing's dormancy at the world stage, especially relating to the war in Iran. For Pakistan, adjacency to an emerging superpower

also comes with strategic dividends. It has bolstered its relationship with Beijing and, for all the right reasons, this mutualism bled through the clouds of uncertainty and anticipation to witness unprecedented heights. Straddling the interests of both countries, Pakistan is poised to bridge the widening Sino-American divide, a position other middle powers of Eurasia are devoid of. This structural dynamic is elaborated by J. Morgenthau in his book " Politics among Nations. "

"The aspiration for power on the part of several nations, each trying either to maintain or to overthrow the status quo, leads to a configuration that is called the balance of power and to policies that aim at preserving it. In such a system, small and middle-sized nations derive their independence and their very existence from the mutual balance of the great powers."
J . Morgenthau

Though the apartheid state of Israel views Pakistan, Turkey, and their Sunni axis including Saudi Arabia as a potential threat, their omission from the negotiations fostered more skepticism. Their ideological resonance with India must be monitored up close, as this Hindutva-Zion alliance has the potential to be a nuisance for Islamabad. We had already seen technical and military cooperation of both in the Indo-Pak skirmishes of 2025. By combining Israel's electronic warfare and surveillance architectures with New Delhi's deep-seated regional ambitions, this partnership seeks to construct a counter-weight to Pakistan's emerging Eurasian transit corridor.

Amidst all of this, for Pakistan to catalyze its nouveau relevance, it must reinvigorate its civic institutions. Political influence and state manoeuvring are turning it docile, making it harder to translate geopolitical triumph into domestic ones. The civil-military components are in sync, but they must learn to perpetuate this relationship, something that seems foreign to the country's political landscape. These elements, paired with a long-term vision for relevance, can clear the course through economic and sociopolitical logjams present at home. In the contemporary disclosure, Pakistan's problems have shown no partisanship, so neither should its civic and political proponents.

But to progress on an international level and to translate those gains into tangible domestic outcomes are two fundamentally distinct endeavors. Organic societal transformation is inherently more intricate, particularly when extractive institutions are

coupled with a borrowed sense of national identity. We succeeded in mimicking the outward sophistication of the West while deserting the very soul that sustained it, leaving us with diluted models of governance devoid of substance.

This is exactly where the concept of social capital comes in, though an overarching concept,it fundamentally revolves around cultivating equitable cultural values that over time, create a ripple effect, strengthening civic institutions. After all, there are no institutions without people, and people are where governments must invest in the longer run.

The fate of institutional change, however, cannot rest solely on the tides of social progress. Institutional reform and societal transformation must advance in tandem, each reinforcing the other. Governments must therefore act proactively to overhaul redundant systems of tax collection, public administration, and service delivery, thereby demonstrating that sustainable reform is more than an aspirational narrative.

Ignorance may be bliss, but we must never allow it to become a national duty.

The writer is a student of Intermediate Pt-II

A Traveler's Heartbreak: Climate Change and Pakistan's Northern Areas

Laiba Imran

As someone who has traveled through several northern regions both recently and as a child, I have noticed stark differences that, in my view, are warnings we are all choosing to ignore. Back then, traveling to Naran, Kaghan, Swat, or Kashmir felt like an undertaking, a journey you earned. Now there are hundreds of travel companies commercializing these routes, and the soothing silence I remember from childhood has been replaced by the rush of crowds. Watching it happen, valley by valley, has been genuinely heartbreaking.

As a student of Economics, I can name what I'm seeing more precisely than I could as a child: unregulated urbanization has hollowed out our traditional way of life and replaced it with a service economy that collapses the moment tourist season ends. The cost of living in these valleys is being pushed up by short-term tourism, and locals are being priced out of towns their families have lived in for generations - largely due to reasons that remain invisible to the people driving the change.

For a long time, my objection to all this was mostly instinctive. Then came the summer of 2025, and my instinct was aided by real-time data.

Between June and September 2025, Pakistan lived through its most devastating floods since 2022, driven by monsoon rainfall roughly a quarter above normal and by cloudbursts that tore through the mountains faster than anyone could prepare for. The Northern Belt - the very valleys tourism has spent a decade reshaping - suffered significantly. Islamic Relief Pakistan's on-ground reporting found Buner was hit hardest, with a death toll surpassing 340. Shangla, Mansehra, Swat, Bajaur, Battagram and Lower Dir followed, while Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir also reported significant deaths and destruction. A rapid needs assessment conducted by UNOCHA across ten flood-affected districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa found more than 1.57 million people were affected, with roughly 100,000 displaced and over 3,487 houses damaged.

Pakistan's Economic Survey 2025-26 puts the national toll at 1,039 casualties and more than four million displaced, while the international disaster database EM-DAT estimates 6.9 million people were affected altogether. The same survey states that total monetary losses reached roughly Rs822 billion, with agriculture alone accounting for Rs430 billion, and that the government was forced to cut its GDP growth target for the year from 4.2 percent down to a range of 3.5 to 3.9 percent. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, in Pakistan's Planning Ministry briefing, quoted it as "a stark and painful manifestation of climate injustice," and pointed out that Pakistan contributes less than one percent of global emissions yet keeps absorbing a disproportionate share of the damage.

I didn't need a government report to tell me this. I have already seen the riverside hotels in Kaghan built right up to the water's edge. Construction companies treat a riverside floodplain like empty real estate rather, ignoring its real purpose: giving the river room to expand when water level is too high. But it is one thing to feel uneasy about a hotel on a riverbank, and another to read that Buner alone lost over 340 people. Additionally, the Planning Ministry's damage assessment noted that Punjab absorbed 92 percent of the country's total housing losses.

The same assessment reports that more than 213,000 homes were damaged or destroyed nationwide, and I keep thinking about the way many of them were built, like so much of what I've watched go up in Naran and Kaghan, without anyone asking whether the ground beneath them could take it.

There has been some response to this, at least on paper. In mid-2025, Gilgit-Baltistan's environmental protection authority announced a five-year ban on new hotel construction around the region's tourist lakes. A senior official there, speaking to AFP, put the problem more bluntly than I would have dared to in an earlier draft of this piece: *"If we let them construct hotels at such pace, there will be a forest of concrete."* It's a good line, and I wish I believed it had changed much. But barely a year later, a 2026 feature in Pakistan Today on tourism in the north is still describing the same pattern that produced the floods in the first place, what it calls a *"volume-over-value"* model that packs travellers into buses for whistle-stop tours and leaves both the environment and the local community depleted.

I feel like when we visit these places, we owe them a kind of gentleness. Why not choose local, sustainable practices every time we trave? What is the point of visiting somewhere if we refuse to respect the way people there actually live? Every illegal hotel built on a

riverbank, every ignored waste rule adds a little more to the risk of the next flood. The 2025 disaster was a mirror held up to our own negligence, and now, for once, the numbers agree.

We have a moral, and frankly an economic, duty to demand better regulation. Every ecosystem has a limit to how much construction and how many visitors it can absorb, and we are pushing these valleys well past theirs. This isn't a distant concern for people sitting comfortably in their homes in Lahore or Islamabad. It's a present, worsening threat for the communities living in its path, and it raises the very real risk of a landslide disaster on a scale the region hasn't yet seen. If we don't change course now, I'm afraid the beauty of these regions may end up existing only in old photographs, and the next round of losses may not come with any warning at all.

The author is a recent graduate of BS Economics (2022-26).

02

INTERVIEWS

- Athar Tahir & Waqas A. Khwaja
- Kamil Khan Mumtaz

Waqas Ahmed Khwaja and Muhammad Athar Tahir Sit Down with The Ravi Editorial Board

February 20, 2026

Professor Waqas Ahmed Khwaja *is the Ellen Douglas Leyburn Professor of English at Agnes Scott College, where he teaches postcolonial literature, British Romanticism, narratives of empire, Gothic literature, Victorian poetry and fiction, and creative writing. He holds a PhD in English from Emory University and an LLB from the Punjab University Law College, Lahore. He's the author of four collections of poetry, a literary travelogue written during his fellowship at the International Writers Program at the University of Iowa, and the editor of three major anthologies of Pakistani literature. He has also served as translation editor for the modern poetry of Pakistan. He has guest edited a special issue on Pakistani literature for the Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies. A recipient of multiple international literary honors, Professor Khwaja remains deeply engaged in his scholarly and social practice.*

Athar Tahir *is a Lahore-based English language poet and retired civil servant. Thrice the recipient of the Patras Bokhari Award, the highest national prize for literature in English. He is a poet, essayist, short story writer, translator, and scholar of Punjabi texts as well as a calligrapher, artist, art critic, and art historian. Mr. Tahir has published over 20 books, including several volumes of poetry and essays, such as A Certain Season and Body Loom. His poems, also translated into Italian, Urdu, and Chinese, have been set as text for secondary schools and for the Cambridge O-level syllabus and have also been included in several anthologies and in Language for a New Century, published by WW Norton and Co. He is the founder director of the International Center for Pakistani Writing in English at Kinnaird College, Lahore. He was awarded the Tamga-i-Imtiaz in 1998 and the Sitara-i-Imtiaz in 2009 for his services and contributions to literature.*

EDITORIAL BOARD

It must be wonderful coming back home. Returning to Government College after all these years, do you find yourself struck by the transformations the campus has undergone or by the enduring elements that have remained unchanged?

WAQAS KHWAJA

The last time I was here must have been about thirteen, or fourteen years ago, when you had an international conference here, and I had been very graciously invited as a keynote speaker and spoke on Romanticism and its discontents. Coming back to Government College is very much like a feeling of romantic nostalgia. Some things are enduring, while some things have changed and have morphed over the years that have passed since then.

My time at Government College was way back in another century, I would say in another millennium. This was from 1968 to 1970 when I was here. Athar and I actually started at the same time. We became friends—I suppose it was the very first day that we entered the Government College, and it was a fascinating place. It seems just as fascinating today, when you enter the gate, and you see that Gothic building in front of you. It is very inspirational to be honest. It raises the heart in the same manner. It raises the spirits in the same manner. I see people in those maroon coats, and I remember how proud I was when I first wore that blazer.

This chemistry building was where we had our chemistry classes, because I initially was in the sciences. And I'm so glad that the daughter of one of our very revered teachers here, Mr. Ehsan Elahi Qureshi, is here as well, and he was a person who had a very big heart, who treated us with consideration and care when we were but somewhat unruly students. We were very raw, and I was very raw, I still am very raw, but anyways.

We were addressed by our role numbers and I remember an incident where one after the other, there were people in front of me that were being asked to leave the classroom, and then Mr. Ehsan Elahi stopped his lecture and he looked at me directly and he said, "*Oye, 151 hun te maen sareyan nu bar kad ditta ae, hun te chup kar ja,"* and then he passed on to another who was in the same class.

ATHAR TAHIR

I walked this hallowed path with Waqas many years ago. It was a symbol of not only knowledge and wisdom but also of fraternity that you made - friends who last you a lifetime and the friendships you make as a student outlive the friendships you might have as a professional if you join a department or if you join the services. Those friendships are all peripheral, but the real friendships are formed in schools and colleges. For me, it is a very special moment to be here with a friend for many decades.

Coming back to Government College is always a bit of a mixed bag, because, although it prompts nostalgia, you also realize that things have moved on. It's not quite the same place. For one, the campus is much greener than I remember. I remember there used to be Indian coral trees. I don't see them now along the Oval. There is this Ahsoka tree, which is all over the place now, because it's shadier. It's greener. And then, one remembers the teachers one was taught by.

We had teachers like Professor Sohaib bin Hasan, a remarkable person not only as a teacher but as a writer. I consider him to be one of the finest essay writers in the country. I rank him with Hazlitt, and all the great British English essayists. When I founded the International Center for Pakistani Writing in English at Kinnaird College in 2014, I included him in the course. The reaction was remarkable. He was talking about not only global things but also local things. So that "glocal" – global, and local. The local aspect was something that resonated with the students. We need to introduce English literature courses on Pakistani writing in English.

Writers like Sohaib Bin Hasan and Taufiq Rafat, whom I consider among the founders of Pakistani English poetry. Zulfikar Ghose. Absolutely. All these people who have made a significant contribution to the growth of the Pakistani idiom need to be taught.

WAQAS KHWAJA

There's just this, and I first of all would like to apologize because this is the professorial part of mine that kicks in at this time. I do want to correct the name of Zulfikar Ghose. It is not "Ghaus". It was from "Ghosh" that it became "Ghose", but his original name, if you want to know, is Khwaja Zulfiqar Ahmed from Sialkot. I do want us to make this correction because I've seen some faculty members from other institutions, not at Government College, make this mistake. So please be careful about that.

EDITORIAL BOARD

He acquired that name while he was traveling and living in different cities, and it helped him navigate the India of that time.

WAQAS KHWAJA

Absolutely.

EDITORIAL BOARD

We need to work on the Pakistani idiom and bring it to mainstream knowledge. Do you think that your writings have, in the past couple of years, evolved in that direction, or what themes do you feel you're trying to explore as time goes on, or have they shifted?

ATHAR TAHIR

Initially, this whole idea of the Pakistani idiom comes from Taufiq Rafat's seminal essay, which was published by the University of Karachi in the early 1960s. He advocated something that Rilke had done. Rilke, the German poet, had already talked about the German idiom, vis-à-vis the French and the Russian. It was nothing new that was said, but it was new for this country because we were imitating and aping what the English writers were doing rather than what the Pakistani writers were doing.

As for myself, he mentored me. I submitted my poems to him, as indeed did a number of people, including Waqas, I think. He would 'suggest,' and never 'correct', and he would always use Punjabi. "*Ay Jira Lafaz ay ne, enu zara dekh laen.*" That used to be his advice because he did not want to compromise the innate creativity and impose his own style of writing.

Initially, one did feel that one had to make a conscious effort to imbibe the Pakistani idiom. But on my third book, *A Certain Season*, I broke away from that because I became certain of my own voice.

I understood what he was saying, but I wanted to say it in my way, what I call "glocal." Local sensitivity, local things that you look at, but giving them a global significance because that basically is what everybody does. Read Tolstoy's *War and Peace.* That huge novel. Considered one of the greatest novels ever written, has fifty pages of propaganda against Napoleon. He's speaking like a Russian because Napoleon invaded Russia.

This idea of being global or just being local cannot be separated. Increasingly with technology, there is such an inter-meshing of things that nothing is totally global or purely local. We are all in a glocal world. That's why after the first two or three books, my diction and my perception changed, and the last book owes a lot to the Japanese form of the Tanka and the Haiku. It is through exploring various techniques that one begins to discover new areas.

I'd just like to tell you that Waqas started a group. The whole idea of that group was to have interlinguistic exchange. We had poets writing in English, Punjabi, and Urdu. I'll pass it on to him to answer this question.

WAQAS KHWAJA

Yes, it was an interlinguistic group. The whole idea was part of the thing that moved me and frustrated me. At that time, I had come out of an English-speaking and English-focused educational system, St. Anthony's High, where we had only one class of Urdu a week. The rest of the week, we were both speaking in English and writing in English and knew very little about our own languages. It was only at Government College that this whole new world opened to me of Urdu literature and of other literatures, Punjabi literature, among them of course. There were people here who were writing Punjabi poetry. There was this famous French professor, Professor Laeeq Babri, who was a Punjabi poet and a fascinating one at that.

The idea that this interaction needs to happen is there. But let me pull back a little bit about the Pakistani idiom and say a little bit about that, too. I was initially also moved by this idea of the Pakistani idiom. I would say that, but I never thought of it as a conscious sort of objective or a structural principle while I was writing poetry. I never thought of that in those terms. I think it was important to just be yourself or be myself. Athar has very rightly talked about how we discover our own voice or close to something that we call our voice or our voices.

It also depends on whether you know how that happens. That's also an interesting subject that we can talk about for a long time. This idea that you consciously follow a path to be somewhat in a certain vein or in a certain temperament or in a certain sort of sense of temperament, if you will, projecting the culture that you come from. You don't have to do that. You are living it. You are imbibing it all your life, one way or the other.

Interestingly, whether you read something or not—I'm all for reading, by the way—the more reading you can do, the better. Actually, there's never going to be enough, as much as you can do. But you don't really have to do that to have a sensibility that has absorbed the cultural influences, the rituals, the customs, the conventions, the sensibilities of the people that you're living among. You cannot just sort of say that this will not affect me; I am somebody who's totally living in a vacuum. Discovering that (the milieu that one inhabits) and articulating from within that is important.

Where I have come from that position to where I am today is to recognize more that I am just part of a huge ecology that is not only terrestrial but, in every way, cosmic as well. There are influences all around us, and of creatures, both living and those we deem not

living, as well as organic and inorganic matter—I've learned to be so much more respectful of all of that—and finding a place that is not above them in any way or below them in any way, but that we are all an essential part of that ecology, and it is important to respect that.

It seems to me that whether I want to do it intentionally or not becomes irrelevant. The whole being that has evolved to this or morphed to this place expresses itself in this manner. I hope it sort of gets to the question that you had asked.

The other part of the question of course . . . I can't answer that question about whether you are still meeting together or not . . . you know, people who are writing, still create. I'm sure they are. I'm pretty certain they are. I hope the interaction with local cultures also continues. I hope familiarity and absorption in local languages also continue. I hope that we can also, at the same time as we are writing in English, speaking in English, creating in English, have enough people who are doing innovative and new work in the Punjabi language, in the Sindhi language, in the Pashto language, in all these languages, in the Urdu language, all these languages as well. This is a key part of moving forward in a healthy ecology, it's linguistic ecology as well, if I may say so.

ATHAR TAHIR

The growth of other Adbi festivals and melas is actually a good prod towards understanding and learning from other languages. Recently, they had the Adab festival in Karachi, and they honored both Urdu and Sindhi poets, and they're planning next year to add Balochi to it. The growth of these literary festivals, and across linguistic boundaries, is taking place. People are beginning to understand and welcome work that is not in English or Urdu alone.

You do have that thing gradually coming up. But if you all hope that there are groups like the one Waqas created in the 60s in Lahore, that there are similar groups in the country that look at the cultures of this country, the languages of this country, and the literatures of this country, and that there is creative dialogue between the practitioners, whether it is a novel or whether it’s poetry, so that the experience becomes richer, it becomes more comprehensive.

WAQAS KHWAJA

I must acknowledge that it is impressive that you remember or you have picked up that in that group, there were people like Ali Arshad Mir and Sain Akhtar. I don't know if even many Punjabi writers would know about both these writers. Perhaps Sain Akhtar, because he was an oral poet and his poetry used to be presented on television, radio, and all. "Allah Mian Thallay Aa," one of the long poems that he wrote, and then "Meray Lahore de Vekh Nazaray."

When I was practicing law in Pakistan decades ago, in the afternoon we'd sit together, and I'd record some of these things. I still have recordings from that time. Ali Arshad Mir is a much more complex poet and steeped in Punjabi tradition. He was the principal of Government College Faisalabad, if I remember correctly. He passed away fourteen, fifteen years ago. But I was very glad to know that a group of Punjabi writers has come together to celebrate a yearly anniversary and designate him as the Homer of Punjabi.

His poetry is worth looking at, and his poetry is layered, modernistic, quite distinct from the traditional poetry that one reads in Punjabi, which is great in its own right, but this is a different kind of work. It hearkens back to the Mohenjo-Daro and ancient sub-continental traditions. Mahmud Gillani, Chaudhry Shaukat, and I had got a little informal literary outfit going we simply called the Writers' Group. Sain Akhtar and Arshad Mir shared their work at our meetings too on a couple of occasions. Munnu Bhai used to come to our literary gatherings as well. I could name some other literary luminaries too who attended occasionally, and it was great--Kishwar Nahid and Ashfaq Sahab, for instance, and Ahmed Nadim Qasmi, Javeed Shaheen, Amjad Islam Amjad, Ata-ul-Haq Qasmi, and so on. Before long, we were receiving requests from foreign writers visiting Pakistan, mostly from the United States, to present at our fortnightly sessions. So, Thomas Disch, Michael Lynch, Rosellen Brown, and many others. Some younger Pakistani writers came to know of these meetings, M. A. Niazi and Osama Siddique, among others, and they were soon among the regulars, as were Professors Shuaib-bin-Hasan and Nasim Riaz Butt. I have fond memories of Taufiq Sahab, Kaleem Omer, and Anwar Adeeb sharing their work and the enthusiastic discussions that followed.

A sizeable cast of writers over the years developed a network where we also translated work from one language into another, and not necessarily only from the local languages

into English, but vice versa as well. Translating between different languages is also a form of cross-pollination, and it also advances your skills as a writer, very much so.

EDITORIAL BOARD

How did the Pakistani literary sphere of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the divide between English and vernacular literary traditions, influence the kind of questions you began to ask in your writing? What did you feel was missing? When you began writing seriously, who did you imagine as your reader? Was it a Pakistani literary community, a global audience, or perhaps an ideal reader that didn't exist but you feel exists now?

WAQAS KHWAJA

A slew of questions here. A whole lot of very profound questions, by the way. I think questions that we engage with continually, and if you're expecting a definitive or an authoritative answer, please sort of move back from that because you're not going to get one. It is a struggle, and it's a journey that we all go through, and even at this age, I am going through it still.

I can give you certain markers regarding that. Yes, it was initially because I was sort of exposed to a lot of English poetry in school. It was initially the English poets who moved me a whole lot. There was Browning, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, all these figures, but again that was just the start of it all, and again it was after coming to Government College that I became aware of a larger cast of poets in other languages as well.

That is not to say that I was never introduced to Momin or Momin's writing or Ghalib or Zouq at school, but it was one short anthology, *Jawahar-paray* that we studied, and it included both poetry and prose—hardly enough to give you any in-depth look at Urdu's rich poetic landscape and tradition. It was a learning process all along, and a slow one at that.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that from the very beginning of my interest in writing, I was pretty much grounded in my own environment. It wouldn't have made sense for me to be writing in some airy-fairy world about abstract or theoretical matters that had nothing to do with reality as I knew and lived it at the time. Just because I was writing in English. The choice of language didn't quite matter. Yeah, I started writing in

English alright, but I was writing about subjects and topics that were meaningful to me. That mattered somehow, and continues to matter, of course, to this day. That is the key feature of my writing that has continued since that time.

And I'm not writing about or to someone out there, the presumed reader. I'm writing about something I wish to probe within or want an explanation of from myself. It is a plumbing of the inside, wanting to figure out what it is that I am thinking, or feeling, or fumbling towards, where I am going with all of this. What this teaches me, rather than attempting to control my poem, is to trust where the generative impulse and language are leading me, where the journey itself is seeking to take me, for, I reckon, if I know where the poem is going from the start, it will likely follow a predictable path, and the reader will know it as well, and that's going to be a rather dull and flat experience, as much for myself as the reader, a very boring piece of writing indeed.

I note this specifically, because the surprise the poem brings with it, the surprise that the creative process itself springs on me suddenly, that is what ignites the writing, that is what makes the poem itself, not the repeating of age-old images and metaphors, or routine and formulaic expressions, and so on and so forth.

That is the kind of evolution we are talking about as we go along the journey, and one continues to try and plumb as much as one can of this domain, the mystery of it, what has not yet been heard or seen. But then the horizon widens further with reading and exposure to new work from other languages, other places, becoming acquainted with French poetry, Portuguese poetry, German poetry, Italian poetry, Persian poetry, for instance, and so on. Talking of Persian poetry… there's so much richness to it. Strangely, coming upon Persian poetry, as I did, through English translations of it, I was so moved that I wanted to learn Persian itself, to taste its original flavor. You see what I'm saying? So, the field of knowledge is so huge, so vast… it never ends. This journey continues no matter how much, or how variously, one reads.

And the fact is that I'm not embedded only in this one culture. Now call it whatever culture you like. Call it the subcontinental, Indian, Pakistani, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, call it Greek, Mongol, Persian, Western, Oriental, Arabic, you may go on and on with it and never quite be able to define it. You see what I'm trying to say? This is all a part of our heritage.

One of the crucial things I realized very early, I sort of feel almost bashful that I'm going to give an example from one of the anthologies that I did early on in my writing career called *Mornings in the Wilderness*, for which I wrote a short introduction contextualing the selections—some of the things I've grown out of by this time, but some I still adhere to—one of the things I mentioned there was that if you look at our subcontinent with all its history of the many interventions, which people may call invasions or intersections, that have happened here from all across the world – the Greek, the Western, Mongol, Central Asian, Middle Eastern—all these threads crisscrossing everywhere—this must be the richest cultural inheritance that anyone anywhere in the world has. And instead of embracing it, we say, "Oh, now that we have lines of political division following the British exit, or we grew up in a certain atmosphere of nationalistic reframing, we belong to only this particular national configuration, this specific ethnic group, this restricted culture or that, this language group, or this particular tradition or version, or part of history." I think this amounts to severely limiting oneself, denying the richness of the heritage and its legacy that we all carry within ourselves, and I can't and don't want to do that. These are the thoughts I have in responding to the set of extremely important questions you have raised, and I recognize that it may come across as a rather amorphous sort of response.

ATHAR TAHIR

I'd just like to add to what Waqas said. Your questions actually ask a more fundamental question. Why do I write? Why do I create? You create and write because you have to do it. It's something that overpowers you and obliges you to do it. If you don't have that feeling, that urge, that welling up of that particular thought, you don't need to. It's only when something moves you, or something obsesses you, or something overwhelms you that you begin to want to translate it into something the words can carry, the ideas that you believe in. If you think in English, naturally you will write in English. Then you begin to play around with it. There are difficult forms that you tackle. There are difficult emotions that you have to handle. But that's the right of creation. That is what is ultimately so satisfying: a challenge you have set for yourself.

Nobody else has set the challenge for you. You do it yourself, and then you see how you can, in poetry, of course, in the least possible words, convey as much as the words can carry, and then leave a lot unsaid which can still be perceived. You have to answer that question for yourself. Is the urge strong enough for you to do what you want to do? If it

isn't, do something else. But if it is, then you have a lifetime of struggle with whatever genre you're working in. That is it. It's an individual effort. Everybody has to do it for himself or herself, and it's an individual endeavor to achieve what they wish to achieve.

You set your standard, you set your rules. Nobody else can do it for you. What you can do is when you read good poetry or good poets, they can tell you how to do it, but they cannot tell you what to do. That is your choice.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Do you feel there is a pressure on Pakistani writers to include performative portrayals of trauma, otherness, or religion in order to be legible or taken seriously? How do you deal with that?

WAQAS KHWAJA

I think that's another great question, one which generates all kinds of conflicting ideas and possible responses to it. On the one hand, it seems that there are audiences out there that expect certain kinds of approaches, beliefs, and writing. One wonders, though, if one ever writes for an audience outside the self, or, in that sense, a particular kind of imagined or perceived audience. Instead, or alternatively, one may be actually writing for or to an auditor within, for a listener, reader, or consciousness that is inside the writer, rather than a theoretical construct outside the self.

There is a lot of pressure in certain quarters of the world, an almost obsessive demand or craving for narratives that retail all the horrors that one may have experienced or be going through, the oppressions, inequities and hardships they may have faced, with the complementary understanding that those quarters, or markets, guarantee people the freedom to express them that their original societies may have denied them. First of all, that is a puerile trend and expectation; it's childish. And yet writers fall for it, for there is a market for these narratives, and rewards as well, in countries and societies whose present prosperity and power continues to be based on colonial depredation and degradation of the rest of the world. It is hypocritical—the use of the word "trauma" or the words "abuse" and "suffering," basically to describe something that defines your life and occurs mostly in non-western world. Frankly, we all go through some form of struggle and striving against odds no matter where we may live. I mean, you may think that people today living in the United States are not going through experiences that

could be defined in those terms? But talk to the Americans, and you'll see. They will tell you about the trauma of dispossessed native populations, but also of the guilt and horror of some members of the supplanting settler generations living on stolen lands, though this "guilt and horror" does not quite motivate them to take any steps to redress the wrongs of history, for the native populations continue to live in dereliction on miserable reservations. Amnesia or rejection of America's own settler-colonial past further heightens the irony of the virulent anti-immigrant policies that its leaders pursue today. You are seeing the process and practice repeated in other parts of the world as well. You see the horrors and the massacres repeated. And the enforcement of silence in the face of it. That is why it is a conflicted response.

You can't get away from the horrors. You can't get away from the genocides, the massacres, the slaughters, etc. Yet you may not be writing about them because you wish to appease a certain audience, or find buyers in a certain market, or look for rewards and awards. Your motives as a writer may be disinterested and stem from genuine concern. Sometimes it does seem like you know when these decisions are being made, or how this happens, but there is much clouding of motives and intentions. I think that's why I have my reservations about endorsements and the award culture. I have my reservations about certain book festivals too.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Could you tell us a bit more about this?

WAQAS KHWAJA

It's like you pat my back, I pat your back—that's the culture of book festivals and the publication networks in the Western Hemisphere. Why? Because we/they are doing the same kind of thing. Isn't this great that we are *all* engaged in the same kind of project of sorts? I am in an entirely different place. Maybe nobody reads my work, or nobody should. It doesn't matter to me. It really doesn't. I think it is the same fundamental question that Athar raised: why am I writing? Who am I addressing, or who am I writing for? *I* write because I'm trying to understand myself, to make sense of myself. I'm a very clumsy person. I'm not fluent with words, and aligning thoughts and words spontaneously. You ask me a question, and I'm fumbling to give you an answer, thinking through the matter as I proceed.

Well, writing allows me to sit down and work it out on paper, and I don't know myself what the answer is, or will be, and maybe ten days later or three months later, I will find a tentative resting place—maybe; not a permanent answer—and I'll present that, and it seems like this, or maybe the next day, I say no, this isn't quite it, I still want to go further. This is what for me art is, the creative, the imaginative exploration, a journey always.

If there is a person you're trying to satisfy through your writing, they will never be satisfied. It is what is inside you, that consciousness, or some part of the self, or selves, that you're trying to understand. That creature inside you is complex. And it is not only in one person or the other that that kind of complexity and striving exists, or that trauma exists, or that sense of injury exists or that sense of elation or elixir exists, you know, whatever. It exists in all of us, it is only a question of whether we do have the time to follow up on this. Once again, I endorse what Athar rightly said, that if you have the urge to express what is inside you, then it's a lifetime's activity, a lifetime's endeavor. It makes you forget about everything else, for this is what you are going to do. This is a never-ending quest, and you might find the resting places. Like Athar has found his resting places 20 times or so thus far. You know, these books of his, let's say. I'm just saying, you know, using this just as a metaphor, for resting places. It's not the end as far as he's concerned. He's still going.

This is perhaps a condition, I think, all creative artists share. This is how it goes. It makes us, I reckon, just more tolerant of ourselves as well as of others. I think that is the important thing that I have learned through all this. It makes you a person, for instance, who recognizes that we cannot just dismiss another person as an evil person or a good person. There's much more going on there, and one needs to get much more absorbed in this. How far are you willing to go there, and how far are you willing to admit that your own implication somehow may be there as well, even in the question that you ask, the fact that I write, and somebody up there picks it up to read it and engage with it? There's an implication, that I've become part of a system, or community, if you will, that, whether I liked or intended it or not, I've become a part of. I've been sort of drawn into it through these channels of communication that we name the various genres of creative expression. Am I willing to be satisfied with that and say, "Oh, you know, I got this. This is great." That is never going to happen. I don't know if I've really confused the issue hugely now, or what.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Given the current institutional and critical positioning of Pakistani literature in English, do you think the development of sustained indigenous critical frameworks has been relatively marginalized?

WAQAS KHWAJA

Again, from the framework of the label which I hate: the postcolonial . . . it is easy to use a label that denies the right of other labels. But once we create a label, we try to define that label, you know, and then try to fit facts and narratives into that category. And of course the new label is not enough, because it doesn't, and cannot, bring all the details into one coherent, consistent pattern, cannot define in a way that includes and takes into account all specifics and variants, for life is much more complex.

What do we do next? We create yet another label. We are transnational. If we find something else that doesn't quite capture all the variations, we'll go on doing this. But is it fruitful to do that? As I said, I shy away from labels, those categories or frameworks that say "this voice" or "this kind of a voice" or "this kind of a literature"—especially when we are in this fumbling, stumbling sort of journey, all of us together on this planet. It is not that only we here are going through it. People elsewhere, everywhere in these porous, mobile societies or our times, are also going through it. Yet, there is something there, in those classifications and taxonomies that is valuable, that I'm not willing to give up. What each one of us, in our own way, may not be willing to give up. But we have to find out for ourselves what it is that they help us see, what part of our self-perception or perspectival make-up that we are not willing to give up. That is the big question.

We cannot say, "Okay, reverse all the colonizations that have occurred. All the interventions that have happened." Will we be satisfied with that situation? Of course, no. There is no state of pure innocence we can go back to. There's inequity and bias in all societies. How do we go past those inequities is one question that may be relevant to us, or it may not be relevant for us, but is there learning also, borrowing and absorbing from others, or is all learning and knowledge confined only to a particular religion, or to a particular sort of region, or to a particular people? There are plenty of people and communities in the world who are trying to claim that. There will be people in the West claiming something this kind in a certain way, and there are people right across the

border claiming something very similar in another way. Our own society itself shows all the symptoms of this affliction as well.

On the one hand, you have claims, for instance, that, based on the sort of stories told in the Puranas and the Mahabharat, plastic surgery and all kinds of modern medical and scientific knowledge was already known in ancient Vedic times. You can go on and on with that without end. And then you have Muslims who will claim that all learning originated with the Muslims. The fact that intersections, interactions, and interventions have occurred in history and these have come to comprise and compose the kind of learning and knowledge culture we live in today, one which is indubitably and inextricably hybridized, is often disregarded. To recognize this is the first step towards an aware, and perhaps meaningful living, and then to recognize that I have the choice to see what I value in my own culture that I need to cherish, nurture, or strive to understand more closely, maybe helping it bloom and flower, and what is it that I don't find appropriate, ethical, or just, mentally or spiritually healthy, so that it opens me up to what I can learn from other societies and cultures, just other cultures and societies may have plenty to learn from us as well.

That sense of give and take, the fact that we are all participants in this enterprise of living and improving our lives, is far more important than this idea of just maintaining something in a hermetically sealed state under some misconception of the notion of purity and assumed perfection. Let us maintain our indigeneity, wear certain kinds of clothes, if we wish, or express ourselves in a certain language that we recognize as ours, or write about certain themes and not about others, etc. That individual choice is ours, and it is our right too. But, by the same reasoning, we have to recognize the same right for others as well. Not recognizing that, and forcing societies into homogenizing regimes, would severely constrict individual autonomy, promote discontent and resentment, and ultimately lead to what I would say is a kind of separation, a division and disaffection among people, and I would want our societies to move beyond that.

I may be totally wrong, and this may be a Quixotic fantasy, and it probably is, but **I want to dream of a world, a space where we can all flourish together in our diversity, in our variations, in our differentials, in all that we have to offer separately, and collectively too, within communities.** That is about as far as I would go in this.

ATHAR TAHIR

As a creative writer, one is committed to words; one is committed to how you use those words and how you place them alongside each other. The problem is that a lot of the jargon that is used, labels that are used, and names that are given have their own biases and baggage, and the current situation here in the world now is a matter of semantics - how you interpret a certain word. There's a very famous essay by George Orwell, which was basically a radio broadcast during the Second World War, in which he mentions this. For example, if you look at the recent genocide in Gaza or you look at what happened to people across the world wherever there are conflicts, there is a certain language that the mainstream media uses; they don't say so many women and children died, they say so many casualties took place. Now, casualty is an abstract word.

It's not pinned down. It doesn't have the same response when you say a child, a woman, or an old man is killed, bombed, or liberated. The same thing happens with language, that when you start using words without going into a certain amount of depth, you are perpetuating that word. You're perpetuating that phrase. You're perpetuating that label. I'll give you a simple example. There's a very famous book called *Hopson Jobson*. It is all the Indian words that were used by the British, which are now part of the Oxford English Dictionary, or have become obsolete. It gives you all that. Hobson Jobson was actually an imperialist way of rendering Ya Hussain, Ya Hussain. So, this person saw this procession, a Shia procession moving, and he couldn't understand what they were saying, and he said Hobson Jobson, that's what they're saying.

Now that the document itself reflects the whole imperial baggage that words carried during the colonial period. A simple example is “Dilli” or “Dehli”. It is not Del-hi or Deh-li, but when you write it in English, it's Delhi, and nobody fights back; you just accept words. Similarly, if you look at Islam and Muslims, there's a longish work-essay that I'm writing, which is that things can be Islamic but they need not be Muslim, and things can be Muslim, and they need not be Islamic. Yet if you look at all the Orientalists or Islamic scholars, they have used this word without using Islam in place of Muslim. Muslim instead of Islam. So, what is happening here is that even words, when they are being used by us, have to be questioned. You have to come back to a certain place. Sharahe-Quaid-i-Azam, when you write it in English, but literally it should be “Sharah dash I no space Quaid-i-Azam".

Quaid-i-Azam should not be with an e. It should be dash I. If you're going to look at it in a literal transliterative fashion, you have to make those corrections. But nobody does. When you go and write a certain poem or a short story or a novel or whatever, you should be conscious of the words because those words are carrying your emotion, and if those words are not properly handled, they can lead you astray.

EDITORIAL BOARD

You are planning to publish another novel that is called *Tomorrow, Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*, which is a reference to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. If we need to fight back, how do we incorporate these references to European classics in our written works while we're reclaiming space? Can we reclaim them for our own in some way?

ATHAR TAHIR

When you read in different languages or from different languages, you imbibe certain ideas and things. Although you are trying to express what you feel, you're at the same time setting out ripples into other literatures. The last collection, *The Last Tea,* had references to not only the Japanese ceremony itself, but also to "*The Last Supper*."

It was embedded in it, but I didn't have to say it. A person who's had enough of a reading in crosscultural literature would understand why last year, because there, a friend betrays Jesus, and here, a friend betrays Jesus, the master. It is when different cultures come together, and you see this is something very funny which somebody mentioned. He said, you have written in English about a Japanese ritual, and you are Pakistani, and in that you have embedded Western ideas. But that's what life is all about. That's what Waqas is talking about. When you read different literatures, you get something from them. You begin to understand your own self better because you're looking at it from different perspectives.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Mr. Khwaja, law, like literature, relies heavily on narrative interpretation and persuasion. I was wondering how your legal background has helped you as a writer.

WAQAS KHWAJA

I think literature may provide the only venue where you may find historical justice restored, or redressed in some way or another. I can work my way backwards from there,

because legal justice, the laws that are promulgated and are operative in a state, are part of a system, and that system is always privileging a certain part of that society, which is always sanctioning or approving a certain kind of thinking. To give you an example, when there is an intervention or an invasion from outside in a country, and a new dispensation is established, anyone who cooperates with that new dispensation becomes absorbed in that dispensation and would be considered as part of what is right, what is appropriate, what is legally permissible, and what is legally acceptable as well.

People who do not choose to collaborate or cooperate with the new invasionary force, the invasive, colonizing power, call it whatever you will, are the rebels, or criminals, troublemakers and so on, and in the eyes of the law need to be punished or controlled in some way. Languages, or language traditions, are erased by establishing just one language as the central, approved language of a society. By prescribing that everyone speaks and communicates in this language with the offices and institutions of authority and power, determining that education will be recognized as worthy only in this language, and that knowledge of this language will be a condition precedent to qualify for any means of making a living, any jobs that may be available, the new dispensation renders all local languages and language traditions, whatever they are, communal, provincial, or cultural irrelevant and worthless. This is a systemic sort of exclusion that we find colonial and their successor states practice.

Historical wrongs may be talked about in history books, various historians can make various sorts of assessments about them, but it is the field of literature, or art, that provides the space where such conflicts and the anxieties they generate may be aired. Painting as well may perform this function, as does music too, the most abstract of arts though it is. It has been done in the past. And it is very much in practice today. You know the famous painting of Picasso, the *Guernica*, for instance, is an example that one can give, but there are many others. Sibelius' *Finlandia* and Smetana's *Ma Vlast* may be cited as instances from European classical music.

What I'm saying here is that if you are expecting the law to address these issues, the quest is laudable, but let's not hope too much. We have to change a lot before that can happen, which means we have to change the very system of laws that has been left to us as a colonial legacy. We recognise how difficult it actually is to change a system that the colonizer imposed on the colonized people and the successor state assumed and

maintained it. The system allows change only bit by bit, but change that needs to occur doesn't work bit by bit.

Audre Lorde said that you can't dismantle the master house with the master's tools. If you are going to do that, then you have to do it with your own tools. On the one hand, we are very proud of the languages that we have, the cultures that we have. On the other hand, we are not willing to starve to save them. We want a job. We want privilege. We want power in society.

You reconcile this yourself. How are you going to sort of manage to go past that calculus? That's differential calculus. How you do that is the question. Legal studies did help me a whole lot, but philosophy did in the same way as well. The most important subject that appealed to me in legal studies was Jurisprudence, because it not only sort of exposed me to a variety of legal perspectives, legal theories about law, natural law, you know, common law, statutory law, and so on. It also introduced me to this idea of rigorous logic, reasoning, rules of interpretation, words, and the connotations of those words as well. We have to choose circumspectly, because language doesn't easily sit on the page. It is slippery and seems to be moving all the time because of its connotative effects in all different directions. There is that realization, and law did help me a whole lot in bringing me to it.

I was very grateful that I had the opportunity to study law. The practice of law is quite another matter, and I would not have believed that the practice of law could be so ruthless and self-serving. It's a profession, you know, where whoever comes to you for legal representation or assistance, you have to sort of go and argue on their behalf in a court of law. Yes, within the confines of law, but it allows for a lot of latitude too. It may require you to constrain or quell a lot of murmurings that you might have, ethical murmurings, moral murmurings that you might have about an issue when you go to a court of law and you have to serve the interests of a client. It's not always that you get to represent a client who is in the right entirely. Often it is a question of balancing, you know, between two parties, and you're speaking for a party as if that is the only party that is in the right.

Literature, of course, allows you to move among and between all parties. Compassion, perhaps a kind of universal comprehensive compassion, for all the characters that are created or positions that are imagined, is perhaps one of the cardinal features of good

literature. You cannot say I will make the antagonist evil in every way so that you hate that character wholly and completely, and likewise the good characters entirely good, to show no trace of pettiness, knavery, or roguishness. People are complicated and complex, as are situations and circumstances, and you need to appreciate this to be able to write with depth and meaning, or to satirize, or see the humor and frivolity of a situation, or in human demeanor and in interactions between people. Both empathy and a canny awareness of what is not immediately or overtly evident are necessary to literature. So that's my two cents on this.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Structure is something that reflects in your work, *Telling Twilight*, which is a collection of about 140 sonnets. How much of this structure in this collection is because of a structured lifestyle you have lived, if any at all? What do you think the sonnet structure allows a poet to do intellectually or emotionally that freer forms might not?

ATHAR TAHIR

It's a very simple answer to that. Can a tree stand vertically if it did not have the structure of its trunk and branches? Think about it.

What administrative services - the Civil Service of Pakistan, now called the Pakistan Administrative Service - teach you, is several things. The theory is found in colleges like the
National Institute of Public Administration, where you are trained, but the practice is very different. My own experience is that it's like a cutthroat den of people who are in power. Either you are with them, or you are against them. Very few people are able to negotiate the crack between the two. It is a service that demands obedience at one level. You may suggest what you want, but ultimately, the decision itself is out of your hands.

Your advice, your recommendation might be very honest, but if it does not suit the powers that be, it'll be neglected. There is a great deal of structure within that, but that structure is often misused. I was telling Waqas that because I didn't follow a certain pattern of behavior, I was in grade 21 for 7 years. Why? Because I did not conform. I said, no. I'm at the top of my batch. Why should I ask anybody? Isn't merit something that should be considered? No, it isn't, after a certain level. Some of you are thinking of going into the civil service. Remember that from 17 to 18 you have to work hard. From

19, you start networking, and from 20, 21, and 22, it's all networking. There's no merit. I'm being very frank and honest about it.

But as far as creativity is concerned, I always believe that there should be a structure because if you do not have a structure, you're not able to say the thing you want to say in the best possible way. The structure provides a network of emotions or a network of words that reflects what you want to say. So even if you look at so-called free verse, free verse itself has a structure, you see? It depends on how you perceive structure. How do you perceive it? As an impediment, or do you see it as a facilitator of expression? But you have to have a structure. Without structure, you can have nothing. This cosmos is a structure. I was remembering in the 60s or was it 70s, there was a very famous series on the BBC called *Cosmos* by Carl Sagan.

I remember when I first saw that because he talked about the entire universe and trillions of lightyears away, there are other galaxies. You begin to see that you are just a small mote in the dust, as he put it. But there is a structure within the earth, and there are principles of structure that are operating outside the world. For me, it's very important, but it depends on how one looks at it. It depends on my own perception of what structure should be. It is a rigorous thing. You want to say something, but you are facing the second challenge of the limit of the rhyme scheme. Decasyllabic, 10 syllables, 14 lines. Now you've got to girdle up and see if you can handle that. You see, there are lots of sonnets which I just discard because I don't think it's coming across. You are the final judge.

You have to decide what your merit is. You know other people's merit. But ultimately, you have to decide whether the structure is going to facilitate you or it's going to be an impediment. If it's going to be an impediment, how are you going to handle it? Structure is very important to stay up straight. You have to have a root. You have to have branches.

I just want to correct the gentleman's observation. *Tomorrow, Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* is a quartet. It is a series of four novels, linked but independent. I am working on the second and the third. They will together form the *Tomorrow* quartet because, as you know, these famous lines from *Macbeth* sum up what life is all about. A little pessimistic perhaps, but having seen the world as it is, one can empathize with what Macbeth was saying towards the end of his life.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Professor Khwaja and Mr. Tahir, thank you both for your time, your candour, and for returning to these halls that shaped you. It has been an honor to have you with us.

WAQAS KHWAJA

I'm duly impressed by you all, I must say. It has been our honor too.

ATHAR TAHIR

Thank you, certainly.

Rethinking Tradition, Architecture, and the Crisis of Modernity

With Kamil Khan Mumtaz & The Ravi Editorial Board

* * *

Kamil Khan Mumtaz *is an architect, educator, and writer, who is considered one of the key figures in developing a distinct identity for traditional architecture in Pakistan. He has authored two books, namely "Architecture in Pakistan" and "Modernity and Tradition" and has also served as the head of the National College of Arts (NCA), Lahore. He was awarded the Tamgha-e-Imtiaz in 1993 and the Sitara-e-Imtiaz in 2019.*

EDITORIAL BOARD

You have described human history not as a story of progress, but of sustainability, noting that if humanity lived for one day, the industrial era would occupy only the last minute. As we face irreversible climate change and resource depletion, you advocate reverting to traditional paradigms. How exactly do you define 'tradition' in this context, and why is it more than just a nostalgic remembering of the past?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

I think that's important to clarify because the word "tradition" is normally understood as practices that have continued from the past. We use the word "tradition" in a slightly different way. I suppose it's recognizing that the past practices were more sustainable and, in the light of the present crisis, that we need to reconnect with the traditional practices in that sense. Now, what is important is that we need to connect with is not just, as I've said time and again, a romantic attachment to the past style, forms, or even materials. The crucial thing that we need to reconnect to, is the worldview that sustained humanity and the environment for millennia.

Because it is the shift to the modernist worldview that has resulted in this existential crisis. So it's really in relation to or we define tradition in terms of the worldview, which means philosophy, beliefs, ontology, an understanding of what am I, what is the world, and our relationship to The Spiritual Creator, The Divine. It's those things that we have rejected, deliberately cut ourselves from. And that's how, when we say "tradition," it's

really in the context of the worldview rather than built form or any other particular practice.

EDITORIAL BOARD

When we talk about rejecting international Western values in favor of tradition, we must acknowledge that Pakistan is ethnically and linguistically diverse, encompassing Punjabi, Sindhi, Baloch, and Pashtun communities. Do all these cultures have different ideas of what tradition is, or can we reconcile them into one unified narrative?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

Well, this is precisely why we need to make this distinction in defining what you mean by tradition. Languages, as much as arts, architecture, and culture, are the forms in which the essential understanding, knowledge, and belief of human beings takes place. The essential principles are manifested in what we do, the practices. So the practice varies from one culture to another. But what is common to all cultures is the essential principles which define the worldview. So if one can sort of simplify it, for the natural man, natural culture looked at reality, the world, God, man, in terms of a created universe, a Divine Creator, and we, man, as a creature in the centre, in the ever-present spiritual reality.

So this was a worldview of societies, hunting-and-gathering societies, pre-industrial societies. If you like, pre-agricultural societies, which I call the natural state. And it's not as if they've disappeared. They're still around in South American tribes or Native North Americans, even our Kalash, and Australia. Everywhere there are these survivals.
Anthropologists have actually studied and documented it. So it's not just guesswork. It's well documented that there was a universal common worldview which was essentially based in the primacy of the spirit as The Creator.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Western philosophers like Thomas Hobbes define the pre-agrarian 'state of nature' as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short; a hostile 'do or die' world driven strictly by power. How do you reconcile this unlivable portrayal with your contrasting view that humanity's natural state was actually quite harmonious?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

You see, there, each society formulates or defines, has a narrative, a worldview, and then we look back at history and interpret it in the light of the worldview that we hold at that time. So this notion of the struggle for survival, supremacy - so what is success? It is being more competent. Therefore, you can clearly see through what is happening. This is the modernist worldview, which basically says reality is phenomena, material. The spirit is a product of the mind. It reflects what we experience. The primary reality is the physical and what we observe.

This, as I said, has resulted in the pursuit of material goals and objectives, and ultimately, when you run out of your own regional capacities, then you're looking for resources beyond. And so, the whole imperialist struggle for domination of the whole world. So you justify this aggressive conquest of other cultures by saying, "But this is the law of nature - the struggle for survival. We are superior, so we will succeed."

So you see, everything is interpreted in that way. And that's why you have these different narratives. That's connected with what your worldview is. Essentially, you want to then interpret and justify everything that you do.

It's not necessarily an answer to a question. It's simply that natural man, all over the world, for 99% of human existence, the dominant worldview was one of a metaphysical reality as the source, and what we experience is a projection or reflection of that reality. Then the first deviation was the agrarian revolution, where one understood this phenomenon not to be the presence of the spirit but a manifestation of the principle. So the world becomes the manifestation, and the principle is in the heavens above.

So this separation was a new or different way of looking at things. But it allowed humans then to manipulate and use nature, the physical forms of land, water, animals, plants and, with management, to get more out of it. But, of course, that meant that you had to possess the land, the animals, the plants. It gave you more than you needed, but it also created conflict and contestation, and then you had to defend that. But it did produce a whole series of changes. And then the next big revolution was with mechanical production, industry, that gave you the means not only to produce more than you need but to keep on producing more and more and more, with industry which doesn't get tired, doesn't get sick, doesn't need to have holidays.

So then you conquered the whole world. Now you have global markets, global resources, which gives you more technology, more power, and you can produce still more. But you've met the needs of the whole world. So what should you do with it? So you replace need with desire, and desire has no upward limit. So this takes us into the postmodern consumerist phase which we are in now. And so these are very clear epochal phases or stages. And if you look at it in the perspective of time, you see that the natural state, which I keep coming to, is a balance and harmony with nature. You don't exceed the limits of nature, and you try not to go below the needs of the human body.

And if you do, you pull yourself up, and then you overshoot the norm, you come down, because you can fluctuate within these limits. Once you cross either the lower or upper limit, then there's no coming back. So natural man was a normative man. All his actions were normative, coming back to the norm. Agrarian man was able to push up above the norm, but not above the limits of the planet's capacity. Industry gave you the means, to break that barrier. And in the year 1970, we actually crashed the ceiling and entered into postmodernism.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Given the overwhelming dominance of these modern, materialist narratives and the environmental tipping points we have already crossed, do you believe there is a practical way back? Can modern society truly revert to its traditional, normative state from where we are right now?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

And don't you see that graph? Perfectly level, and then suddenly, can you see that coming back? There are only two moments when the rate of change is infinite. When anything comes into existence from nothing, it's an infinite change. Just like that. It develops, evolves, and grows into its normative state, and then subsists for a duration, and then either goes up or down, and that's the end.

EDITORIAL BOARD

You have noted that art helps us access absolute truths and experience a higher reality. While poetry and music achieve this largely through sensory and auditory experiences,

how does architecture, which is inherently structural and spatial in nature, help us realize and experience these traditional values?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

All art is also a medium of communication. Traditionally, art referred to anything - doing anything, making anything. The art of making shoes, the art of making carpets, the art of speech, oratory, dress - everything, there was an art.

So there is a utilitarian, material aspect of art. But there's a difference between building and architecture. Building is about making a building, but architecture is also about making a building with some other aspects or objectives, all of which has to do with aesthetics. But most importantly, the art of building, like the art of music or poetry, or any of what we now call the arts, the main aspect of it is communication.

Now, communication is an amazing tool that we use. How do you transmit knowledge from one place to another? What is knowledge? It's not physical. How do you transmit something non-physical across space? That's the function of language, words, speech. What you're doing is you are encoding a fact, information, knowledge, into a physical form. So if I write ABC, there's no knowledge. That's not the knowledge. But these forms we agree will mean, Alif (الف or ا) will mean the sound "A" and then you go on. It becomes symbols. You're using symbols. You convert it into sound symbols, visual symbols, tactile symbols, audio symbols, but it's converted into a symbol.

There are other ways that you could make an image. You can make a metaphor. You can say, "Oh, this fact is, you know, like when you're sitting here, you're feeling comfort." What is comfort? How can you explain to somebody what is comfort? It's the way that you're sitting.

What is evil? What is it? I don't have it. It's like this fellow (points to editor of The Ravi), he's a little devil. Then you say, "Oh, now I know."

So you see what's happening. What you're trying to communicate is the information itself, knowledge itself and it is not physical. It has to be packaged in some physical form, and

then the receiver must be able to also decode it. So they must speak the same language; otherwise, you won't get it.

So architecture is the art of building. It's utilitarian, functional, has to do with forces of nature, stability, all of that. But it is also an art. So what is it trying to communicate? Essentially, that's what I mean when I say how art, including architecture, enables us to access the essential reality, which is metaphysical. The principles of evil and goodness are a metaphysical reality. You can't say it's not real when there is so much evil around. You can't say it doesn't exist when there's so much goodness around. So these are real, but not tangible, not physical.

How do you explain this? That's where art comes in. And there are many forms of art. So it's through art that you can access the metaphysical, that is, go beyond the physical appearance and get to the essence, the reality which is being manifested by this form. The form, this is not the sound "T," but this - that sound is being manifested by this form. So this is what the power of art is: it enables us to access the real, metaphysical reality.

EDITORIAL BOARD

You have stated that the real strength of Mughal architecture lay in its self-reliance, a method you still use in your practical work. Why do you think contemporary architects in Pakistan have lost this confidence in local methods, opting instead for Western-style designs like Italian-looking bungalows?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

You see, again, these are the manifestations which are infinitely varied. So there will be Italian Renaissance, or Persian Safavid, or Ottoman Turkish, or Sindh, Punjab, Baloch - whatever. Every culture will have its own languages, its own dress, its own ways of making, politics. That's the physical form. If you try to understand a phenomenon through the physical appearance, you will come to the conclusion that it's chaos. Everything is - there's no principle. It's when you go beyond the physical and try to understand what is it trying to say. Then you find that, oh, people in India were saying the same thing as what the Chinese were saying, or what the Egyptians were saying, or

what the Red Indians were saying. It's the same thing, only in their context they will use metaphors.

The Quran talks about Paradise with trees of every kind, evergreen. So the Arabs would use palms. The Persians would use cypress in Central Asia. So you go to Southeast Asia, instead of the rose epitomizing beauty, maybe the lotus is. So the manifestations, the symbols can change, but the idea is the same idea.

So what is important about the Mughal or any other culture is the essential worldview and ideas, rather than the forms themselves. The forms are necessary; otherwise, how do you access what was in their hearts? It's through that. But you have to read that, you have to interpret it and understand that, you know, it's not just this form that this printer (points at the printer next to his table) wanted to make. There's something it wanted to communicate. So you have to open the book and read inside and understand the language and then get the message.

EDITORIAL BOARD

An architectural masterpiece is never the work of a single person; it requires the contribution and labor of countless individuals. Because of this mass collaboration, does the final structure embody one uniform meaning, or does it hold the individual meanings of every artisan and worker who contributed to it?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

In any time, in any place, in any culture, each individual, you can say, is a microcosm by herself or himself. That means each of us has our own lived experience, our own narratives, our own memories, and so on.

But there is, in every culture, a dominant worldview. There is a dominant narrative. Today, we might say that the materialist or digital notion is dominant. Whether you are in China or Timbuktu, everyone has access to it, and we become completely immersed in it. So there is a dominant worldview in each culture. There will still be individual differences, and you can see this in any work of art. Even in these traditional paintings, we got Ustad Saif to do this and these doors, and essentially, they followed the same design. But he had an assistant working with him who was a graduate, trained as an artist at the NCA. In

the end, she said: **"استاد جی مینوں کرن دیو"** - and you can see the hand. There's a difference. You can recognize the work of hand, even though it is the same design.

So there is that aspect: whatever you do, there will be an individual's signature. And that's another thing that we lose with mechanization. Everything that we made by hands had that individual quality. There will be a standard matka or a khussa following a certain design, - **"فلانہ استاد کے ہاتھ کی بات ہی اور ہے"** , each individual has its own stamp that you can still recognise. The machine doesn't recognise this. So, again, it takes away the spirit.

EDITORIAL BOARD

You describe the Wazir Khan Mosque as a transformative spatial progression, moving from the commercial bazaar into the courtyard, surrounded by Islamic symbolism like the cypress tree and Surah Al-Fath inscriptions. Can a contemporary architect recreate such a masterpiece without the backing of a sacred civilization, and does this Islamic symbolism still offer a transformative experience for non-Muslims?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

Well, your first point about a culture which has certain beliefs - is that necessary to produce a work like that? As I was just explaining, in architecture, in fact in all the arts, there are these two aspects. There is the physical aspect. Particularly in architecture, the materials matter, the processes matter, the tools that you have: they matter and also the functions matter. A house for a rocket will be different from a house for a mouse.

But the means also matter. Do you have digital 3D printing, or have you got a chisel and hammer? That will make a different product. And then, in the end, that dimension of communication: what is it you want to say through this, in addition to the function and the material limitations?

So all of these are dimensions in every art form. And if you're saying that works like what we still have from, let's say, Mughal times - why can't we do that kind of thing? All of these things come into play.

You have to have that common worldview which produced those buildings. Without that, you can produce a form, but it'll be a fake, and you'll recognize it as a fake.

Someone created this model of Hiran Minar (points to the model on the table). It's laughable. The idea was just to produce a gift which would connect you with something. But the form is not all. The material is extremely important. That establishes certain limits of things. You just can't do certain things if you don't have machines and high-tech and so on.

So all of these things come together. And as I said, and you're saying that there's teamwork involved, particularly in large projects, and does everyone share the same worldview? Yes. In a given society, in a given culture, there is a uniting worldview overall. But then there are differences in each individual. So you need all of those things to come together.

So what we are trying to do in our work is to understand these things first of all, and then to seriously decide what is right and what is wrong, and then try to practice what we believe is right. So forget about everything else, beliefs or whatever. If you just remove industry, machine industry, then how do you build a mosque or a mouse hole or a rocket launcher if you don't have any machines or mechanical products? So the whole object will be transformed.

So all of these are factors that influence the actual product, and why, in a given culture, there is a commonality: because of the dominant worldview and also the dominant resources in terms of technology and so on. How does this impact the observer? Does it matter that I don't share that worldview? Will I have a different experience? There's one aspect where you look, and I know of, for instance, die-hard atheists who've gone to visit the Taj Mahal because, if you're in India, you have to go to the Taj. And this person describes how he stepped in the gateway and he just froze, and tears started flowing.

He couldn't explain it. And this is something I've experienced. If you go to a cathedral - a functioning cathedral, they tell you to speak softly. You respect it and then there's a shift in your attitude. And if you go into a posh hotel with carpets and everything, you'll be careful not to throw stuff. But if you go to a dilapidated alley, you won't think twice before mistreating it, spitting, whatever. So your behavior is in, in - so there is a universal aspect to it.

But, of course, if you can actually read the writings on the wall, then what you get out of that is another, as you know, reading. That's why I wrote that article, "You should read when it's written down - but no one does" and that it's telling us literally.
But even if you couldn't read Persian or Arabic. Even we used to go but wouldn't read, never thought about it because it was written in Persian or Arabic and we couldn't understand. But at that time, when Persian was a lingua franca, everyone, or every literate person, could read and write Persian. That was the official language. So there is a deliberate use of Persian facing the bazaar. But once you cross the threshold, then it's all in Arabic.

So the assumption is that you are a 'Momin', you belong to a particular worldview and you can read Arabic, and then you've been through the mosque and you still haven't got the message. As you're going out, it's written in Persian, if you still haven't got the message, " تمہارے سر پر خاک". So language, what you get out of it, and the symbols culturally - what the cypress represents for one culture will be different for another. So it's a multidimensional response. It's not a simple, single one-to-one correlation.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Your project, the HarSukh Art Residency, dismantles the binary between the academic elite and local craftsmen, serving as a proof of concept for sustainable, carbon-neutral regional architecture. However, because it requires massive land and highly specialized master craftsmen, can this method ever be scaled to solve Pakistan's urban high-density housing crisis?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

Clearly, if you're serious about solving this crisis, that's probably the only way you can do it. Will it ever be possible? No. We just don't want it.

EDITORIAL BOARD

You have worked closely with government agencies on urban planning, yet the prevailing bureaucratic attitude seems to be 'bring down old buildings and set up modern infrastructure,' as seen with the Orange Line Train, the destruction at Nasir Bagh, and the acquisition of the Neela Gumbad Evacuee Trust building. Do you believe these

government projects genuinely benefit the public, or are they unjustifiably destroying and altering our cultural heritage?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

I see. The worldview that we were talking about. So, this government, like all governments all over the world. I don't think only Bhutan is probably one exception, where the national goal is not more progress and development. The national goal is more happiness and contentment. The rest of the whole world, every five-year plan, budget, policies, campaigns, elections, slogans - all are about getting more. That is success.

Even now, with the Gulf War and all of that, the whole concern is that the lifestyle will crash, values will go down, it will deflate. The whole concern is, how will I get it back? Back to 3-7 %, I'll give you more. So that's everywhere, and including our governments, all of them. Their only concern is how they can personally get more, and to justify that, to have a nice story and tell you, "I'm doing this for your own benefit, and you will get more."

So whether it's RUDA or the Orange Train or all of these, or heritage conservation: the reason why this government has now suddenly started taking a lot of attention to heritage, the argument is that this will generate income. This will bring in more tourists, so we'll earn more dollars.

But I keep my position: that's not why we need to preserve this. We need it. Well, the tourists can enjoy it. That's fine. If they can't, that's none of our concern. This is our need. We need this for our survival because we are killing ourselves. And the only way to stop destroying ourselves is to stop thinking in this suicidal mindset.

What other mindset? Well, just look at the pre-modern worldview. What was it? And these monuments are telling you. I mean, every one of these monuments, this Chauburji, which the Orange Train passes in front of, what's the problem with that? Look at what's written above it. Above the entrance gate, it says:

"This garden, in the pattern of the garden of Paradise, has been founded..."

[*The second line has been effaced*]

"The garden has been bestowed on Mian Bai,

By the bounty of Sahib-e-Zebinda Begum-e-Dauran."

Have you ever thought about who Mian Bai was? Who was this princess? It is telling you that the most powerful lady in the world took up this project and appointed her servant, a woman, as the project director. When the project was finished, she thought she'd visit the garden.

On the way, in the bazaar, a voice reached her ears: "The princess is going to see Mian Bai's garden." That affected her so deeply that, when she reached there and Mian Bai came out to greet her, she stood there on the spot, and right there and then. She gifted that whole garden to Mian Bai. We should ask ourselves: what is this monument telling us? It's telling us something about values. It's telling us something about purpose in life. There is so much more. You go further, to Buddhu's tomb, in front of UET. Who was Buddhu? Buddhu was the son of Sidhu. Who was he? A potter. They had a kiln. This was supposed to be a very exploitative society, so how did a potter manage to build such a royal tomb? It's telling you something. And in front of it, you see Dai Anga's tomb. Dai Anga was a wet nurse - and this is a Mughal garden?

This was supposed to be a very oppressive society. There was a great deal of class exploitation. There was a great deal of gender disparity. What are we looking at here? Please, open your eyes. Look at what the reality was. This is the lesson we need. This is what we've forgotten. That is why we are killing ourselves. So the importance of these monuments is for us, for our existence, for our survival. To hell with the tourist. If they come, that's very good. If they don't come, what difference does it make to us?

EDITORIAL BOARD

In Lahore, considered a cultural 'palimpsest,' current restoration projects like the tombs of Dai Anga and Ali Mardan Khan, focus heavily on preserving Islamic heritage. Meanwhile, just meters away from the beautifully restored tomb of Qutb al-Din Aibak, a Hindu Mandir sits in a devastating state of decay. As an architect, do you observe a deliberate pattern or inclination toward conserving only Islamic heritage, while neglecting the Sikh and Hindu architecture that also makes up the city?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

This is a majority-Muslim culture, a Muslim society. Most Lahoris, Pakistanis identify themselves with the religion of Islam. So this is a fact of life, and what can you say about that? That's who we are. But if you're saying, what about the other subcultures? Well, if we're Muslims, as Muslims we are required, as an article of faith, to respect and acknowledge all faiths. And that's not just religious faith, whether it's Buddhist or Sikh or Hindu or Christian or Muslim. At least Muslims, we have to recognize and respect all the other faiths. That is an article of faith. There should be no doubt about it. So we should be respectful, and with justice and equity and fairness.

There has been variation. Sometimes the Islamic *Jazbah* becomes - now there is also a little more awareness that there are other cultures as well. Particularly, once again, tourists can come here as well, and you can do something for the Sikhs too. They'll come from Canada, and you'll earn money. But also, people recognize that for whatever reason. Even recently, there was a very big, important meeting about renaming places and streets to their original names. And it was amazing. Everyone unanimously supported that.
So there is a change, but these are things – you never know from which way the wind blows.

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EDITORIAL BOARD

At a recent panel discussion at GCU, Kamran Lashari exhorted the audience to visit Androon Lahore and immerse themselves in the experience. However, can the younger generation truly experience their culture if they are viewing it entirely through a lens? What is your opinion on social media's role in the commodification of our cultural heritage, and will young people first have to put their cameras down to properly understand it?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

It's a double-edged sword, isn't it? I mean, on the one hand, we get awareness through videos and things like that, things which it was previously impossible for us to see. We can now literally experience it, and so that is an aspect which is a plus, you might say.
But then there is a very dangerous other aspect: you get so caught up in this that, then that itself becomes reality for you. The actual bricks and mortar, you're not interested. It's just how it looks. The look and feel, the experience.

There's a trend or a movement called phenomenology in architecture, where the whole point is the feel of the space. How does it look and feel? So that's the danger: that you get caught up into this imaginary world and start believing that that is the reality. Very dangerous.

But this is what this is doing to us all over the world. When we went for Hajj as well, I was shocked. People had their phones out, taking selfies of themselves. But this is what it can do.

EDITORIAL BOARD

In *Architecture in Pakistan*, you were highly critical of Edward Durell Stone's WAPDA House, pointing out functional flaws like its heat-trapping dome and ineffective perforated canopy. Yet, the building was widely celebrated simply because of its imperial, Western influence. Do you believe that this imperial influence and bias toward Western aesthetics still persists in the architectural circuit of Pakistan today?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

Oh yes, very strong. It takes on different inflections, but that view is so easily influenced because now we know - lately, we all want to be up to date. Yeah, it sets your whole mindset.

EDITORIAL BOARD

John Lockwood Kipling once called the Wazir Khan Mosque a 'school of design,' praising its true, buon fresco painting, a traditional art form that has since vanished due to a lack of demand. If there is little to no demand for traditional methods, how much can we blame local artisans for abandoning them? Are they simply helpless against the giant, mass-production Western methods that make traditional work seem too time-consuming and costly?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

No, they just cannot blame the craftsman, the artisan, for any of this. These are forms of cultural expression that are much larger than just this city or this person. I mean, these are happening globally. So, the loss of traditional values, materials, processes, etc., it's all part of a global move to self-destruction.

EDITORIAL BOARD

In your youth, you were inclined toward Marxism and actively involved in politics, even facing arrest during the Ayub and Bhutto eras. However, Marxism is entirely at odds with your current traditional worldview, which values God, family, and the immaterial over materialism. How exactly did your worldview change? Was it a realization that Marxism isn't practically viable in Pakistan, or a deeper ideological shift?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

To begin with, it was a question of communication. I had a certain understanding of what modernism is about, and I think it was profound and deep because I'd been educated in the heart of modernist culture and so on. And I felt that modernism was being misunderstood as a matter of style, and I was trying to say that it is a matter of attitude, philosophy, approach, rationality, functionalism, all these things.

So what was worrying me was, why am I not getting that message across? That started this process with the realization that my own education had left me with no understanding of my own history, culture, traditions. So that sense of ignorance really started a process of re-education. And from the word go, the first thing that I looked at, the book, I immediately realized that the difference was not about this form or that style. The difference was precisely what I've been saying: the worldview. And at the same time, realizing that there is a difference between a modernist worldview and a traditional worldview and traditional cultures all over the world.

Of course, every culture has its expressions which are different, but the underlying principles are universal. So that must be true. And recognizing at the same time that the philosophical foundations of modernity are flawed. So that was how I started this shift in interest and, as I learned more, applied it to my work. But then, in the mid-1990s, I became more and more aware, as everywhere people became more aware of the ecological crisis, and then I could see that these things were connected.

The ecological crisis was precisely the product of the modernist worldview. So that has added the other dimension to this. And so, with both of these aspects, they form part of what I do.

EDITORIAL BOARD

You noted a striking contradiction in Islamabad's two most prominent buildings. The National Assembly accepted an overtly Islamic design by Edward Durell Stone while rejecting modernist proposals, but the Faisal Mosque deliberately removed traditional elements in favor of a modern aesthetic. Looking at modern architecture, like the cafes in Androon Lahore with overtly Mughal aesthetics versus the minimalist cafes in the center, are we still struggling with these confused binaries between tradition and modernity?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

We are very much struggling with these issues, which is what is reflected in these examples: the selection of the architects, the design, Islamabad's Faisal Mosque, and what you see today in the streets and so on. Yeah, it does reflect this confusion and struggle. On the one hand, we feel drawn towards our heritage and tradition, but it's really not a well-reasoned position. It's emotional. And then, equally, on other days, we are drawn towards modern, postmodern, futuristic ideas, but at both ends, it's not really a clearly thought-out position. It's really sentimental, romantic, emotional and what looks good today, tomorrow might not. So it's very shallow, but it's true. That's what our culture is.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Indian poet K.S. Narayanaswamy wrote that prominent historical events and waves of thought can make a man 'disillusioned at one time and rebellious at another.' Having lived a challenging life, from your Western modernist training in London to your eventual rebellion against it, what specific historical event or wave of thought do you feel was most truly disillusioning for you, and why?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

No, I think it's been a series, a whole life of changing realities, thoughts, learning, reconsidering one's position, observing what's going on. Yeah, you can't not be affected by things that are happening. It's a continuous process. That's part of life.

EDITORIAL BOARD

So, no specific moment that jolted you?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

Except, as I said, there was a moment where - not a particular event, but a growing feeling that there's something that I am not educated about, that I need to re-educate myself. And then these are realizations that come slowly. But yeah, I think that's been part of my life.

EDITORIAL BOARD

The traditionalist school of thought you champion is profound, yet often runs counter to the prevailing global narrative. Do you see this worldview expanding in the future? With organizations like Hast-o-Neest taking shape, do you see your contemporaries and younger generations successfully carrying your work and philosophy forward into the future?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

Well, on the one hand, I've noticed in the last decade a very big difference between the kind of feedback that I get. This is obviously due, in large part, to YouTube and all these social media platforms. Our work is now known, and is getting known, very fast all over the world. So that's a fact.

There are also, all over the world, very small niche groups of thinking people who are questioning modernism and are looking at tradition as an alternative. This is a trend, a movement that I'm noticing emerging all over the world. It's good, but I have no false hopes that this is going to replace anything. It's simply good that it's happening. I think it's thoughtful people who are questioning things, people who are beginning to realise what is happening. But on the other side, this is so dominant, so powerful that they manipulate everything to serve their own agenda. Even the interest in tradition gets absorbed into the system as a form of green business. So it's green products, green buildings and everything has a green label on it. But at least some people are thinking. People do question. But this monster is going to sweep everything.

EDITORIAL BOARD

As an educator who has interacted with countless architecture students over the decades, what is your ultimate advice for the younger generation if they wish to bring about the change you advocate? Should they pursue a Western education to fully understand it

before actively reverting to traditionalism, or should they learn traditionalism from the very beginning, even at the risk of becoming isolated?

KAMIL KHAN MUMTAZ

Again, it's these kinds of formulations. We have to be careful about this. There's no shortcut formula. This has to be a realisation that comes from within each individual, each society, and the world. As I said, given what I can see of the larger picture, I don't see this curve even bending slightly, let alone coming back. It's not possible. But that doesn't mean we give up. So what I always say is: what can we do?

One is to discern between right and wrong. Because now the dominant paradigm, postmodernism, says there is no right or wrong. Discern between right and wrong, and then do what you believe is right. Again, it's not going to change the world, but that's not the reason why you do it. Do what is right because it's the right thing to do. That's what I would say. There is no need to worry about what you cannot control. Focus on what is in your purview and power. Learn to differentiate between vice and virtue. But you must begin by making that distinction.

HUMOROUS ESSAYS

- Friend of My Mind
- On Girls' Hostel
- Love, Last Seen, and Other National Emergencies
- It Was the Best of Times, It Was the Worst of Times...

Friend of My Mind

Younis Azeem

[This essay is a craft talk, and was read out at the LUMS Young Writers Workshop on the 10th of June, 2026, in Lahore. It appears here in *The Ravi* with a few minor changes.]

* * *

I'm not sure if I even had a semblance of what I wanted to do while I was still an undergrad at LUMS. I switched majors three times, and I thought that when (and if) I graduated I'd just find *any* job and vibe there till greatness found me or I died.

I was well on track for this till that last spring semester in 2018 when I stumbled into Bilal Tanweer's 300 Level Kafka course. Before I took this course, I had some inkling I could write, and I did enjoy reading. In fact, I was mad about reading and I was all up in the books till the 9th grade which as we all know is that universal mysterious year that takes all childhood readers in its embrace and detonates.

Anyways, I found myself in this course and *my God*. Mind blowing. So good that even Kafka would have learned something from it. I only had one other course that last sem, Literature of Conflict, which was, also in its own regard, quite engaging. Neither of these two courses were strictly about writing but I wanted to use them to write something creative before I graduated, and both BT and the other Prof allowed me to submit a creative prose piece for my final. That writing experience was a joy like no other, and so much more fulfilling than what I could possibly have ever imagined.

For that Lit of Conflict class, I wrote a short story called Kutta—a piece about the Partition from the point of view of a dog. I know, right? Hold the applause. But what I took a lot more pride in was what I submitted for the Kafka class, a series of 10 autofiction vignettes about what it meant to be an early 20 something "launda" growing up in Pakistan. A piece that synthesised everything I had observed and thought about over the last couple of years. A piece that well and truly came from the heart. BT *really*

liked that submission, so much so he kept a printout of it in his office, gave me a cool B+, and then just like that I graduated.

I was now back on track for my original life, but as I now applied to a whole host of random jobs, everything from education to HR to accounting, I felt something had broken. I felt uneasy about all the JDs I came across, and I showed up to all the interviews clearly disinterested and not there. What I really wanted to do was chase that writing high again, and two months post-graduation, at 6:14 AM on the morning of the 26th of July, 2018, I dropped BT an email. Here's the receipt:

> Dear Sir:
> My apologies for sending this email while I know you are still vacationing, but I still thought that perhaps I ought to send this email lest someone else emails regarding the same proposition before me (Unlikely, but I'm sending this email from Pakistan and apparently anything can happen here). I remain as confused as I was three months earlier as to what career path to choose (and the meaning of life) but I genuinely feel that I would like to perhaps give writing the fair shot that I think it deserves.
>
> The issue here of course is that while I believe I may have potential, at the moment I am at best mediocre and to that end I hope that you would be willing to allow me to become a Teaching Assistant for your course "Mechanics of Fiction" which would allow me to interact with fiction in a rigorous academic environment both developing my own ability and allowing me to understand if this is what I intend to eventually do. I have even found a job in Lahore so I may have the funds to shift outside LUMS for this end, and I have informed them that I may need two half days during the week (if this comes through) and they have agreed to this proposition. (It's an NGO if you're wondering why on earth any profit maximizing company would agree to a new employee pitching this).
>
> Of course none of this means that you agree with whatever I have written and allow me the position, but I do request you to entertain an interview with me once you return, and even if you don't think I am up for the task,

I'd love the chance to interact, discuss life and you know like just chill with you again. I hope to hear from you soon.

Your student,
Younis Azeem

Three hours later, BT replied.

Dear Azeem,
Are you in Lahore? I would like you to participate in an intensive workshop starting next week. You will have to read three books, be available from August 6-10, 9-5 pm. If you need accommodation, we can try for that too. And TA-ship, of course. But I would like you to be in the workshop to prep you for the work. Let me know what you think.
Bilal Tanweer
Assistant Professor
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Lahore University of Management Sciences

He also for some reason signed off with a Derrida quote: "Law is not justice [although] it is just that there be law."

Bars.

The week after this exchange I found myself walking into something I had little to no idea about, the LUMS Young Writers Workshop. You know someone else would have interpreted this invite as thinking they were so beyond the selection process, and so good that they were here on a personal invite from the Professor, but I walked in feeling like a nepo baby, some *parchi.* I couldn't shake off the bizarre feeling that BT wanted me here mostly cause 22-year-old me was kinda fun to have around, and that rare breed in a writing classroom; just some regular dude. I was a personality hire, a diversity intake, back at LUMS not because of the strength of my prose but because I was not like the other girls.

* * *

One of these other girls who had fair and square earned their position in this workshop was Mahrukh Aamir.

I saw her in the workshop and immediately felt that was someone I would *never* get along with. She sat there skinny, stoic, rich looking, with perfect posture and the strongest resting b***h face you've ever seen in your life. Even before she spoke you could tell she'd probably read everything ever published in English and then some. A sort of a literary Victoria Beckham.

I'm not entirely sure how we got to talking but I suspect it was because of Rabia Saeed, a mutual friend of ours who just so happened to also be the Teaching Assistant for the workshop.

In the space of a day, I went from thinking this Mahrukh girl is gonna be trouble and *ignore, ignore, ignore,* to where she was the entire time while we were both still undergrads at LUMS. At that point the only book I had read in recent memory (which was not assigned in a course) was The Catcher in the Rye. That meant that de facto Salinger was my favourite author, and it turned out he was hers too. We obsessed over him together and she told me I *must* read the rest of his work, particularly Franny and Zooey.

It became apparent that I was right. Mahrukh had read everything *ever*. In addition to talking about books I'd never heard of, Rabia Saeed and her also talked about this thing called an MFA program, about teaching writing one day as a life. I think there, perhaps,the gears moved for the first time in my head towards a career which sounded fulfilling.

What gravitated me the most towards Mahrukh—and there's no way to say this without sounding like a narcissist—was the way she reacted to what I wrote for the short writing exercises BT made us write and read aloud to our workshop. She had the highest of praises. She started conversations around the subtle themes she'd read into, about the piece's originality, about the art of masculine writing, and just generally about *the voice of Younis*. I sat there, listening, nodding along, thinking *behn yeh wohi hai na jo main nay likha hai?* It was all the more absurd because Mahrukh was easily the strongest writer in that cohort so there was hard won credibility backing up whatever she said that week.

I'm unsure at what point or how it happened, but somewhere during the middle of that week Mahrukh got her hands on my Kafka submission and before I knew it, she had posted not one, not two, but all ten vignettes on her Instagram. This is 2018 by the way. These were *ten separate posts* on her feed—screaming admiration of another into the void—etched forever into the undying fabric of the internet. Nothing resembling the noncommittal nonchalant approval of the now 24-hour disappearing IG stories.

I was heady when I saw the posts on my phone. Here was something which had never happened before nor which I had imagined could happen. Mahrukh had taken the work *seriously*. She didn't think it was just funny or on trend or quirky or not like the other girls. She thought it was serious. She believed in the literary merit of the work and the way I thought around things.

This was the first time I had been taken seriously, quite possibly in my life. Over the years starting as early as that 9th grade when I gave up on books, I had made a reputation as a clown and despite year after year of good grades and first positions, that reputation preceded me. The hardest thing about being a comic is convincing people it's just *one* part of your personality and there is possibly more beneath the gags and punchlines.

That's why the most critically acclaimed comedians—regardless of whether you like them or not—have always been an interesting half breed. A sort of impossible combination of comic and sage existing in one person in quantum super position. The George Carlins, Dave Chappelles, Doug Stanhopes, and on a good day, even the Jim Jefferies of the world. Most comedians though are actually one-dimensional clowns. (I'm looking at you here Kevin Hart). And there's nothing wrong with that. In fact, I'd be happy to die a clown, but I do know I'd go out wishing at least someone somewhere thought I could be more than that.

In August of 2018, Mahrukh Aamir made me believe I could cross over. And I could stop with the self-deprecating jokes, and the Laissez-faire attitude, and write intentionally. Of course, some months prior to this BT had also appreciated my work but the difference between Mahrukh and BT was that I believed Mahrukh. There was no need for her to do all this. She could just straight up hate my pieces and kinda move on with

the rest of the summer and her life. It'd be a first-rate psycho move if BT did that to a recent struggling former student.

I left LUMS after that week, woozy and revitalised. If Mahrukh could find merit in my work, then of course, anyone else could too. I threw myself into the TA-ship work with BT and began work at this strange tax evasion NGO to fund living in Lahore as I tried to figure it all out. This NGO, incidentally, was so morally bankrupt it laid off all employees one year into my working there and forced us to sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement before handing us our last pay checks. Sidebar: The company was named United We Reach. F**k you guys, I teach at LUMS, Sector U, DHA, Lahore. Come get me.

We had stayed in touch and decided to commit to the single most pretentious medium of communication viable. We would write letters to each other and send them over Pakistan Post twice a month. For the entire year I was at this NGO, one of the great joys of my life was coming home and stepping on a letter the postman had slipped through the door. Mahrukh wrote to me from Pindi about life and death, about psychology and philosophy, about books and writing, and I wrote back with intensity responding to every idea of hers—never self-censoring or being conscious of coming across as insufferable, which I of course, I was.

We wrote pages and pages of handwritten notes that year, six or seven almost per letter. Mahrukh also mailed a book in: Franny and Zooey. It was one of the few books I read all of that year. I wonder now when was the last time I stopped the Careem at that post office in Gulberg where I would drop the letters for Mahrukh on my way to work? Who can be sure of when anything comes to an end? What I do know is that by the time my job ended, so had our letters and by the end of 2019, Mahrukh was in Boise starting year one of her MFA.

It was Mahrukh and Rabia (who was by this point in year two of her own MFA) who convinced me I could also get one. This by the way is a great analogue for why representation is a real thing to rally for. You'd never believe what people can do if they see even one person kind of like them blazing the trail away. This is why so many Pakistani men smoke cigarettes and play snooker all day because Jinnah showed us that yes, boys, *yes you can*.

And then in 2021 it happened. The MFA happened. Fulbright happened. New York happened. And for a little over two years, I was there in Manhattan and Brooklyn writing on the regular, surrounded by poets and essayists and novelists and comics and supervisors and books and the best pizza in the world.
And then just like that one day in the February of 2023, it was over, and I was back in Lahore faced with the big questions that come with a writing life that only can really be planned out perhaps till the end of a grad program.

Who is to sustain the writer after the crutch of the MFA, the LUMS Young Writers Workshop, the undergrad courses? What will save him after the disappearance into the ether of the deadlines and the professors and the networks and the readings and even the bookstores that stack things you'd actually wanna read? Who was going to help me workshop my pieces, be a first reader, a second reader, draft with me, toil with me, scream with me into the damning abyss that is this career choice.

The answer, of course, was Mahrukh Aamir—back herself from her MFA—ready to read whatever I threw at her, unflinching in her critique of all the work I'd print out and send over to her house now in Lahore.
This is the critique I prized and continue to prize over any other because here was a person who believed I could always do better.

So do better, Younis. Quit writing these terrible one-dimensional manic pixie dream girls, Younis. Quit with these terrible word choices, Younis, you're clearly just Googling synonyms of words. Quit overthinking the consequences of non-fiction writing, Younis—if you're in it now, you've got to see it through. Quit with this cringe dialogue, Younis. Quit with the random French phrases, Younis. Quit with this amount of swearing, Younis. Quit with this lack of transformation, Younis. Print this out and read it aloud to yourself and do you see what I'm saying now Younis? Cut this out, Younis. Cut that out, Younis. In fact, trash this altogether and rewrite it again.
When I go over Mahrukh's notes, my essay all choked up in red and hear the five podcast length voice notes she's sent along with it, something clicks. Well, she's right, she always is.

And when I make her edits and send back draft two, she marks it up again. And then she does it a third time and a fourth and a fifth and on and on till somehow, she has held my hand and seen me through eight drafts and we both stare at this new thing printed in front of us. A product of something greater than two MFAs and two creative writing Profs and all of the years of reading and writing and teaching between us. Something delivered and alive because of that which transcends all degrees and workshops, the good old Disney magic of friendship.

* * *

Over the last three years, Mahrukh and I have made it a point to meet at least once a month. We spend our entire time talking about books and literature and what it means to be a person of our time. We rarely ever step out of my office. We rarely involve other friends. We've almost never gone out for food or to the mall or the cinema and are sustained just by conversation. There are times when Mahrukh is speaking and I find myself reaching for a pen and paper to make notes; this is a friendship of ideas, a camaraderie of the mind, shaped by the same literary spirit that brought together and thus created Fitzgerald and Hemmingway, Morrison and Baldwin, Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock, 50 cent and Eminem, and of course, Talha Anjum and Talhah Yunus.

I've given three craft lectures over three years at the LUMS Young Writers Workshop where I've talked about any number of things that can improve your writing, but I think the far simpler thing has been here all along. Like in life, it helps enormously to have another person. Your strengths are validated, you are reassured of your skill, you're called out on your BS and inch by inch you become better than you ever could have become alone. It's also, I think, important to understand that this glamorous solitary writer's life is cool for around 48 hours after which it's distinctly depressing, isolating and just all around sad. Hell, even working for United We Reach is better than that as a life.
If the entire point of writing is to make someone somewhere feel less alone, please, as Camus would have said, do poetic justice and first experience that yourself. When the airplane crashes and the oxygen masks come down, you've got to put your own on before helping someone with theirs.

That's an alright ending.

Mahrukh would want me to end here (or like three pages before). But since this is the first piece in a long long while, I've written without her, here's that really cringe closing, that she would have cut out in a heartbeat.

Maybe, perhaps, I'd like to believe at least,
the real writing is the friends you make along the way.

The writer is an essayist, memoirist and cultural critic from Islamabad. He is a Fulbright scholar, and is currently faculty in the English Department at LUMS. He is also a yearly mentor at the LUMS Young Writers Workshop where he teaches the workshop, Writing Funny. His essays have appeared in Evergreen Review, JAKE, and elsewhere. His editor and long-term writing collaborator is the writer, Mahrukh Aamir.

On Girls' Hostel

Mohattar Bashir Mughal

To be eighteen and to pack one's entire earthly existence into a solitary suitcase and live in a new place and a new world is a terrifying experience.

The wounded sometimes develop associations with the crimson hue of their aggressor's swords. Modern psychiatry calls this Stockholm syndrome. It is an established law of nature that no one hates the hostel more passionately than the freshman who is separated from her rightful parents, and no one weeps for it more hysterically than the graduate who is about to be returned to her rightful parents.

Before examining the feminine quarters, scientific honesty compels me to cast an eye upon the Boys' Hostel. The boys' hostel is situated directly opposite the college gates, which at first glance appears discriminatory until one examines the matter more deeply. Boys, as is well known, cannot be expected to travel long distances before lectures. The male undergraduate body is an extremely fragile and sentient piece of flesh. Such excessive physical exertion would inevitably ruin the structural integrity of his hairstyle, disturb the digestion of his morning tea, and render him temporarily impotent toward campus politics. If forced to walk a full kilometre, he would arrive at the lecture hall intellectually paralysed, requiring immediate hospitalisation and a steady diet of electrolytes.

The founding fathers of our institution, therefore, directed their entire store of benevolence toward the Girls' Hostel. In an age when lesser institutions foolishly place hostels near campuses, our visionaries demonstrated courage. They understood that education is incomplete unless a girl must first survive a daily expedition through traffic that appears to have been organised by enemies of human civilisation. The female student benefits morally from hardship. Every morning she crosses Zamzamah Chowk which is an intersection designed, perhaps, by military strategists to test civilian reflexes. This hardship, however, is nothing compared to the one she is destined to face after marriage. The young lady is expected to navigate her way through twelve erratic motorcycles, two smoke-belching buses, a donkey cart, and — most terrifying of all — a gentleman reversing a car entirely by his divinely ordained instinct. By the time the

hostel resident reaches class, she has already confronted mortality three times and therefore attends the lecture with unusual seriousness.

Inside the hostel, the mess hall is the perfect manifestation of ideological and architectural minimalism. Its serving window is designed with such spiritual restraint that only eight human fingers may pass through at one time. The ninth and tenth fingers, presumably, represent the deadly sin of gluttony. From this sacred lacuna emerges food served upon metallic plates perhaps borrowed from the inmates of the nearby Jail Road prison.

Yet one must admire the culinary department's creativity. Very few mortals can take the humble potato and transform it into seven entirely different emotional experiences. On Monday, the potato appears before us with respectable piety, cubed in a thin gravy. On Tuesday, it returns in the secular disguise of a cutlet. Wednesday introduces the potatoe inside the lentils, a gesture intended to promote interfaith harmony. Thursday's potato and eggs are so diabolical in texture that one begins to question the very laws of solid matter. On Friday, the week's accumulated remnants evolve into a substance resembling haleem through a biological process known only to the chef and the Almighty. By Saturday and Sunday, the potato has transcended the vegetable kingdom entirely; it has become our bosom friend, our solitary confidant, our air, and our water.

Naturally, food delivery is permitted. The hostel administration believes in freedom, modernity, and constitutional rights — till 11:30 p.m. At eleven-thirty and one nanosecond, the great iron gates close like that of a medieval fortress. A starving student may stand outside, weeping into her purse, her stomach crying out to the heavens, but the decree is absolute. The pearly gates of Paradise may swing open for a repentant sinner, but this gate shall remain closed until the sleeping guard feels the first stirrings of his morning appetite and heads toward the mess hall for breakfast.

Institutions survive through consistency. The university itself maintains admirable discipline. Bollywood songs are banned on campus. Fizzy drinks, too, are frowned upon, perhaps because of their revolutionary bubbles. Yet the hostel, in moments of breathtaking rebellion, occasionally permits both. Once every three months, the authorities decree that the student body must be entertained. Bollywood music blasts through the speakers in Reading Street with the intensity of a political uprising. Girls emerge from their rooms as though summoned by ancient tribal drums. Sleep schedules

collapse. Humanity rediscovers the primitive joy of rhythm. It is a moment of profound liveliness.

Then, precisely at the stroke of midnight, a handful of delicate residents complain that the noise has offended their sensitive nerves.

Still, for those brief moments, the hostel becomes a livable society.

The hostel also contains permanent archetypes. There is always a girl sitting in the mess hall. No one remembers her enrolment, nor does anyone know her department. Come morning, evening, examination week, or Eid holidays, she sits there with a supernatural stillness.
Some argue that she is a phantom from the British Raj, left behind to observe the rise and fall of student generations.

There is always another girl occupying the communal sink area, performing acts of hygiene so intimate and acrobatic that ordinary citizens lose the will to wash their faces. At any given hour, she may be scrubbing the underside of her feet in the sink with the concentration of a restoration artist repairing Renaissance paintings.

Lastly, there is the Long-Distance Romantic on the staircase. She sits beside the fire extinguisher, engaged in a three-hour telephone call, speaking at a frequency lower than human hearing, yet somehow audible across four floors. Entire empires fall, hearts break, and future wedding venues are negotiated within that faint, agonizing whisper.

Sometimes at 1 a.m., agonized by thirst, one leaves the room carrying an empty bottle and the courage of one's ancestors. The corridor is dark except for frail, flickering tube lights. Room coolers leak constantly, creating floors so slippery that they appear personally offended by human locomotion. Pipes coil along the walls like sleeping cobras.

And then, midway through the gloom, one sees her.

Girl or ghost? Silhouette or a spectre? A solitary girl illuminated only by the pale, ghoulish glow of a refrigerator light prancing slowly towards you from the far end of the corridor.

At this horrific spectacle, the sensible student decides that dehydration is, after all, a highly dignified lifestyle choice. One turns and retreats at an athletic sprint, knowing

that to die of thirst in one's bed, or by slipping on the wet floor and fracturing one's cranium in the dark, is far more dignified a death than being engulfed by this spectre.

My days in the hostel are now numbered, but I know that years later I shall remember this place with remarkable affection. Not because it was comfortable. Comfort is forgettable. But suffering shared collectively acquires the grand nobility of a melancholic nostalgia.

The author is a recent graduate of the English Department (2022-2026). Her works have been published in The Kashmir Poetics, Jarida Today, The Gazette, and elsewhere.

Love, Last Seen & Other National Emergencies

Aelia Bukhari

In our part of the world, relationships are not relationships. They are full-time government jobs without a salary, pension, or leave. You apply with hope, get selected with excitement, and immediately start questioning your life choices. The journey from *"hello"* to *"why are you ignoring me?"* happens faster than a Lahore bus changing lanes without an indicator.

The desi relationship often begins with something innocent, like a follow request. In the old days, it was a wrong-number SMS saying, *"Hi, who is this?"* Now, it is Instagram stalking so advanced that even the CIA would hire our aunties for surveillance training. Within three minutes of a follow-back, you are emotionally committed, spiritually invested, and mentally confused.

Then comes the official stage: *"talking."* This is a magical limbo where two people are basically in a relationship but deny it with the confidence of a politician during election season. If anyone asks, the answer is, *"We're just friends."* Of course, these are the same "friends" who reply to each other within 0.2 seconds but still say, *"Busy tha yaar,"* as if they are running NASA.

In desi culture, relationships are rarely between two people. They are between two families, three aunties, and one suspicious neighbour who always knows more than Google. Privacy is a myth. Even your relationship status gets updated in real life before Facebook has finished loading.

Now let us talk about communication. Modern love is measured in blue ticks and last-seen statuses. If someone is online but does not reply, World War III begins internally. Logic disappears, and an emotional Netflix series starts playing in the brain. Suddenly, "Why are they online but not replying?" becomes a question requiring the analytical skills of someone decoding ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Ghosting is another imported concept that we have mastered with distinctly desi creativity. In the West, it means silent disappearance. In our version, it means silent

disappearance plus active Instagram story viewing. You are ignored but still watched, which is basically emotional torture with an internet connection.

Then comes the biggest villain: overthinking. In desi relationships, overthinking is not a habit; it is a profession. A single "okay" can generate a twelve-hour mental documentary titled *Where Did We Go Wrong?*, complete with the background music of sad Bollywood songs and unnecessary flashbacks to that one time they replied late in 2019.

Family interference deserves a separate Oscar category. Every desi relationship has a hidden audience. Mothers are FBI agents, fathers are silent judges, and cousins are freelance journalists reporting breaking news such as, *"I saw them talking in the corridor."* Even when absolutely nothing is happening, everyone behaves as if Netflix has just released a new scandal series. Marriage discussions often begin before the relationship has even figured itself out. One conversation, and suddenly the rishta committees activate faster than Wi-Fi connects in a government office. Love becomes secondary; compatibility charts, salary graphs, family backgrounds, and cooking skills become the main characters.

Let us not forget the most powerful force of all: *"log kya kahenge?"* This invisible committee controls more relationships than actual love does. People do not always break up because they want to; sometimes they break up because *"log"* might feel uncomfortable. *"Log"* is basically the unofficial third partner in every desi relationship—and, unfortunately, one nobody can block.

Social media has added entirely new layers of confusion. Posting a story can become a political statement. One selfie with someone else, and the relationship status is silently downgraded to *"complicated, under investigation."* Even emojis now carry emotional and, apparently, legal weight. One heart emoji can trigger an entire investigation committee.

The funniest part is how everyone pretends to be modern while following centuries-old emotional traditions. We say, *"We're different,"* but still wait for permission from destiny, family, and sometimes even astrology apps that predict love based on star positions that have clearly never met a chemistry textbook.

Breakups are rarely endings. They are season finales with guaranteed rumors of another season. Block today, unblock tomorrow, then accidentally like a photo from 2017, and

suddenly the emotional reboot begins. Healing becomes less about moving on and more about stalking with dignity.

Relationships even come with their own unspoken syllabus. There is a course called Reply Timing Mathematics, where a five-minute delay equals emotional betrayal and a two-hour delay equals character assassination.

Another subject is Digital Body Language, where typing dots mean hope, and disappearing typing dots mean doom.

Then there is the legendary phase of *"seen without reply,"* which is treated like a national emergency. Friends are called, screenshots are circulated, and everyone becomes a relationship expert with a PhD in Assumption Studies. Nobody asks directly because direct communication is apparently considered too Western and emotionally dangerous.

Voice notes deserve special mention. A simple *"Kya kar rahe ho?"* can turn into a seven-minute monologue—half emotional, half documentary, and entirely unnecessary. The receiver listens at 1.5x speed while pretending to understand every emotional nuance, which is yet another hidden skill in modern desi love.

And still, after all this chaos, people insist that love is simple. It is not simple. It is simply familiar chaos.

We recognize it the way we recognize traffic jams, load-shedding, and unexpected visits from relatives. We complain, we laugh, we survive, and then we repeat the same cycle with new hope and a slightly better internet connection.

At the end of the day, perhaps desi relationships are not broken; they are simply over-updated versions of older emotional software that never came with proper installation instructions. Even then, nobody uninstalls love.

Because desi hearts prefer chaos over silence, drama over peace, and, somehow, hope over logic—always.

It was the Best of Times, It Was the Worst of Times

Naoroz Aleem

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times", the opening line from Charles Dickens's famous novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* might be the safest way to start this piece, with a subtle clarification that the subject under discussion is not the revolutionary France but rather a *Darsgah* that has been holding its ground for the past 162 years: Government College University Lahore. *Darsgah* (educational institution) might not be the right term, perhaps, for a true devotee of the eminent writer Ashfaq Ahmad, who would go to great lengths to claim it as a *Dargah* (sacred space), omitting the sizzling "s". In contemporary times, however, this place has become a site of dichotomy shaped around Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's slogan of *"Roti, Kapra aur Makaan"*.

They say change starts from within, and it's quite true as the first manifestation of this dichotomy, an emerging tension between classism and communism over food, was something that I witnessed within my very own Department of English Literature. One might describe the anecdote as an embodiment of *"Mas'ala sara roti da"*, a phrase capturing the negotiation over the matter of food, with much emphasis on the correct pronunciation of the word "*Mas'ala"*. (Tell me you love Zia Mohyeddin without telling me you love Zia Mohyeddin). It was a windy evening with flashes of thunder in the sky. I was quite shocked, not by the weather of course, but when one of the advisors of a literary circle, I was a part of, refused to join us at *Cheezious Pakistan* for a post-event meal, during a university delegation visit, dismissing our taste as "cheap." God forbid, who wouldn't have loved to eat at *Papa Johns*, had we not been required to arrange our own

transport as delegates, perhaps killing this whole idea of the word "delegate", not to mention paying individually for half of the meal.

Nevertheless, this story also has its hero, perhaps heroes, as two weeks later, just before the arrival of Abrar ul Haq's "*Bheega Bheega sa yeh December*", another event took place: a three-day English Conference, the first of its kind at GCU, managed again by faculty from the Department of English, though this time by individuals who have specialized in *Lisaniyat* instead of *Adab*. These robust fellows, by the dint of hard work (of the volunteers), not only managed the event pretty well, but by providing lunch and tea throughout the event, turned it into a three-day desi wedding-like celebration, eating the same soggy samosas and chewy chicken like the rest of us. Rest in peace Karl Marx, you would have loved them.

Stepping out of this rather sophisticated department of ours, one encounters the serene surroundings of Gothic architecture. This aesthetically pleasing landscape, however, again exists through its own binary opposite, located across the bridge: the Bangla Campus. One may infer its state from its ironically rhyming name “Bangla”, for it has been neglected in the same way as East Pakistan, before the great separation. They say that there’s light after darkness and it’s quite true as the sigh of those on the other side of the bridge was heard a few years ago, with the inauguration of a new campus, located in an arguably more deprived condition than the Bangla campus itself, in no man’s land, on the outskirts of Lahore: The Kala Shah Kaku Campus. This campus has evoked a sense of nostalgia among its students as it resembles the setting of the popular cartoon show *Courage the Cowardly Dog*, whose house was also located in the middle of nowhere.

Apart from the dichotomy represented by *Roti* and *Makaan*, this institution fully encapsulates the *Kapra* component of the slogan as well. Imposed dress codes have always been a part of the university's legacy, but mind you, the recent adoption of annual departmental photographs in a prescribed dress code is something that has sparked considerable debate across social media (to clarify, my friend and I were discussing the matter on Instagram just the other day). I do admire adherence to rules and, consequently, dress codes for specific occasions, yet excluding students, who have spent four or more years under the roof of this institution and have contributed to its academic and cultural life, from a departmental photograph merely because they were not wearing the ever charming colonial attire is something which seems difficult to justify.

There are undoubtedly more pressing issues that deserve attention through The Ravi; nevertheless, as a true Ravian, I hope that this place, amidst all its chaos and contradictions, remains as evergreen as the renowned singer and children's-rights activist Shehzad Roy, Ameen! (Petition to add this idiom in the Oxford dictionary).

The writer is a student of BS English Literature (Year III)

PHOTO ESSAYS

- Anarkali: The Town of Strangers
- Saeed Akhtar: Art and the Act of Arresting Time



The Town of Strangers

Anees Adam

I open up easily. I used to think that I was supposed to die at a young age. I like my shadow more than my reflection. I have been lying on my CV over the past year about working as a content writer in the evenings. I love taking long walks in the evenings.



I started photography as a four-photo essay class assignment during the last week of December. I like to look up facts about people and things—usually poets and insects like cicadas. I hope to never translate my heart in binary.



When I was young, it gave me immense joy to climb walls and to steal apricots. Late at night, one day—years later, I started to draw in my notebook, and I drew a tree, badly. I read the unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath in my late teens.





She reached out of nowhere, almost three years later, and thanked me for a book that I had gifted her.

She stopped sharing music from her playlist weeks before we gave up on each other.



She was an intelligent person and a beautiful friend—she caused me poetry.

Photography allows me to see and try to see



something



in people

that they



themselves





have forgotten.

An old man
stays in my
shadow and
follows me
everywhere.
He tells me
about a tree
to our left,
sitting on a
park bench in
the
afternoon
after a long
day,
that is known
as Laila
and Majnu's
tree. He tells
me that we are
characters
who wander
in
search of
stories; even
tragedies
should be
embraced
with great
relief.



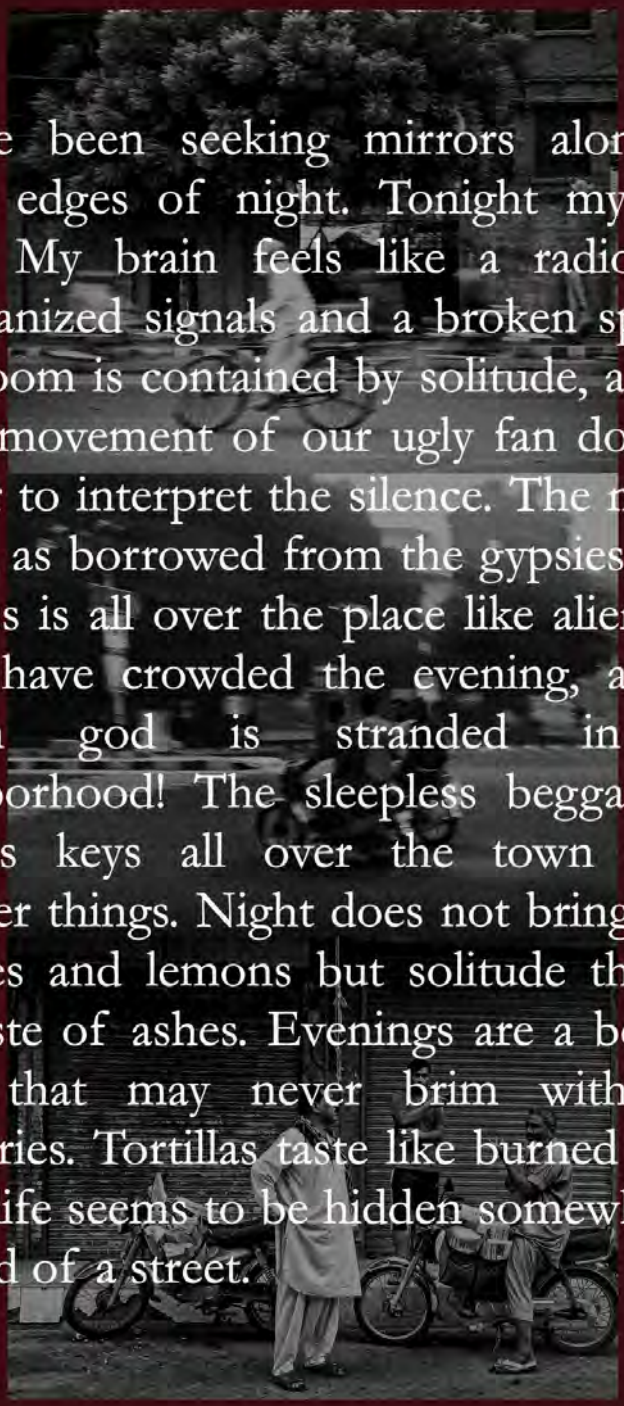




افسوس! میں، تم، ہم ہیں آمنے سامنے







I have been seeking mirrors along the lonely edges of night. Tonight my heart pains. My brain feels like a radio with disorganized signals and a broken speaker. The room is contained by solitude, and the dying movement of our ugly fan does not bother to interpret the silence. The night is lonely, as borrowed from the gypsies, while sadness is all over the place like alien eyes. Kites have crowded the evening, as if a certain god is stranded in the neighborhood! The sleepless beggar who collects keys all over the town claims stranger things. Night does not bring along oranges and lemons but solitude that has the taste of ashes. Evenings are a beggar's bowl that may never brim with kind memories. Tortillas taste like burned pages, while life seems to be hidden somewhere at the end of a street.



The other night, in
your memory, I
counted a thousand
and one stars as in
childhood.







Saeed Akhtar: Art and the Act of Arresting Time

Amna Sanaa

To the sailor the obscure sea offers a clear route
You, in the confining solitude of life,
Must (since you know no other)
choose your own harbor

(Pessoa)

Saeed Akhtar chose his harbor early and never left it. For over half a century, the lines that form faces, and the colors that make up portraits, have been his one route through an obscure sea of life. When almost all the characters of the stories you tell have become ghosts of the past, you then have lived a lifetime worth talking about. Akhtar, in his studio in Lahore, told it to us in fragments. It is the way memory usually arrives, not in order but in flashes. Saeed Akhtar's work, he himself says, is still in the process of evolution and there's no end to it. It continues to preserve what it captures.

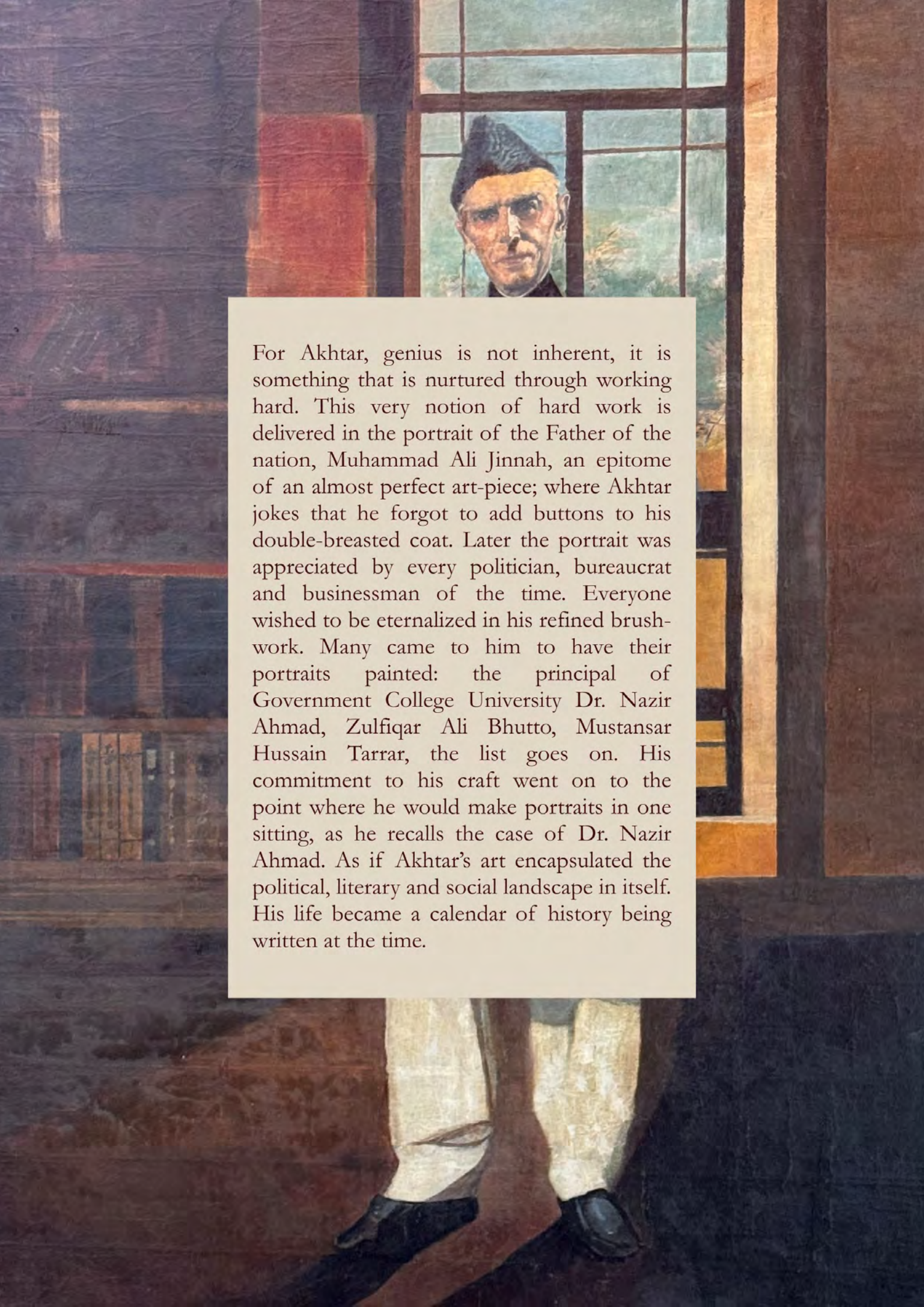
In his studio, a new generation sat on floors, mobile phones beside them, drawing on sketch-pads and drawing boards. We were told Mr. Akhtar teaches them the fundamentals of drawing, and that he himself is working on his new paintings. His room is littered with used and unused canvases. One corner has all of the current art pieces he is working on. Brushes, oil paint, pages with design ideas, all littered on his desk.



He began tracing his life from Quetta to NCA, his affinity towards paintings and arts pulled him towards a particular kind of lifestyle that he has never left till this date. Our questions about his artistic sensibilities were answered by his fleeting memories of the paintings he had made over time. Akhtar recalls every moment with a lingering sense of nostalgia. His classroom assignment of a sculpture retells the tales of history, both political and social, being made at the time. One can gather the hold of honor and pride in his conversations about his fellows. He recalls the tales of his fellow artists; let it be architects or painters who at the time helped in the building of a rising nation. Most people he talks about are not among the ranks of the living anymore, but Akhtar stands to tell their collective stories. His artistic endeavors led him to return to NCA; this time as a teacher.



From the father of the nation to Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Akhtar has eternalized every face he has painted. Belonging to an era which functioned on the tenets of hard-working, Akhtar's persistence has made him one for the history books. Akhtar's subject in his work is the encounter of the active sensibility of the world around him accompanied by master strokes of detailed realism of feelings, extravagant fantasy in terms of subject matter and engaging imagination throughout the paintings. His unique blend of all these elements makes his work memorable. He lays out his artistic process in front of you in the form of raw lines. Then, he fills life within those lines.



For Akhtar, genius is not inherent, it is something that is nurtured through working hard. This very notion of hard work is delivered in the portrait of the Father of the nation, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, an epitome of an almost perfect art-piece; where Akhtar jokes that he forgot to add buttons to his double-breasted coat. Later the portrait was appreciated by every politician, bureaucrat and businessman of the time. Everyone wished to be eternalized in his refined brush-work. Many came to him to have their portraits painted: the principal of Government College University Dr. Nazir Ahmad, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, Mustansar Hussain Tarrar, the list goes on. His commitment to his craft went on to the point where he would make portraits in one sitting, as he recalls the case of Dr. Nazir Ahmad. As if Akhtar's art encapsulated the political, literary and social landscape in itself. His life became a calendar of history being written at the time.



Not everything he made stayed within the realism of portraits. The intricate micro-expressions and exaggerated features of his work around Rajasthan reveal his provocative skills. The intricate detailing which you see in renaissance-era monuments is well rested in his works. His classic stallions and fine detailing in portraits have stood the test of time.





He recalled his painting of Buraq, a celestial steed of Islamic tradition, and shifting entirely from observed detail to pure imagination.

کہتی تھی یہ براق سے اس کی سبک روی
یوں جائیے کہ گرد سفر کو خبر نہ ہو

(The swift lightness of his movement whispered to the Buraaq, "Travel so subtly that even the dust of the journey remains unaware.")

-AlaHazrat

Akhtar's reimagination is a mythical horse with wings; it has an ethereal appearance. When you see the painting, you realize very few have come close to capturing the divine as *Buraaq* has. The swift brushstrokes and mystical color palette shift your imagination. The painting sends you in a trance. He recalled that after completing *Buraaq*, he went to a mosque and brought the people for them to witness his work, who, then, were speechless to say the least. In this painting, he has shifted his realism to evocative imagination, where the dramatic color grading brings in mythical elements. Not painting this, surely, would have been blasphemous.





Saeed Akhtar made sure that we realize that one man can live so many lives. His work can be divided into many sections, each reflective of his life and era he was living in. His earlier works range from stallions to self-portraits. He moves from self to Baloch identity. He captures the feminine beauty in an ecstatic manner. One element that remains consistent is imparting life to lifeless paintings.

Akhtar understood the paradox of attempting to make art that spoke to posterity and a contemporary audience simultaneously with equal force. The process of creation and the final product both reside in his catalog of work. No work of his is incomplete, just in the process. His early charcoal sketches and rhythmic lines reflect his inner genius but his finished brush-strokes and shade-work highlight his persistence and his commitment to art. No matter which era of his career one looks at - let it be age or censorship - nothing has stopped Saeed Akhtar from creating. His ballad of life is art; it is encapsulated in his continuous creative process. He chose his harbor once, in Quetta, as a young man with no other route in mind. He is, by every account that he gave us, still there.

FILM REVIEWS

- On the Nature of Hamnet (2026): A Review
- The Orpheus of Inisherin: A Review of The Banshees of Inisherin (2022)



On the Nature of Hamnet (2026): A Review

Waniya Aks E Noor

Hamnet (2026) *dir.* Chloé Zhao, is a dramatized retelling of Agnes Hathaway and William Shakespeare's family life released somewhere between 2025 to 2026, depending on your region. The film opened to little cinematic fanfare. In Pakistan, it was not even screened in any cinemas. I had the pleasure of watching it at home, in my living room with a broken AC. It was some time in early April. My mother and my sister were sleeping on the sofas, a ritual we'd created for no reason other than the convenience of proximity to the kitchen. I connected my bluetooth earphones with the TV despite having an above-average sound system, and kept a thermos of cold water to splatter on my shirt to keep myself cool throughout the movie.

I can talk all about my conditions during my watch. It is harder to talk about the movie. But that is true for most reviews I write. At first, I thought to put my thoughts down would be to contain them, to turn them from solid to liquid. And that would be disingenuous because my thoughts were precious, and they reserved the right to solidity. I don't feel the same anymore. Thus, this review.

I will ease into this by sectioning the things I have to say, transcribing them as they proliferate in my head like weeds. I will give you the first four fields of weeds.

I will keep the rest.

The Field of Hylozoism

Hamnet operates on the philosophy of Hylozoism—the belief that all things are living, sentient. All of the movie's trees and vines and wood and soil are alive and speaking, and Max Richter, the composer of the film's quiet, sifting score, breathes life into them, while Agnes, the witch of the forest, keeps them well and healthy. The sounds in this film are akin to those of a strong wind, if only that wind were made out of the finest silk. Even the characters speak almost in whispers, Agnes especially.

It is interesting to note here a scene between Agnes and her brother Bartholomew after Agnes' marriage to William has been agreed to by the latter. Bartholomew comments on William's house, about its... silence. He rhetorically asks Agnes how she will live in such a place, and with that, Chloe Zhao indirectly asks the audience: how will you hear the silence? Not *will* you hear the silence, but *how*.

And I heard the silence through farewells.

When I was eight, my father was still in the military, stationed in Sialkot. He would visit us in Lahore intermittently; four days, five, never more. I do not remember anything remarkable about his arrival or the duration of his visits. I only remember our farewells because I was so bad at them: face turned away, eyes glossy, being placated by the prospect of sitting in the front seat once my father left. I would crawl up to the front seat once he'd gotten on his bus, and my mother would drive away. Then I would do something strange. I would crawl deeper, beneath the seat, under the dashboard, the AC blasting me with its freezing air, and I would sit there until we got home.

In *Hamnet*, we see Hamnet and William saying goodbye when the latter is leaving for London for his theatre work. The camera is centered on the corner of the street, slightly removed from the scene, enough so that we can see Agnes on one side, William leaving on the other, and Hamnet between them. This review could be all about this scene, about the profound mundanity of farewells, and the ripples they carve into your body.

We are once again the helpless audience to a story whose ending we already know. In fact, that is how we start this movie, with Agnes asking William to tell her the tragedy of Orpheus and Eurydice. William's version is clipped: a musician, Orpheus, marries a beautiful nymph, Eurydice. They live happily for a while until one day Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies. Orpheus then journeys to the underworld to recover his wife and moves the god of the underworld with his love and music. Hades offers a simple proposition: Orpheus may take Eurydice back with him, but she will walk behind him as they make their return journey, and if, at any point, Orpheus tries to look back at her, she will be doomed to the underworld forever. He listens, Orpheus, to Eurydice's sounds. Her footsteps. Her small breaths. Her bones crepitating. When the sound stops, the tragedy happens.

Orpheus looks back.

Eurydice was right there.

And all is lost.

Many conclusions can be drawn from this tragic myth: Orpheus was a fool. Orpheus was hasty. Orpheus was impatient.

What about Eurydice?

If Orpheus hadn't looked back, would Eurydice ever really know he loved her? When you're out in a busy bazaar with someone you love, and you're holding their hand, do you still not look over your shoulder to make sure they're still there, even though the touch alone assures you they are? Is it stupidity, then, or something stranger, something familiar to the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice?

In *Hamnet*, William looks back at Agnes. Each time Agnes asks, he looks back.

Agnes wanted to be seen.

Eurydice wanted to be seen.

She was all the happier for it.

The Field of Sociology

Have you ever been to a funeral? I do not doubt that most people reading this have. They begin shortly after life begins, but unlike life, they never truly end.

I was twelve when I went to my first funeral. It was of a young man. My mother's cousin. The cause of death was a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Not suicide. No. He only took a gun and fired it through his mouth. He didn't mean to kill himself.

His mother was peeling potatoes and making chai in the kitchen for the funeral-goers while the man lay on a charpoy in the middle of the living room, skin yellowing, nose bleeding; dead. Women filtered through the kitchen to wipe the mother's sporadic tears with their dupattas.

The men drank tea and laughed.

In *Hamnet*, a similar social structure unfolds.

Agnes, upon losing Hamnet, is forced to peel potatoes, cut apples, and change sheets. She is allowed to scream and cry only once, and then it is the chores.

William, on the other hand, is allowed poetry and literature. He is allowed hiding and indulgence. He can be sad later. He can cry whenever he wishes.

Agnes makes tea. William drinks and cries.

The Field of Sonic Lens

The camera in *Hamnet* is its greatest mouthpiece. I like the self-coined term "Sonic Lens." We touched on hylozoism earlier, and according to that philosophy, we must conclude that silence, too, is alive. It lives, and to live, it must breed.

But what does it breed? You do not create silence with more silence. Or perhaps we can. I suppose we can. But what is silence without its music?

Music: the rasping scratch of your nails against dry, flaky skin, old pipes crepitating in house walls, the voice in your head reading this.

Hamnet is silence.

Your head is its breeding ground.

The Field of Humanism

Humans are special.

That is a generic statement, I know. But in a world where art is being rampantly encroached upon and trampled by generative AI, it is important to know and believe that humans are special for one very important reason: we evolve, and we evolve fast.

When there was no photography, we made still lifes with our hands. We painted vast sceneries for no other reason than to observe and preserve them. When the camera, a machine, came for still life, humans did not relent. They turned to abstraction. When AI takes abstraction, humans will evolve again.

Jessie Buckley. Chloe Zhao. Maggie O'Farrell.

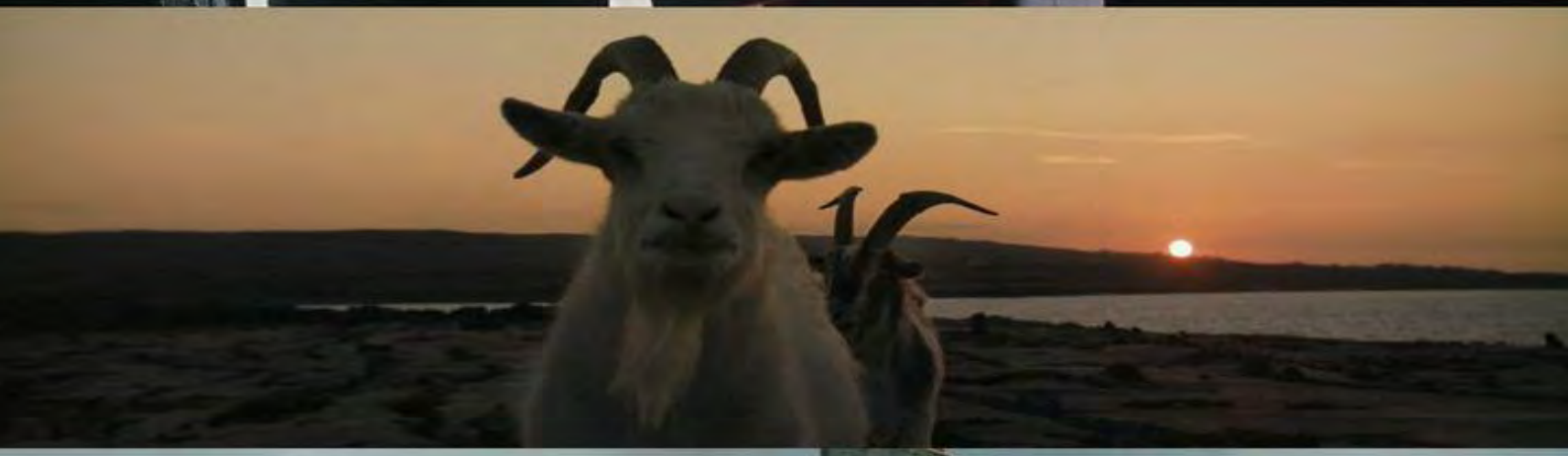
These three women are testament to this evolution. To take something seen all the time in movies—the sky, the trees, the sun, the fields—and create what they have created: a new life, a creature with its own distinct DNA and fingerprint.

Hamnet reinforces my belief that no idea is original, but its rendition can be. That is important for humans to know in this day and age where artists are facing pitfalls at every turn and corner.

Everything you will ever do has been done before.

But it's never been done by you.











The Orpheus of Inisherin:
A Review of The Banshees of Inisherin (2022)

Fatima Arshad

"Everything was fine yesterday."

That is the desperate, bewildered refrain of Pádraic Súilleabháin after his lifelong best friend, Colm Doherty, suddenly stops answering the door. On the isolated, windswept island of Inisherin, life is built on small, absolute routines: at two o'clock every afternoon, Pádraic walks up to Colm's cottage, knocks, and they head down to the local pub for a pint. Pádraic is a simple man; he doesn't ask much from life, and he gives exactly that to it in return. Colm, cut from a sturdier, darker cloth, is an aging fiddle player burdened by a sudden, desperate dread of his own mortality. And on one ordinary Tuesday afternoon, Colm decides he simply doesn't like Pádraic anymore.

What follows is one of the most darkly funny, deeply tragic, and bizarrely devastating breakups in film history.

Now, film scholars love to dissect *The Banshees of Inisherin* as a grand political allegory for the Irish Civil War booming across the water on the mainland. And sure, when Pádraic watches distant artillery flashes and mutters, *"Good luck to ye, whatever you're fighting for,"* the senseless, ego driven feud between two former allies, mirrors brother turning against brother. But reducing Martin McDonagh's masterpiece to a historical footnote cheapens its raw, human heart, for art doesn't need to be reduced to a single metaphor to be brilliant. Sometimes, a story about a broken friendship on a tiny island is all the tragedy a story needs.

To begin with (or rather after finishing it), one wonders why the film is called *The Banshees of Inisherin*—plural? On the surface, there is only one literal banshee figure: Mrs. McCormick, the eerie, black cloaked old woman who foretells that two people will die on the island. Notably, she is also the first person to state out loud: *"You used to be the best of friends."* Siobhán (Pádraic's sister) had hinted at it earlier as a joke, but Mrs. McCormick pronounces the friendship officially dead. Yet, the title demands a plural. The truth is

that Colm and Pádraic become their own banshees; they sit on that lonely island wailing over a dying bond, haunting each other, screaming into the wind, and predicting their own destruction.

To understand Pádraic, we must forget Colm's fiddle.

The true musician of Inisherin is Pádraic himself. In Greek mythology, Orpheus was the legendary bard whose music softened the hearts of wild beasts. But Orpheus isn't immortal in our cultural memory because of his lyre, he is famous because, when entering the kingdom of death to retrieve his beloved, he couldn't stop himself from looking back. Pádraic is the Orpheus of Inisherin. Consider his connection to animals. While Colm writes formal compositions, Pádraic lives the lyrical flow of life through pure, unselective affection. Even when he is sad, he brings his tiny donkey, Jenny, inside the house. When his sister protests, he utters a line that breaks one's heart in its absolute innocence: *"I'm not putting me donkey outside when I'm sad, okay?"* He loves his horses, he carves a heart on a wooden cross for Jenny's grave when she dies, and even after Colm burns their world to the ground (and Pádraic himself burns Colm's house), Pádraic looks after Colm's dog. *"Anytime,"* he says. Wild creatures (or rather anyone society treats like an outcast) are softened by Pádraic's spirit. Dominic, the island's erratic, neglected village boy, gravitates toward Pádraic because Pádraic never looks down on him. When Dominic admits *"I used to think you were the nicest of them,"* he's acknowledging the rare warmth Pádraic gave him when no one else would. Pádraic's "music" isn't written on a piece of paper, it is his instinctual, boundary-less niceness.

And then there is the fatal act of looking back.

When Pádraic finally decides to retaliate against Colm, he makes a chilling promise: *"I'm going to call up to your house and I'm gonna set fire to it, and hopefully you'll still be inside it. But I won't be checkin' either way."* It is a terrifying line. But the crucial, beautiful, devastating truth of Pádraic's character is that *he does check*. He rides up to the house, makes sure Colm's dog is safe outside, sets fire to the house and proceeds to walk away; but he stops, turns back, looks through the window into that raging hell, and searches for his "friend." He cannot help but look back into the ashes of what he loved. Even when Colm threatened to cut off his own fingers if Pádraic spoke to him—and then actually did it, throwing his severed digits against Pádraic's door—Pádraic kept coming back.
"I'm Pádraic Súilleabháin. And I'm nice."

This coming back, looking over the shoulder, and refusing to let go isn't stupidity; it is the tragic burden of someone who endlessly cares, of someone who is genuinely *nice*.

Khaled Hosseini famously wrote, *"And that's the thing about people who mean everything they say. They think everyone else does too."* This might as well be true for Pádraic's niceness as well: he's nice, so he assumes everyone else operates the same way.

"You used to be nice"
"I suppose niceness doesn't last then, does it?"

Which brings us to the movie's central philosophical argument: Is being "nice" actually enough? Colm, suffering from a deep, suffocating depression—a condition Pádraic recognizes immediately, proving he was never the self-absorbed fool Colm made him out to be—becomes obsessed with legacy and despairs. Colm sits in his standout, polished white house, a grand, isolated museum of masks and instruments that contrasts sharply with the humble stone cottages of the island, and decides that "niceness" is worthless. In the pub, Colm argues that no one remembers people for being nice; they remember Mozart. (To which one has to ask: do only things that last really matter? And do the things that last actually matter all that much?). Colm chops off his own fingers, destroying the very capacity to play music, just to prove a point in an argument about his artistic legacy. It is absolute madness masquerading as high art. Meanwhile, Pádraic stands for the unsung heroes: the "good guys" who make the terrifying weight of existence bearable. *"You're more one of life's good guys, aye*," the island folk at the pub tell him. One must stop here and think, how many masterpieces only exist because a "good guy" made life bearable enough for the artist to create them? For in a cold world, simple goodness is a rare, vital work of art in itself

The visual direction of the film drives this contrast home with surgical precision. One can't help but notice the lighting choices in the pub scenes. When Colm sits surrounded by musicians, a warm, bright overhead light bathes his table. Meanwhile, Pádraic and young Dominic sit at an adjacent table, lit only by the weak, reflected glow off Colm's space. Colm hogs the light, self righteously declaring himself an artist, while leaving the genuine souls of the island to sit in the dark, wondering what they did wrong to deserve such cruelty.

Yet, niceness is not weak. Siobhán, Pádraic's sister, proves this. She is brilliant, articulate, and fiercely kind. She is even gentle to Mrs. McCormick, the terrifying local banshee. And perhaps that innate, active kindness is why Siobhán is the only main character who escapes the suffocating grip of Inisherin. She leaves the island's slow death behind to start a real life on the mainland, choosing growth over the petty, stagnant blood feuds of men.

In the end, *The Banshees of Inisherin* leaves us standing on a windy beach alongside two ruined men. The house has burned, the donkey is dead, the fingers are gone, and the friendship is in ruins.

"Haven't heard any rifle fire from the mainland in a day or two."
"I think they're coming to the end of it."
"I'm sure they'll be at it again soon enough, aren't you?"

The film closes on a hauntingly beautiful score, music that feels like it might as well be sung by a siren rather than a banshee. Suggesting something, perhaps; suggesting nothing, perhaps; but leaving you with a lingering sense of never quite moving on from the story.

"Some things there's no movin' on from. And I think that's a good thing."
- Pádraic Súilleabháin

The writer is a student of BS English Literature (Year III)

FLASH FICTION

- Tainted
- Porawarhy

Tainted

Salwa Jabbar

"Mother, I have a gift for you." I beamed, fist hidden behind my back.

"Is it a flower?" She guessed wrong, just like me.

For six years, Father had brought me gifts. Candies, coins, dolls held fast in a clenched fist. I could never guess and he always won. Now I wanted to surprise her, just like him.

"I was looking for a flower but caught a butterfly." I grinned and Mother's face darkened.

"Loosen your hold!" she shrieked in horror.

I blinked back tears and dusted my colored palms.

"Just like her father," I heard her say.

The writer is a Law student (Year I)

Porawarhy

Rohail Ahmed

Porawarhy, debtor, a name given to me by my father in a letter sent home from the valleys where he died trying to avenge my grandfather. I have known him only by the stories I have heard, the tree on his grave and the extra piece of kafan I inherited. I have his rifle on my shoulder and the cloth knitted into my kameez. I am going toward the mountains, into wilderness, to avenge him. I will drink the blood of our enemies, and if I cannot, I too have left home a son who will inherit the same name.

The writer is a student of BS English Literature (Year III)

07 STORIES

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The Rosary

Faiqa Mansab

'When I was a young woman, I offered all five prayers. I used to cry if I missed any,' the old woman said, her eyes darting from one unfamiliar face to another. 'I carried my rosary with me everywhere. They called me the rosary woman.' She laughed.

Her grand-daughter's fiancé was visiting with his family. It was an important evening.

'I never missed a single prayer, not a single one,' she continued. 'Even if there was a wedding. Even when it was my own wedding.'

The old woman tried not to pause too long between sentences, even though it was difficult to speak. She didn't want to give them the chance to make use of the gap and beg leave. In her hurry, she didn't care what she said. She spoke randomly, talking about anything she thought would reflect best on her and keep them from leaving.

'You have such beautiful eyes. They sparkle with mischief. Were you a naughty boy, hain?'

Everyone was obliged to laugh.

She wanted to be seen as the respected elder, even though nobody even asked her anything anymore. She wanted to be seen as someone whose experience carried weight. But ageing had frightened her, and so she had done everything a woman of limited means could to hide the process. She dyed her hair black and her skin was an uneven terrain of fault lines and barren deserts. One had to lose too much to gain a little bit of wisdom. It was better to be happy than wise.

The young ones had already started talking amongst themselves. She realized she had paused too long to catch her breath.

'I love reading the Quran,' she said suddenly and loudly.

Everyone turned towards her. She smiled, trying not to show her teeth because they were permanently stained now, the ones that were still hanging on to her bleeding gums out of spite, she often claimed.

Since the morning, every footfall she'd heard made her heart sing with expectation of company. So now that she was lucky enough to have it, she wanted to feel like she was a part of it all, like she mattered.

Her son-in-law looked at her with a sympathetic smile. Old age is an insidious embarrassment for everyone else, but the person suffering from it, she thought. Old people are silently engaged in an epic battle between their inner reality, a perennially youthful, capable self, and their outer reality, where their bodies fail them daily as if only to reinforce the truth. He was beginning to understand what that felt like. He sighed and looked away.

The old woman felt half of herself, and she made sure she had pretty shoes on her feet she could not even feel. When she had people around her, when she talked, she forgot that she was old and everyone thought she was useless.

They were all laughing. She had missed the joke. Had she dozed off?

'What? What did you say?' she asked, her voice seeped in panic.

The fiancé drawled, 'I really don't think it's worth repeating.'

Bina, his fiancée, stole a glance at him and smiled at his cleverness. He gave her an approving nod. She blushed and lowered her lashes as a precious little sign of her complicity.

The old woman saw that she was beginning to fade between their indifferent glances.

'Hain? What did you say? What are you all laughing at?' her voice rising. It was a petulant shrill sound.

Not a single glance fell her way. The men were talking and the women were laughing and the young girl and boy exchanged pretty glances and smiles. Her silence began to close in on her, like it did, in a slow, oppressive blanket of invisibility. She extended a reluctant gnarled hand towards the rosary beads she had so recently discarded at the arrival of her guests.

Not her guests, really. They had been sitting in the drawing room for the longest time and had only just come to meet her before they went in to dinner.

'Sajida,' the old woman barked. Her hand had barely closed on the rosary beads.

Her daughter looked up.

'Ji Ami?' she asked.

'Tell someone to bring my wheelchair. I'd like to sit with you all at dinner. I will make a special prayer for the new couple.'

Her daughter sighed and said, 'Sure, Ami.'

The old woman closed her fist on the rosary beads.

Old age brought a strange kind of stupidity, where one was always saying the wrong things, her daughter often scolded her.

'Don't talk so much of Allah, Ami,' she often said. 'People get bored. It's not like in your days.'

But the old woman recalled the past with relish. She had been young in the past. The past was where she could hide stories that were not even true. Her husband was not there to shout at her or laugh at her and tell her off.

The grand-daughter watched her poor parents struggle to put her in the wheelchair.

'Let's go have dinner,' the old woman's daughter simpered. 'Hope you like it, son. Bina cooked the meal. She said I want to make everything for aunty and uncle. I swear she already loves your parents more than she loves her own.'

Everyone laughed approvingly.

The old woman was wheeled in and put in a corner of the table. Perfunctorily, the guests offered the head seat but her son quickly dismissed that idea and stationed her wheelchair near his sister, far from the men, who all sat at one end of the table. Everyone took their seats and exclaimed about how great the food looked.

'The pulao doesn't smell right. Didn't you use my recipe? My relatives used to come all the way from Gujranwala and Faisalabad to eat my pulao on every Eid,' the old woman said, pushing herself up to look at the table.

The food looked sumptuous, brimming in shiny silver dishes. There were flowers on the table. The fiancé beamed at the girl.

'Looks lovely, Bina. Now let me eat and see if it's actually as good as it looks,' he said.

The old woman was not supposed to eat because food was difficult to digest in the evening but she didn't want to be left out.

'How is the korma, beta?' she asked the fiancé.

'Hmm, good,' he replied off-handedly.

'My recipe,' she said. Her eyes shone. 'I was a great cook. My daughter can't cook. She can't even boil rice. And I don't cook anymore. I only enjoy praying now. There is no other company I'd rather have than that of Allah and Quran.'

There was silence. Then someone said something about the new change of government.

'They will all go to hell. Corrupt people. Liars and cheats. They will all go to hell.'

'Ami, please,' her daughter said, glancing at her.

The old woman recognized the look. Her daughter had warned her not to talk. Her daughter had said the new in-laws graciously wanted to see her. They were civilized, well-behaved people to think of even such small courtesies.

'Give me some pulao. I'll tell you what is wrong with it. It doesn't smell right. If you start anything with the name of God, there will be barkat in it. Without God's name there isn't any.'

Her voice held a quarrelsome note, a challenge even. There were polite murmurs of agreement. She had been placed just behind the younger brother, and because he was nearest he had to cater to the old woman. The hosts protested, and the guests said acceptable things about honoring elders, and getting blessings.

'Just a little. I just want to taste. I can tell with a single bite. My taste buds are sensitive. I'm not much of an eater anyway. I like to feed the poor instead. I give half my food to the servants.'

The young man's shoulders shook slightly. He scooped a spoonful onto a plate.

'Don't give me a very big piece of meat. No.. no.. that's too big, I can't eat that…my digestion you know. I just want to taste so my grand-daughter knows what mistakes she made. It's my duty after all to teach her right from wrong.'

The boy's lips twitched as he handed her the plate.

'Oh…this is too heavy.'

'Would like me to hold it for you,' he said with his jaw clenched.

'Oh how kind. Thank you. Bismillah.'

With a trembling hand, she scooped the rice into the spoon, using the index finger of her other hand to help scoop an extra few grains onto the spoon. The journey from the plate to the mouth was agonizingly slow and precarious. It seemed she would drop the spoon any second but she managed to stuff it into her slack mouth. She chewed like a cow chewing cud and eventually, the young man looked over his shoulder at his parents. His face was quite red.

'Hmm,' she said, her face stamped with an expression of superiority that didn't sit well on her face, 'No nutmeg, I see?'

'Of course there is,' said the grand-daughter and turned her face away to speak with her future mother-in-law.

'Really? Hmm, let me see.'

She scooped up another spoonful and put it into her mouth.

'Hmm, I see. You forgot cinnamon?'

The grand-daughter ignored her. The old woman took her grand-daughter's silence for assent, and her smile broadened.

'Without cinnamon, rice is nothing. No flavor. My rice was famous.'

The old woman's daughter got up from the table and strode towards the old woman, her face white, and eyes cold. She took the plate from her, and hissed, 'Sit quietly. I don't want to hear anything more.'

The old woman shrank in the face of her daughter's suppressed fury. Then her daughter turned and, smiling at the young man said, 'You're such a wonderful boy. A credit to your parents, masha'Allah.'

The young man laughed out loud with relief at the unexpected rescue.

'Beta, please sit down. Here eat this,' she served food to the younger brother and he began to eat with his eyes firmly on the plate before him.

The old woman felt lonely in the midst of all their chattering and laughter. She cast a long, reproachful look at her daughter and began to tell the beads.

'She'll see when she's old. She'll see,' the old woman murmured.

She kissed her rosary, eyeing everyone surreptitiously. She smacked the rosary again, but still no one looked towards her.

The old woman had reduced her life to praying. The proof was the rosary in her hands, the Quran by her bedside and the Kaaba framed on the wall. That was where God began, and ended for her. For some, God was the last resort. She was virtuous because she never had a chance to be anything else.

They decided to extend the party by going out for after-dinner coffee. The guests had risen from the table to wash their hands before leaving. She was still in her corner vacantly moving the beads of her rosary, as she watched them make plans to go out. Everyone was ready. They went up to the old lady to wish her good night. No one even imagined asking her.

Her eyes misted. She clutched her rosary to her chest, feverishly moving the beads. The fiancé hugged her briefly and turned away. But she didn't want to be alone. She could not face another night of frustrating intimacy with God.

She clung to the fiancé's hand, squeezing it, clumsily thanking him in order to justify this insistence. The others were already turning round to tell him to hurry up. His eyes turned cold. He snatched his hand away.

'Come on, Ami. I'll put you to bed.'

'Let me bless them first,' she squealed.

'You can do that in your room,' her daughter said firmly and wheeled her away.

The old woman sobbed. She strained her neck to say her final goodbyes. She waved her hand, expecting to be acknowledged. No one did. They had already said their goodbyes.

Her daughter covered her with a blanket and left the room.

She was alone. God was watching, she told herself. God is with me.

She flung her rosary at the wall.

The author is a literary thinker and novelist exploring symbolic consciousness, feminine metaphysics, Sufi storytelling, and contemporary narrative. Her acclaimed debut, This House of Clay and Water (2017), was an Amazon Editors' Pick, long-listed for major prizes, and has been translated and optioned for screen adaptation. A Saari Fellow and British Chevening Scholar, she has spoken at major literary festivals and contributed to publications including Forbes, Vogue, and The Tribune.

Playgue

Ahmad Tajy

I

Ice cream melted onto my hand which was formed into a half-closed fist. I couldn't move — I was frozen. I tried to talk but found myself in waters too deep. I tried to look for an escape but it was too dark. The ice cream was then "ice" in name only, but I remained frozen. I longed for a kind hand to pull me up to the surface so that I could see the light again, hear my voice again, and breathe — yes, breathe again. A disfigured ice cream cone fell from the hand of a dishevelled young lady, followed by the fall of the young lady herself.

II

That is when I woke up from another nightmare about meeting the devil. 'Why did she look just like me? Why did God make me so handsome? It does not signify. I must start my day now. Or is it the end? Is there a beginning or an ending to the snake eating her own tail?'

There was no point in pondering upon such topics. I had teeth to brush, breakfast to make, food to put on the table, and a kid to feed. I felt a hint of fatigue, but I mustn't have — there is never enough time to be tired, or ill. 'I must bleed on and carry on giving life.' By the time this thought crossed my mind, the oven pinged its usual ping — pancakes for my love. Oh! how she smiled when I fed her sweets. That — bleeding to water a seed; dying to give life — was what kept me going. Going… Going… Driving… Stop. I dropped her off at her nursery. She was upset to let me go. I cherished that frown. I had not known another as precious as hers. But I kissed her so she wouldn't cry. I never could bear that.

III

I drove on then, to my office, praying to dear God that I would not encounter the devil. God knows I would not go there if I had a choice. She wasn't there anymore, though I still saw her sometimes. The mind is a curious thing. It plays tricks on itself: clowns,

magicians, spectators — it is a whole circus. And in its Ferris wheel of insanity, it falls... falls… falls… until you fall asleep too.

I had dozed off at my desk.

IV

Tap…tap…tap. "Mom?" I asked, half asleep. No. It was only my colleague, Meg. She smirked, "I didn't know you thought of me like that, hon'." I gave her a gentle push, the silly girl. "Shut up, will you?" "Wake up, will you?" She echoed, "Manager's gonna be here any minute. Look lively." Her last two words set me off thinking — overthinking. "Look lively." That's what I had been doing, wasn't it? For my daughter, for my mother when she had been around, and for myself too. God knows I'm not alive. It's a facade, a show, an act, and the whole circus watched my act. Some loved it, while others had simply been too busy looking into another pair of eyes. It wasn't that my show was not good. It simply wasn't as important. Important. Right. Work. Look lively. I made a face at my computer. The manager walked in.

What followed at the office is not very important. The manager simply played her now truly hackneyed tricks. So hackneyed were they that their performance was now buried in as much irony as their spectatorship. She was a clown for twenty-nine days, and a magician for one. She did this twelve times a year. That was how I kept track of my age. I counted the months in paychecks because the sun does not rise and tell you that the new day would be any different from the last. No, it would not be different at all except that the air would get warmer for some days and colder for some others.

Just then my reverie had been interrupted by the realisation that it was time to pick up my little buttercup from the nursery. She must have missed the warmth of my bosom, for where else could she be loved from the heart. I thought I could find such love elsewhere, but I was wrong.

The car, its keys, the ignition. Yes. Turn the key. Done. Mother, I miss you. No. I made a choice. Stop. Smile. I went smiling and waving towards the teacher whose finger my daughter, with her little hand, had held in a half-closed fist, ready… ready to take off at any moment. I bent down to hug my daughter and she leapt up to hug her mother. That was the difference between our roles. That was what changed. I looked down; she looked

up. "Did you have fun, sweetie?" "I missed mommy!" She pouted. I smiled at her and gently pressed her head against myself lest she should see me without a smile on my face; lest she should learn to wear the same expression I had worn then. "Me too, sweetheart, me too," I simply spoke into the air above as I stroked her delicate hair.

V

'Mommy' went back home with her little cupcake; made mere leaves tasty for an omnivore as picky as the human; and uttered assurances, not knowing whether they were really intended for herself or the little copy of herself that she was raising. Nevertheless, I, the so-called mommy, concluded my daily show — that of a doting mom.

Once I had read my own daughter to sleep, I was no longer a mother. I wished I were a daughter, but it was then only too late. I went down to the convenience store and bought myself an ice cream to relax. I knew no part of my body could handle the ice cream, especially on a cold November night like that. I did not eat any of it.

The ice cream melted onto my hand, which was formed into a half-closed fist. I couldn't move — I was frozen. I tried to cry for help but found myself in waters too deep. I tried to look for an escape, but it was too dark. The ice cream was now "ice" in name only. But I remained frozen. I longed for the kind hand of my loving mother to pull me up to the surface so that I could see the light again, hear the soothing voice of my mother again, and breathe again. And the puddle of ice-cream drippings reminded me how dearly I'd rather be a small fish in a big pond — for aren't they, like stars in the open sky, the freest things there are? A disfigured ice cream cone fell from the hand of a dishevelled young lady; torn apart, tethered to new life, and to death all at once; followed by the fall of the young lady herself. I put on one last act for the day — my body had decided to play dead.

The writer is a recent graduate of the English Department (2021-25).

Pardesi

Hira Ali

(1)

You wake to the sound of your father leaving. It's another blue hour before dawn. He doesn't wake you or your siblings anymore. Across years of leaving, you have come to understand that goodbyes do not become easier with time. But they can become a chore. Emotionally straining. Mentally exhausting.

The more you dwell on what's gone, the more it gets in the way of your busy life.

After his stay, one morning, your father gets himself out of bed, lifts his suitcase, and walks through the door.

Your mother drives him to the airport.

Your mother then drives herself to work.

By the time you wake, he is already somewhere over a sea you have never crossed. By the time you brush your teeth, he is landing in a country you've never been to. You have your breakfast while he unpacks his luggage inside an apartment you've never seen.

You pick up your bag and head to the school, to the college, to the university.

Life goes on without saying goodbye.

(2)

You have looked it up on Google countless times, only to realize there's no term in English that translates *pardesi* while holding the same sentiment, the same weight, the same meaning of the word. You realized words that cannot be translated can only be defined. So you take the word apart in an attempt to reach its meaning.

Par meaning *paraya*, meaning a stranger, an outsider, a foreigner.

Desi meaning countryman, from the word *des* meaning country.

So becomes the word *par-desi.*

Becomes *paraya desi.*

Becomes the stranger-who-belongs. Becomes the estranged uprooted one. Becomes the man who is of the country's soil and beyond the country's soil simultaneously. Who is desi in every cell of his body but a paraya to his home, to his city, to his country, even

to the countries he moves to, to earn. Who carries home inside himself so fully but who is so far from it that he has become a stranger to the walls he built with his own hands.

Meaning Father.

Meaning *pardesi*.

What does it mean, then, Father, to be held and abandoned in the same word? To be defined only by being taken apart? To have inherited the grief of belonging so completely to a place that you keep departing from?

(3)

Each evening around 9 p.m. the phone rings. You have learned to recognize his voice more through the phone. You hear your mother conversing with him on the video call. Everyday. Even when she doesn't want to.

He asks the same questions. How is everyone? Where is everyone? Are they studying hard? Where did all the money go? Is the light bill paid? What about the gas bill?

Your mother gives the same answers.

This is to say, love in your family has always been expressed through logistics.

You talk to him once a fortnight. He asks for you once a fortnight.

He does not ask how you are in his absence.

You do not tell him.

(4)

The night you sat with your father, and he asked your mother to bring the watermelon. She had cut it whole the same day he bought it. He wasn't happy about it. He thought it would remain there many days and rot before his sickly plain and skinny looking children would eat it.

That night, when it was late spring and early summer, your family sat watching the cricket match after dinner to eat the watermelon. But when your mother brought the bowl, it was about empty. Your father was surprised to see that his sickly plain and skinny looking children had eaten almost all of it. And they did. And he became so happy and proud. As if it would make his children big and buff in just a day.

Then you ate the rest of it, just you and him.

He gave you the bigger piece, the one he was going to eat, and it all made you so sad.

You have lost many years of good memories with your father. Because, like many fathers, he was an angry man.

You wonder if he remembers being an angry man.

(5)

Father we live with an outsider; father, you are the outsider we live with.

This is to say, each arrival is another chance for a new departure.

Hello. Goodbye.

For another time.

(6)

You still remember telling your grandfather, a few days before his death, on your way to school, that you talked to your father. You thought he would be happy, so you told your grandfather, who had always been hard of hearing, that his son is returning next week. For a moment he remained unfazed and you thought he hadn't heard what you said. But then your grandfather, whose body had begun its journey, slow and steady, towards deterioration, succumbing day by day to lung cancer, said to you, in half consciousness, *What's the point of coming next week?*

You looked at him closely for a while, and in his eyes with fading consciousness, you saw that whimsy glimmer briefly awaken again. And then he smiled his usual toothless smile. And with great effort, he raised his trembling hand to give you his blessing.

It made you wonder how your grandfather, with his body thin like that of an infant's, with his uncovered knees wounded and gashed, incapable of healing anymore, with his mind slowly losing its comprehension, still remembered to offer love. Patting your head for the last time.

You didn't know what he meant then. Didn't know what he meant until he passed away in the hospital before your father could board the plane. You wondered if a man barely conscious could really foretell his death. That he could tell he wouldn't be able to meet his son for the last time. That there was really nothing left for his son to come for.

You learned, then, that life also ends without saying goodbye.

(7)

It stands there through everything.

Through the summer. Through the long afternoons when the old water cooler from your mother's dowry gurgles its last note through the walls and the whole house slows to

the suffocation of heat. Through the meals. Through the silences at the table that have learned to exist in the space between a man who does not speak much and a family that has learned not to require it. Through the hours you spend on the floor near the window scribbling something akin to poetry, the window that looks out onto nothing in particular, a low balcony and a wall of the neighbor's house blocking the afternoon light of late July sun in Lahore.

The suitcase stands through it all. Always half-unpacked. Because to unpack it would mean making a commitment that cannot be carried through.

The suitcase that brings happiness. Brings chocolates. Brings T-shirts. Brings mobile phones. Tracksuits and joggers for your mum's evening walk. Skirts that you will never wear. A branded bag for your married sister. A torchlight for a neighbor in the village. An apple watch for another distant relative.

The list changes every year, but the grey Samsonite remains the same. Remains there. Standing. Upright. In the corner, in the periphery, in the part of the room your eye keeps returning to, the way your tongue returns to a loose tooth. Even when it is gone.

The suitcase is the 7th member of your family.

(8)

He doesn't know, your father. He doesn't know your siblings had an argument that one time in 2017 soon after your grandfather's death. That there was no one around when it happened because your house in the city only ever consisted of you four siblings with the occasional presence of your mother, who was always at her job. That your elder brother and sister didn't talk for a year after that. He doesn't know that your mother cried once, then twice, has cried many times, not because of his absence, but because she had to become a scapegoat between a rebellious son who defied everything and a husband who couldn't let go of his need for control even when he lived so far away. Doesn't know that you were too young then and your sisters too helpless. That it still haunts you, all that your mother had to face because she married a man who was never around. That you have vowed, so many times, to never marry a man who is never around.

He doesn't know, your father. He doesn't know that you stood first in your grade again or that a few years from now you will fail a subject for the first time and the accumulated shame will engulf you, will make you bury the failure, will make you not utter a word of it to anyone, except your sister. That the failure will make you discreetly pay 6,000 rupees from your pocket to repeat the course.

He doesn't know, your father, that reading a book was the first time you ever felt the most alive. Or that after it, you began to write. That words had started to fascinate you. That it happened years ago. That you have been published in 2 anthologies even when you were studying medicine. That you won awards in writing. That you were published in a magazine. That writing had become your dream. That you were about to give up on your dream for his dream. That you were ready to live his dream, were ready to become a doctor, were ready to stop praying for an out of this misery of studying medicine, were ready to become a living dead, to extinguish the fire of your passion, when one day he said, I think you can do CSS. When he said, I think you are good at English. When he said, you can do English literature. You couldn't believe it. You hurried to it. You applied, after being rejected by all medical universities, to the only university that had its admissions open. You applied to GCU one late December, your doorway to the next 4 miserable years. But you were beyond ecstasy. You understood then what euphoria felt like when he said the words, when he gave permission for you to go live your dreams. Permitted you to breathe freely. For once. In a very long time.

You have always thought your father doesn't know you. But the truth is, he is more an honest observer than your mother. The truth is your father knows you more than you'd ever let yourself believe.

(9)

When your grandfather died, your family took him to the village to hold his funeral.

You stood around his corpse , reciting something, when a woman standing behind nudged you to ask *where are his sons? Have none of them come back?* You noticed other women gossiping about the great tragedy of this dead man, who only had his married daughter with him, the daughter who took him from the village to the city, from one city to another, before your grandfather settled in your house in Lahore during his last few days alive. The house where he died.

Your grandfather loved his children, yet he had to give them all away one by one like offerings laid on the altar of a world that demanded money and education in exchange for their survival. Your grandfather paid the price of his poverty without any complaint. But when he lay dying, the world collected its debt and kept his sons anyway.

You thought of your grandfather's sons all in separate countries. That only by his sons being in foreign countries could your grandfather get his expensive treatment. His eldest son in Arabia, who could only board the plane after his father had died. His

second eldest son in London, living with his family, who hadn't contacted in 3 months and only learned of his father's death through a Facebook post. His youngest son in Spain, for whom his mother and yours sold all their jewelry to send him illegally, but who still hadn't received his citizenship and hadn't visited home in 5 years.

You thought none of his sons would be there for his funeral when later that evening you got a glimpse of your father standing among strangers outside the house through the open yard door. Your grandfather got his eldest son back. But years of distance didn't allow him to grieve the same, perhaps because he is a man, perhaps because he had already gotten used to his father's absence.

It made you wonder whether a son, having become a foreign man, having become a pardesi, having become so foreign to his own self, had really forgotten how to grieve his own father's death. You saw him from afar conversing with someone. Face still hard as it always had been, only a little more wrinkled.

It surprised you. It made you wonder whether the grief of losing a father, of being orphaned, hadn't reached him yet. That where his sister would not eat for days, mourning; there, her brother, your father, wouldn't shed a single tear.

(10)

It is summer of 2025. The sticky warmth clings to your skin as you sit in front of the same old, gurgling watercooler. You sit on the prayer mat, your substitute for carpet, while your father sits near on the cold, tiled floor. It has been 3 years since you started studying English literature and 6 years since you started writing.

You sit compiling your poetry collection on your laptop, when your father asks, *What are you doing?* And you just say, *Nothing, just working on a university project.*

(11)

Your father complains that you never call.

So many times you have held the phone and said nothing because what is there to say? You don't know how to tell him that distances are not only the ones that can be measured in miles between countries. That some distances are built day by day, month by month, year by year, rule by rule, until the space between a father and his children is so thoroughly built that no one remembers who laid the first brick.

Father, you built this distance with love. Father, do you remember?

(12)

You wonder, sometimes, if your father's ripe age scares him of its loneliness. Whether his aging years are the reason he has learned of something called softness. Whether he knows that his softness feels softer than your mother's love. And you wonder if it would have been any different had he showed this tenderness and compassion in your early years.

You want to tell him sometimes that you do not remember him except through restrictions and demands and all the words he uttered to make you live your lives according to his want. That you only remember him through the silences of your mother and brother and sisters. That you remember him only through the lies you used to tell him to get by. That you remember him through many wrong worlds you lived in while he was here, living with you.

You lived a beautiful facade, a make-belief of sorts. You walked on needles around him like tiptoeing upon shattered glass. All you remember is that his love felt like hot summer sun and your body as good as burnt flesh. And you wonder now whether this tenderness you feel, while eating this watermelon with him on this late spring night, while watching a cricket match, while holding his protective hand in your little palm, whether it would have changed anything had you received it, this fondness and warmth, earlier in life.

(13)

There were times when you missed your father till the longing became a big fat lump in your throat. There were times when you gave in to the urge of your longing and decided to give him a call.

Your finger hovering over the call button while you second-guessed your actions. You would wait a few moments, phone pressed to your ear, holding onto your breath, eyes darting between the phone and the wall, before the voice would flow from his line to yours. The voice, raspy and distant. The voice, strange yet familiar. The voice, your only connection to him for a year.

His voice. Making yours get caught in your throat, making yours heavy with emotion, with fraught to the point he would ask if you have a cold. *No, father,* you would want to say, *I don't have a cold.* He would ask if you needed anything; perhaps he couldn't imagine you or anyone missing him. You would want to tell him, *no father*, *I don't need anything.* You

would want to tell him, *father*, *I just missed you too much, father, I called you because I couldn't help myself.*

(14)

Just a few days after your grandfather's death, your whole family sat on the chowkis in the kitchen of your grandparents' home. On the stove, the tea simmered. Everyone, still stricken with grief, ate the dinner quietly. And in that quiet, your grandfather's absence remained loud. Your father, while eating, suddenly began talking about his father. *I feel as if he would call me from his charpoy any moment now. Like from the living room his voice would call. Complaining, jesting, saying something.* He said that his father was a good man. That he missed him. And he recounted a story that you cannot recall because, with a bite of roti in your hand, growing cold, you were mesmerized by your father's features, strange and sombre, contorting and contorting. The struggle of a man fighting his own grief, fighting his memories till he can no more. Your mother pats his back, a subtle nudge telling him to let himself go. And he does. In the middle of his story, your father begins to weep.

It was your first time seeing your father cry. The first time you heard your father talking about how he *felt*. Your father, who never cried, finally had the grief of losing his father catch up to him. You wanted to console him. But you, who still had the shadow of your father over your head, grieving your grandfather's death, could not help with his grief.

That the least you could do, then, was let your father cry like a child.

(15)

Going through your old journal entries, you read the one you wrote on 25th May 2024. You wrote it the night before your father's departure.

The entry goes like this:

The way you, with love, look at my feet, father. Last night you made me stand and asked me to put my feet together. You became so happy because my second toe was longer than my first and you read somewhere that such people are luckier, more blessed. You look at it again now, and now you are happy again. I have never before felt my heart swell with such warmth and it is a strange feeling to feel, father— I almost thought myself complete. Among all my sisters, father, you called me the most beautiful twice this week and I thought you knew that I do not feel beautiful enough, so you felt that you had to say it to make me feel better and, for some reason, father, the thought made

me sadder. It reminded me of how much love I lack as even in your happiness you are only just looking quite sad. Aren't we all so broken, father? We play pretense and make-believe like we are whole—when we are only just together. Like we do not see my mother's repulsion or my sister's anger. Or my grandmother's tears while she cries all alone in the village in silence on every departure. Or my brother running to another country when this empty house will be emptier without the only man in it. The only one who becomes silly with me—

As much as we hide it, father, we are all so sad and torn. As much as I hide it father, I think I'm growing mad and forlorn. As much as I hide the thought that I'm going to miss it all.

I want this dream to last, father, if only just a little bit longer. Because tomorrow you are going back, and I write this with a heavy heart. For the first time, I think I am actually going to miss you a lot.

The writer is a recent graduate of the English Department (2022-2026) and is an alumna of the LUMS Young Writers Workshop '25.

LinkedIn Road

Naqeeb Ur Rahman

I looked at the tenderness of the cake and then stared out at the golden afternoon through the clean window of MEG, unspooling on the streets in Johar town, and all of a sudden, I wanted *to love* so much. Jabir sat in front of me, dead-faced and angry, and sadly enough, it was not he I wanted to love. Subsequently, like a coin, I turned this emotion to the other side and saw that I equally wanted to *be loved*. Just love and be loved without faces or labels. But sadly enough, it was not him I wanted to be loved by. Meanwhile, a pot-bellied Panda rider passed by us towards the counter, smelling of kitchen and well-cooked vegetables, as if he was carrying open curry-salan in his pockets.

We had been dating since college, and now, after five years, we were still dating while I was studying in my last year of BS, but it was different now. The earliest memories were sweeter when I come to think of them, and as time nestled more and more in our promises, grey areas that were negligible at first suddenly started to swell like pimples. Now our relationship was more like an acned face that was once, sadly enough, beautiful. Now he flirted with other girls. In fact, he cheated on me, though he never confessed to it, and I didn't reply intentionally for hours to his messages. I wish one of us had the guts to move out, break this relationship that was already a dead thing, but both of us were perhaps afraid of loneliness, afraid of ourselves. And that's how we nibbled at each other's peace for fear we would be left alone.

The masked waitress served us viscous, red chai that only cafes with loud music can serve. It had been more than a year since I discovered that Jabir cheated on me now and then, even if that was just talking to other girls. But you will be surprised to see how he never confessed to it because he knew that I was the best among the female lot in his contacts. It killed him if I asked him to show me his WhatsApp. Yet he prowled in my *socials* like a rat looking for grain. And I wish I had the guts to call it quits with him. In fact, I was so desperate to break up with him, but somehow I didn't want to end up being the bad one who breaks relationships, and because of that, I had been subtly provoking him to call it out, but he was such a coward that he wouldn't, and that made me all the angrier. Anyway, that day we were dating again after a month, and both of us

were already looking as bored and unhappy as the November sunsets in Lahore when the smog takes over the sky.

The word 'November' reminded me of my birthday last month, and he was simply not there, pretending that his mother was sick (to be honest, his mother was usually as healthy as Mr Chips!). I still doubt if she was because he put up a story of winning a cricket match late that night. Also, this one time, he jokingly told me how he once lied to his roommate about his grandpa's death so that his friend would write his assignment in college. Overall, you could expect well-designed lies from Jabir, and because of that, my trust in his words scraped day by day like a swollen cement plaster.

"How is mother?" I asked him (keeping my book aside), just to break the silence between us. After all, it was not the sweet silence of lovers, but an awkward, humiliating silence, like the one in the staff room where you would stand pressed down in front of a teacher because you had failed a paper.

"As if you care!" he replied scornfully. How childish and ugly he looked when he was rude. He was texting on his phone now. In a split second, I gathered my anger into a burning lance inside myself and shot it at him with my fierce gaze. But I stopped myself short again.

"Why do you have to be so rude? And why do you act as if I have done something wrong?" I asked him, partly seriously and partly gently, still reigning in the storm of fury erupting inside me. Normally, I am as calm a person as a gazelle, but when I lose it, I lose it really well, though I have never lost it with him. Now, part of me wanted to unload all of my resentments on him once and for all, but before I could say anything, I saw the rage building up in his eyes too, the rage of a frustrated kid, and if it was not for the public, he seemed he would have pounced on me and shattered me to pieces. I stepped back inside myself, a little frightened.

"Yeah, you have done something wrong…You are no longer the Ayesha I knew a year ago. It is like stupid phantoms in your head telling you stupid stories about me, and you start resenting me for that. You accuse me of cheating and of lying, while I have not done anything. And then you call me for a date, and then you are sitting like a bore there, not talking… How am I supposed to take all of this, that you are tired of me and stuff? I

mean, you were just looking at your book. Is that what people do on a date (he usually scoffs at my bookishness)… I mean, I am done here. I am leaving. We will talk when you are finished reading your goddamn books", he said, all of this in a blurt. For a moment, I was shocked, but then in a mini-second, I recollected our fight four days ago over his cheating behavior. Before I had time to contradict him about his lying and his phone-using and all, he rushed out of the cafe as if I had offended him big time, though he knew and I knew that he had offended me more than I offended him. I was positively hurt this time, yet…and yet I sat there, humiliated one more time. Why was my looking at a book a problem when he was using his own phone? How dare he scold me for my books? I know he is just trying to get rid of me soon and perhaps run back to his cricket match. He perhaps loves cricket more than he loves me. Does he even love me at this point? I fell into my overthinking trap again. I wanted to smoke…Do I love him at all? No, not right then at least. No, not right then…But why was I silent all this time? Why am I such a coward after all? (I might just as well write my short story assignment about our messed-up relationship due next Friday.) I consciously kept the loads of matchsticks inside me. I needed to smile. A single bad thought could make my tender body explode like a shriek…Anyway, let's get out of this hell. I picked up my satchel, gave a sheepish, painful crooked smile to the well-dressed, handsome manager, and turned around to move towards the door, but just then I spotted something on the table, and I stopped…

. .

"This woman is crazy herself, and will make me crazy too?" I heard myself saying under my steamy breath as I entered the pavilion. Even Sohail is strange: who calls a player just thirty minutes before a match starts? See, there he is. As always, he will now hug me so tightly. Anyway, let's go play and forget everything else.

"Sorry man, we got short by one man, and I thought you would be the best replacement," he said to me, half in my ear.

"You should have told me a little earlier, man. You screwed my date! My heart was more in the coming here and less in the date," I said, just to unburden the emotional frustration of the date on him. A moving ball slowly hit my left ankle, and I suddenly felt so disinterested in Ayesha, though I don't know why.

"So sorry, buddy! I called you in urgency," he said, and led me to the kit bag.

"We could have won it if Arsalan had not given too many runs in the last over. 23 is a huge amount of runs," I thought as I buzzed on my bike back towards MEG because I realized in the middle of the match that my phone was not with me. I cursed myself for not having it on my mind for straight 3 hours. It was 2 p.m. now. All kinds of terrifying scenarios went through my head. I thought I should contact Ayesha, but she would have contacted me herself, and part of me was convinced that I had my phone with me when I had barged out of the cafe. It must have slipped out of my pocket while driving to the match. On reaching there, the waiters and the manager confessed that they had not seen my phone, though they remembered that I had been there in the morning. I knew the manager, a tall, handsome man, who talks flirtatiously with me and Ayesha especially. I knew he wouldn't lie to me because I frequent his cafe pretty often.

"Did the girl leave after me?" I asked awkwardly, even knowing that the question wouldn't help me find my phone, but I just wanted my phone back so much.
"Yeah, she left directly after you," one of the innocent-faced waiters said.
What to do now? Can't live without that phone. All kinds of horrible thoughts spiraled in my mind again, and in a span of a few minutes, I felt so hopeless and emotionally exhausted, with sweat on my temples. Part of me wanted to cry, feeling immensely like a victimized child. I even started missing her. But how could I contact her if I didn't have my phone? I phoned my mobile from the manager's number, but no response. He assured me that he would interrogate his waiters in private and if something came up, he would contact me for sure. He asked me, I remember now, if I had fought with Ayesha, but it was too private a question, and I walked out of his cafe with a forced smile.

Mother and Aneela had gone to the relatives' house, where there was a wedding. I unlocked the champagne bottle out of my bedroom cabinet, which I had received as a birthday gift from my best friend, Musa. Champagne in the afternoon is one of the best feelings out there. I knew I would miss her more after a shot of champagne, but what did it matter now? I might just as well pour down a few glasses to numb down our sweet memories that would hurt really bad after such fights. Two hours had passed, and I was tired of listening to songs and watching reels, so I poured one more glass. But thank God, I could still function, given my robust build and my habit of drinking. I started feeling so uneasy deep down in my chest as if a little pebble had gotten into my shoes during a walk. I needed to either cry or hurt myself. I knew I would reconcile with her, but what about my phone? As dinner time came closer, I started missing her more and more, and then I

wanted to talk to her and say sorry. But wait, I then remembered, I will call my phone from my laptop. I faltered towards my laptop and called, and to my surprise, I heard a grown-up male voice at the end of the line.

"Hello, who are you? Is that Meg's cafe?" I asked, still thinking the mobile was there.
"Nope, I am Salar, and I found your phone on the roadside," he said. I was ready to fall at his feet just to return my phone.
"Hey Salar, can you please return my phone? I have recently bought it, and I have important data of my family and company in it," I said in a gentlemanly way.
"No, I will return your phone only if you send fifteen thousand rupees to my account," he replied straight away as if from a script. And I wondered how the hell he knew English, and yet he sounded very *desi* in his accent.
"Come on, man! I just bought the phone a few weeks ago, and now you want 15000….Okay, fine, but where can I get the…?" Before I had finished the sentence, he cut the call. I tried back to back, but he was not responding, and there was no end to my horror. I walked in the corridor for I don't know how much time and thought of all the worst scenarios, and I literally felt like the world had slipped from beneath my feet. Even my booze was calming down, turning into a load of left-chest pain. It was okay knowing I had lost the phone somewhere, but it was not okay knowing somebody had found it on the roadside, and that too a poor young man. I couldn't guess where I had lost it exactly, and that messed up my head all the more. Was it while riding to the match that it had fallen from my pocket, or was it somewhere else? Where could it be? Can't even call her to share the horror that was ripping my heart apart. Half an hour later, when the clock struck six in the evening, the founder picked up the phone again, and I had my last chance to try at him.

"Okay, I don't need money: I am a friend of Ahmed's who found the mobile, and I am a sociology student. I have been doing some thesis research lately. I will ask you three questions, and you have to answer me honestly. If you lied, I'll give the phone back to Ahmed to sell it to some young buddy for half price tomorrow. You know, young people die after iPhones, so…"
"Come on, is that a threat? Where do you study?"
"Won't tell you that. You just need to answer my questions, and that's it."
"Okay, but do you promise to give me my phone? How can I trust you? I am losing it here, and you are after your research. I can't lose this phone, man!"

"I promise you won't lose it, unless and until you refuse to answer my questions, which is another deal. So, going for my first question: assuming that you have a girlfriend, or that you had one, have you ever cheated on her? Or how many times you went close to cheating on her or thought of cheating on her," he asked the question so confidently as if he were my friend, and that offended me. I wanted to shriek at him from across the phone, for trying to hurt my privacy like that, but then I was blackmailed and I couldn't, and I didn't.

"What kind of a nonsense question is this? What is with all this interest in my sexual life, dude?"

"Answer the question, or I will cut the call. And if I cut the call, your phone is gonna be sold tomorrow for less than half of its price," the voice across the phone said, and I suddenly sensed grave seriousness in it.

"What the hell, man, you have already started blackmailing me, man!" I said that because I couldn't stand being submissive, yet I implored him. The pain and horror of losing that iPhone was almost already exploding in my chest.

"Yeah, answer the question. Consider I am just a curious, heartbroken student doing research on why people break up. I won't leak your answers, I promise," the guy across said. I was not a bit reassured, and he was still a fishy bait, but to hell with it, I thought.

"Okay. Ohm ohm, can you please ask another such question please?"

"Nope, just this one: Have you ever cheated on your girlfriend?"

"No, I have not cheated," I replied outright, hiding the loads of cheating I have done in my life.

Ayesha's angry face suddenly erupted in my head. How am I going to reconcile with her now? Her anger must be unplacatable now. How could I tell this voice across the screen about my cheating, which I have tried to keep hidden even from myself? My inner life was tied by strings, and I didn't want to be carried away by the whirlwind of my wrongdoings, but again, the anxiety and sense of guilt were kicking in as well, followed by Ayesha's repressed, furious face.

"What if I sent you a message on your phone where you are talking sweetly to three girls at the same time?" he said this, and I lost it outright. In an instant, I was crushed to being a beggar from that confident, haughty man that I was. What he said went like a thorny lance through my heart.

"What! Who are you to open my phone! Have you already opened it?" I shrieked in anger, my pride being hurt, but it was also a subtle implore to not hurt me further because I could see my own downfall coming, and I was, for the first time, frightened and thought of my mother. Even talking about it now is humiliating.

"Yeah, I have. Tell me yourself, or I can check the phone from A to Z and tell you their names and stuff. See, we had a deal: answer my questions, or I will cut the deal off and sell the phone. I will get more profit from the second choice. Just answer the goddamn question, man!"

"Okay, I have cheated…in the sense that despite having a girlfriend, I have flirted with other girls." I let it out at last, though still hiding a big chunk of it, and as I had expected, I felt really ashamed for the first time about flirting and making out with that girl in the park.

"And does your girlfriend know about it?" The sociology rat wanted to kill me with anxiety, I guess.

"She doesn't. I keep it private."

"And if she does, will she leave you?"

"Come on, man. You have already asked loads of questions," I wanted to complain again, but fearing he might cut the call, I added, "Yeah, she definitely will. She can bear anything but cheating. Are you done? One question is already leading to ten more." I said in desperation. I was losing it all the same. Part of me wanted to either kill myself or eat his heart out through the phone. My nerves were hot and tense with fury and shame.

"Yeah, yeah, I am done. This brings me to my next question: I read your recent fight with your girl about the fact that she thought you went to cricket on her birthday, and you said you had some other genuine reason. Where were you on her birthday? Where were you in real?"

"Damn, what the hell? Have you read that too?"

"Yeah, I did. Answer my question, please."

"Man! You are cruel! To be honest, I had a few resentments, so I intentionally ditched her and went to watch a movie with my friend, a movie we had been planning to watch for weeks, and I lied to her about my mother's health getting worse. I didn't go to the cricket. Her only proof of me going to the cricket is a picture I had put on my story that night. That was an old picture…She was wrong, too."

"Have you?"

"Yeah, my girlfriend is just too sticky. Sometimes I just want to have time for myself, my family, and my friends. But she won't allow that."
"Okay, one more question...Oh, no..I am done with my questions. Chalo, come to Linked…UCP's front…"
"UCP university?" I asked, making sure I would go to the exact place after many glasses of champagne.
"Yep, come to the front of UCP. I am waiting there for you."
I got on my bike, forgetting to lock the house. The air was chilly, but I didn't care. I was both excited but fearful because what if it was just another prank? When I reached there, I missed Ayesha more, particularly because it was on that road we first met for tea when we were both studying at UCP, and we talked about LinkedIn for half an hour, and that's why we chose to call the whole of UCP's front as LinkedIn… What the hell! My heart skipped a beat in my chest: Why did the guy on the phone say LinkedIn before saying UCP? I was horrified because I seemed to have missed something; something was fishy. What was it? I didn't know. I kept the laptop on my bike and called to my phone again, squinting my eyes at the screen. A phone rang behind me. Then somebody tugged at my dress. I turned around, and a little boy with the look of a dry fruit seller was standing there holding my phone.

"That mam over there gave me this phone," he said innocently and handed me the phone. I took the phone and followed his finger towards the distance, horrified, and there was Ayesha (why did her face look relaxed and not *la belle dame sans merci?*), standing in the same dress that she had worn for the date and my heart almost jumped into my mouth, knowing that she was the one who had asked the questions, and I had made all those confessions. I would never recover from that towering shame that I felt then, and part of me wanted to die there right away. I took two steps toward her, wanted to stop her and apologize, but she got into her car after taking off her glasses and drove away at full speed.

I sat on my bike for a while, completely shaken and horrified. I tried to fill out the narrative, but I was too shocked. For an instant, my chest felt like vomiting my heart out of itself. I squeezed my temples and tried to think clearly. I cared less about the cheating part and more about the being-caught-in-the-open and the shame part. So it must be that my phone was lying in the cafe, and she, seeing it there, must have picked it up, and not knowing what to do with it, she had then struck upon the evil idea of getting all the

confessions out of me to teach me a bitter lesson. I had always thought that she was going to explode in anger at me one day, but I didn't know this strategic game was her silent way of closure. And she was right in guessing, it hurt me more than tons of curses thrown at me.

Damn, but how? I still can't crack the whole thing after years. Who was that man talking on the phone? A male friend? Through a voice-call changer? Damn, I had driven out of the house as a smiling young man in the morning, and now I was going back home all wretched and defeated.

I looked at my watch again. The evening was already there. Evenings make me sad for some reason. If somebody had pushed a knife into my side, that probably wouldn't have hurt this much, given my physique, but this, this Greek tragedy I was going through in my real life. I opened the phone in desperation, and just then I realized that she never knew my code in the first place. Man! I was fooled big time! All she had done was steal the memory card from my phone, which was filled with our pictures and videos. I was blocked on WhatsApp and Instagram, I would later find out. That's how she strategically won her freedom, and I finally realized that it was not shrieking anger, but steel-cold silence that was her ultimate revenge.

The End

(The writer is a student of BS English Literature, Year III)

Jehanara

Khawaja Huzaifa Altamash

"I remember a Lahore with lush green trees, squirrels and pinecones" I repeat to my poetry class in the fall semester of 2050.

Bringing up nature in a classroom feels almost strange to me now, but for my course it seems to hold an undeniable importance. If I do not painstakingly describe to my students the countless trees I knew as a young boy in the very city now condemned to concrete, how else am I supposed to teach them the influence that green landscapes exert on writers? Especially on the poet we are beginning this week: Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

I usually come home to find my air purifier buzzing softly as I put my kettle on the stove to make some tea. As I wait for the water to boil, I think of how fall, as a season, has drastically changed its meaning for me over time. When I was an undergraduate student at GCU, fall meant brown hues spreading all across the campus: our literature instructors dressed in long overcoats and scarves (outsourced from *Mayo*; dry-cleaned in *Gulberg*) seated quietly on wooden benches, scrolling through their phones or reading a book; couples dating, cautiously stealing away from their friend groups, sitting isolated in the love garden allowing the *pipal* trees to shed their oak-colored leaves onto them in an almost romantic synchrony.

At forty-six now, the fall semester fills me with dread whenever I return to the very campus that first made me fall in love with the season. Although the English department still stands in the same place it has for the last two centuries, it does not quite feel the same. This August, for instance, would mark the seventh month since the tragic loss of the Shahab Garden, in whose place now stands an air-purifying tower straight out of Dante's Inferno, solemnly complying with the Chief Minister's orders.

I vividly remember the Shahab Garden as a place of refuge for all of us in the department. Whenever we felt overwhelmed by Milton or Chaucer, we'd always have the Shahab accommodate us and provide us a brilliant Spenserian respite. My students, by contrast, rarely remain on campus after class; for the city now closes at 4:30pm as the AQI rises drastically in the evening. The Inter Café, which once sold only hot, golden

and oily malai samosas during its good old days of yore, has now stocked boxes of masks within its counters, should a student need another one.

When we were young, masks during the smog days were optional, now they are not. My wife cannot breathe without an air purifier, and our salaries are scarcely enough to cover the electricity bill with it running day and night. Sleeping, even with my wife wrapped by my side, in the night has acquired an eerie quality, especially since my apartment complex directly overlooks Canal Road. The *nehrs* that, since Partition, had been lined with trees and animated by swimmers were filled with concrete five years ago to make way for the horrendous, nauseating yet "state-of-the-art" apartment complex in which I now reside. The *nehrs* of my childhood have now turned into concrete isthmuses between two immense roads, both positioned as parallel as the Islamic angels of right and wrong, or more precisely the Kiraman and Katibeen, to the now beheaded maple trees that once made Lahore green.

What makes me hurt even more is loss! … Oh a whole lot of it. Last year, when I came home during the last day of my fall semester, I heard a strange beep coming from my daughter, Jehanara's room. Ever since she got out of the hospital for bronchitis, things were never really the same. Upon stepping into her room, I saw my beloved Jehanara suffocating: my beautiful daughter, my first child gasping for air in her bed. My innocent daughter, who I had prayed to God for; lit countless candles in the shrines of Sufi saints, all blued up with blackened veins creeping up around her neck resembling the roots of the trees I had seen near Zaman Park. Oh how I ran around my flat to look for the extra air-purifier. "Oh Nasir, Lawrence… oh Iqbal!" screamed I, "Oh the men who have had Lahore's gardens named after them… inspire in my daughter a breath… a single breath… take away the blue from her beautiful face." No Nasir came to save her, neither Iqbal nor Lawrence. My daughter expired in the ICU of Mayo Hospital that afternoon.

I left the hospital in a daze. I remembered Ophelia and thought, absurdly, that I should drown myself. All I needed now was a body of water. I wandered, like Ayaz Naik searching for Durdana Rehman, through Lahore in search of one, but the virgin canals had long since been violated by stern concrete; the Ravi had been reduced to a little more than a grave after being transformed into yet another housing scheme; even the swimming pools at the Gymkhana lay as shallow and empty as the hollows beneath my

eyes. The city had deprived me of even the privilege of drowning, and perhaps the tears in my eyes refused to fall, themselves recognizing the dearth of water. And so, here, I remain alive because Lahore has left me no other choice. I continue to breathe in the polluted air, painfully and against my own wishes, in the memory of my Jehanara.

Oh, how my students glance at one another whenever I fall silent in the middle of a lecture. They probably mistake my pauses for contemplation, perhaps for the careful gathering of a professor's thoughts before returning to Coleridge or Milton. But, oh dear me, why pause for poets now, when Paradise has already been lost and the Mariner's tale long forgotten? Alas! They do not know that I, too, once occupied the very desks in which they now sit, in a Lahore that allowed me to interpret poetry, unlike theirs, which merely asks them to survive long enough to read it.

But wait… dear diary, I shall return to you soon… for I hear a beep coming again… it's from my wife's room.

The writer is a student of BS English Literature (Year III)

Bodies, Duties and Dutiful Bodies

Aleena Tahir

Towering mountains pass us by, sleepy giants preparing for the close of yet another day. The evening sky is a soft, subdued pink-purple hue. This landscape is familiar; Hazara Motorway is etched into my heart. The window is rolled down, and my hand inches towards it, moving of its own accord. We are going so fast that it jerks around erratically, resisting the blustering wind. As the car slows, the hand becomes graceful, weaving through the air in effortless wave-like crests and troughs. Then Mama tells me it's gotten too loud for her to drive. She can't focus properly when the window is down. I close it, the silence again engulfing everything.

I clip and then unclip my earring. Then clip it again, till I need to unclip it. I look over at Mama as she touches the mole on the underside of her chin, as she often does when lost in thought. Ammi has the same one on her nose, I think to myself. Moles are a family heirloom; my grandmother, Mama, sisters, and I are all dotted creatures, the little brown things visible on all our faces.

I think back to yesterday, when Abbu called. He told Mama that Ammi's caretaker was going on her Easter vacation. Mama's brow creased ever so slightly as she replied in a low voice, "I'll be there tomorrow, Abbu jee." I quietly went to my room and began packing.

Ammi has been sick for almost twelve years now. She had a stroke on Eid-ul-Fitr one year. We did not know what words to put to the telltale slurring of her speech, the vertigo, and the vomiting. My memories of it are blurry, but child me remembers black vomit. I don't know if that was real or not. She was admitted to Shifa Hospital soon after. The stroke caused a blood clot in the brain, and it all progressed quite quickly from there. I was nine when it happened. I am twenty now. I have become fearful of bodies.

It is pointless to comfort a mother grieving her own, especially when an illness becomes prolonged. What can you say to make it hurt less? I know the answer for my own mother is nothing. There is nothing you can say.

But I want to be a better daughter and granddaughter, so I at least give it a try.

"Mama?" "Hmm."
I fidget again with my earring, not knowing what to say.
For how long is Gloria going away for Easter?" (Translation: How long do we have to stay?)
"Five days. She'll be back on Sunday."
"Oh, acha", I say, my heart sinking.

It is horrible admitting that. It is not easy being in the same house as someone who needs their clothing and diaper changed, who needs to be injected with insulin multiple times a day, who needs countless medications, who needs to be taken physically from room to room, who is dependent on my mother (at least when we visit), a woman with greying hair herself now. Abbu used to tell us again and again that we need to sit and talk to Ammi, keep her company. But I have been cruelly selfish. An ailing body announces the decay going on within it. The hair gets so dry that it resembles a scraggly bush. The teeth yellow, and the mouth emits an unpleasant odor. The body sags. The mouth, unable to form coherent sentences, burbles unintelligibly. Because of the physical realities of Ammi's body, I couldn't bring myself to sit next to her and talk to her. You scrub and scrub, yet sickness sticks to the skin of the diseased. To me, the Ammi who called me her favorite grandchild was gone. Long gone. I cannot remember her voice anymore. I often think that our bodies are such huge tests. Why do they need so much upkeep? You have to eat, drink, bathe it, dispose of the many wastes it produces, clothe it, drag it to places… Bodies can be cages, their maintenance never-ending.

"Main pehli jaisi nahi rahi", Mama says abruptly, jolting me out of my head and back into our little pink Passo, carrying so much more than just the weight of us two.
(Translation: My back hurts already, and I have to help my mother get around, my legs hurt, and I have to sit her up and down, and my eyes are droopy. I haven't been able to sleep since last night)
She says this exact quote often, and I always laugh. As if she is already 80, drained and exhausted.

"You're not Superwoman, Mama. Thank God you're not like before; otherwise, you would keep yourself even busier. You'd make us raze down the house every week and build it back up again", I chuckle aloud. (Translation: I remember the tears quietly streaming down your face, Mama. Duty has broken you into two, divided between two cities, never at peace in either. Constantly worrying about Ammi when at home, and about home when at Ammi's, overworking yourself at both places till you can't hear yourself think)

Bas beta, Allah chalta phirta le jaaye. Mohtaaji bohat buri cheez hai." Mama lets out whilst sighing the world's saddest, weariest sigh. This rigid proclamation defines Mama, a proud and independent woman who rarely even asks for a glass of water. This had defined Ammi, too, before the sickness. She used to pray the same prayer. But here we are.

Something shifts. There's a small, muffled sob, barely audible but there. I ignore it. She doesn't like sympathy, a trait passed down along with the beauty marks. If our family were a house, its foundations would be silence. What can you say? Everything echoes in our house.

When Mama recalls Ammi's parenting, what sticks out to her is her wordlessness. Ammi was an adept housekeeper, making her brutally clean, yet brutally quiet. Mama says Ammi didn't really talk to her children. There wasn't enough time for that whilst caring for a family of five. What do you even say? For all her quietness, Ammi was violently loud in the early days of the illness. She had some mobility and coherent vocal ability then and used to cry loudly, expletives coming out like vomit. I had never heard her swear before. Her cries cut me down to shreds. Was she trapped inside the sick body? Did she thrash and scream and scratch because she was still in there somewhere, frustrated at being unable to verbalize her pain at being dependent on her children, a fate she had feared so? She also became her sick mother's caretaker at twelve. I am haunted by history repeating itself.

"We're here", Mama announces, killing the ignition. I look up at the old house. I have spent my childhood in this place, coming here to stay for two months on my winter vacations. Ammi used to take me to Itwaar Bazar and buy me things like blueberry-

flavored Crazy Dip powder and paparh. She bought me a purple jacket that looks comically small now. When Abbu scolded me for making mistakes during the recitation of the Quran, Ammi shielded me from his anger.

"Her sins are being washed away. She will enter heaven completely pure", Baba once reasoned with a venting Mama. "Kitne hi gunnah karliye thay meri maa ne jo ab tak dhul rahen hain?" I think of how grief is not allowed breathing space. Of how much people never understand that acceptance is the last stage, not the first.

Mama and I both sigh privately and walk inside, steeling our hearts. She more than me.

Abbu sits on the sofa and hugs us mother and daughter when he sees us, and takes us into Ammi's room. The room screams "sick person". There is a harsh, medicinal smell that hangs in the air. The faintest odor of stale urine is there, not out of neglect but because of time. There are some things you can't scrub away. Ammi's walker is missing, I note. It has been stowed away. Walkers are no longer accessible, her grip too weak to perform the gargantuan task of holding on to the cold metal and making the daily three-time meal pilgrimage to the dining room. Two women or one man are needed to assist her in walking. My eyes see Ammi, curled up away from us, lying on the bed in complete darkness. She doesn't like having the light on. She looks frail, her legs pale and as thin as toothpicks. I go towards Ammi, making an effort to look cheery for her sake.

"Ammiiiii", I say in a sing-song voice. I hold out my hand to greet her, saying "seedha wala" when she gives me her left hand. It is cotton-soft and still beautiful to me. Mama and Ammi have lovely hands. My hands are the only thing I like about my appearance.
Mama asks her the same thing she always does, what we Pakistanis love to ask ill people. "Ye kon hai?", she smiles brightly to her mother as she points at me. I wonder why we do this. Humans can't bear being forgotten, I suppose. Depending on the day, Ammi either mouths a wordless "Hareem" or just stays silent, either beyond remembering or too weak to force her out-of-use mouth muscles to say the name of the granddaughter she named. I get lucky today. A small smile forms on my lips.
Abbu leaves for gaon soon after. I think he breathes his best when in the village that nurtured him. The village that swallowed his mother whole as the earth split open on the fateful day of 8th October, 2005. It's funny, Baba never went back to his village after the

roof collapsed on his father and took him away. Abbu can't seem to stop going back. Who gets to choose whether to run to or away from something?

It is dinner time, 6:30 pm sharp daily. Routine is the best friend of the sick elderly. Mama takes one arm, I take the other, and we take Ammi to the dining area. She makes the roti and heats up the salan Gloria made while I sit with Ammi and try to make her laugh.
"Ammi, I'm soooo much taller than you. You're positively tiny in front of me!"

Ammi babbles in response and smiles. She looks like a baby. Ammi is a wrinkled baby my mama carries to and from places. Becoming a caretaker of a parent is so strange because it is a reversal of the things that fundamentally define what is a parent and what is a child. My mama is now the Ammi, Ammi now the little mama.

Life is ironic, in all its cyclicality.

We eat dinner in silence, aside from the frequent coughing of Ammi as every bite sticks in her throat. The parhezi khaana is bland and flavorless. When it is finished, I put on the TV for Ammi as we take her to Abbu's room in his absence. We make her sit up for at least an hour after meals before taking her to lie down. A fond memory plays of Abbu and Ammi religiously watching Mera Sultan every night before sleeping. I used to get so awkward seeing the blurred out cleavages of the women's dresses, and would avert my gaze. A distant memory.

I suddenly recall that the dishes need to be washed, and go off to do them before Mama gets to them. I'll take Ammi back to the room with Mama when I'm done, I think to myself. I clean all the dishes thoroughly, scrubbing hard, and do the same for the counters and the sink. I can shut off my brain when I clean. Just when I'm washing my hands with a lemony hand-wash to get the smell of dishes off my hands, I hear a pained cry, followed by a yell. Oh no, I think. My heart beats faster in my chest as I run back.

Ufff Ammi!", Mama screams, and sets her down in a chair halfway to Ammi's own room, with a kind of unbridled rage. She holds her back and scrunches her face in pain, as if she's hurt it badly. I know what has probably happened. Ammi got scared and held onto

Mama incorrectly as she was taking her to her room. It hurt Mama's back, but I don't know how much. What do I do?

Mama, still gripping her back, walks over to a chair opposite Ammi and sits down. I can see in her eyes and body language that this is not just about her back. The floodgates have burst open. My mother just breaks down. She looks at Ammi and it all comes tumbling out. She yells. At her mother, at this world, at herself, at God, I do not know. She yells at Ammi for being so strict with her as an eldest daughter, for hitting her as a child, for so many previously unvoiced complaints. I see a completely different side of my mother, one that she had hidden so deep inside her; I thought it didn't even exist. I always thought of my mother as the picture of filial obedience; for the first time, that obedience has cracked. Her anger is so intertwined with the grief of being responsible for Ammi's body, the grief of helping Ammi in the washroom, when it was once Ammi's duty to help her in there. The grief of carrying her mother, who used to carry her as a child.

Like bodies, duty can also be a cage. The bodies we ought to be dutiful to are too often the ones that cage us. (I still have the dream of Ammi waking up one day and having miraculously recovered. No more sickness, no more dependence. No more duty. Love alone is enough again. Till it remains untested, it is so simple).

It is a nice, warm day. We are taking Ammi out for a long drive. She likes them, and it's a change from the drab routine.

"Hareem, go in and bring the hair clips I bought from Ammi's dresser. I will doll up my mother." Mama gives a small, tired smile. I smile back and go inside, into Ammi's room. Rummaging through the dresser, I come up with nothing. Confused, I look into the side table, the cupboards, and even under the table, to no avail. That's strange. I know Mama specifically bought pink, glittery hair clips for Ammi. She loves dressing her mother up and keeping her looking presentable. I think it's her way of honoring the memory of the old Ammi, always put-together and tidy as can be. Disappointed, I come back outside.
"Mama, I looked everywhere, but I couldn't find them." "Hain, are you sure? They are pink."
"I know, but I can't find them. You can check, I'll stay here."

As mama walks away, I turn to Ammi. Looking at her brings up so much sadness, so much protectiveness. I place a tender kiss on Ammi's withered cheek and go on and on about her dress, the pretty color of it, and about where we're going. I want her to know I care. When my mother comes back, she looks upset.

"Did you find them?" I question.
She pauses for a beat, and then quietly says, "Caretakers. One of the many must have taken them."

I stay silent, not knowing what to say.

"My mother's pins… This is what happens, beta, when you become bedridden. Your things begin to go missing; people steal from you just because they know you can't stay on top of it all…", she finishes with something resembling helplessness in her eyes.

A man walks past our house, walking his German shepherd. To him, we are two everyday women. To him, it is just another day.

The writer is a student of BS English Literature (Year III)

Fig tree

Rohail Ahmed

The last time I saw my grandmother alive was when she gave me a handful of raisins before I left my house for the boarding school in Islamabad. It was our sacred tradition: every day I saw her; she'd give me a fistful of raisins in exchange for kisses. I can still, to this day, recall her calling back to me once more with another handful of raisins that she shoved into my pocket. She told me, "Islamabad is very far away, and you are going to need the extra raisins," and kissed me one last time. Now that I think of it, it never was about the journey; it was about that final embrace. And I do wish that I had stayed longer curled up in her lap or thrown a fit that I would not go, but I didn't, because I didn't want my father to once again think that he had birthed a wuss.

Behind my grandmother's room in our backyard, there's a fig tree that was planted from the branch of another, bigger tree in our house which was infested with worms. I used to climb the fig tree to jump over the wall and to the next house to steal pistachios from drying pistachio trees. The house belonged to my father's uncle, whose children all lived in other cities and had left the house empty. I stopped going to that house once the pistachio trees all dried up. Both houses look down at the rest of the city with pride from the top of the hill they are located on. On one side, it's surrounded by houses; on the other, a dry plain with a part of it lush green due to the small pond created by rainwater. The fig tree is now thicker but not taller than the time I used to climb it. Nobody in the house lets it grow taller than the wall so that no one can use it to climb the wall.

I remember, before I left, my father's uncle, the one who the house belonged to and who barred my aunts from studying, gave me an hour's lecture on how important education was and how going to a hostel was a good thing. I hated his guts for saying that the hostel was good. I still hate him, but for different reasons perhaps.

My father was an angry man. He was angry in the sense that he never hit me, nor did he punish me for my wrongdoings (that was my mother's job), but sitting with him was unbearably scary, hearing him hurl curse words at people, the world, and whatnot, the same words that I'd have my ears pulled for saying. Despite his rage, his short temper,

and the yelling, he was the kindest person, at least to animals. I remember my house being filled with the sounds of different animals back in the good days. My siblings and I would ask him what animals he had kept as pets, and we'd all try to count them. He had also planted trees all over the house and even took more care of them than us.

One very unfortunate winter day, I was lying lazily watching TV when my father arrived from the bazaar. I knew the drill: switch to the news channel, wait for him to settle down, and slowly leave the room unnoticed before he got a chance to ask me whether I had prayed in the masjid or at home. But something was different today. He was angry, not his normal anger, but something else was going on. He threw his Chitrali topi on the floor and went straight to the old metal cupboard gifted to him at his wedding. Every time its door opened, it made a roaring sound; this time was no exception. I went near him and noticed blood dripping from a wound on his head. By this time, my sister had entered the room.

"Those sons of vermin, those scum! I will wipe them off the face of the earth. Who do they think they are?" he roared as he cocked his gun. He looked at me and then at the other gun in the safe. My legs started shaking, and my fists became stiff involuntarily. I knew what he meant by that. Most of my life, we have known from the gesture of his eyes what he wanted us to do. I could never. He should have known that I could not, for the life of me. I could not. He knew that, didn't he? That's the least he should have known about me.

My sister, now trying to block his way, started pleading with him not to leave the room. My father cursed at her and then shoved her out of the way. He made his way to the backyard and went over the wall with help from the fig tree. I tried to go after him, and he shoved me too, calling me an incompetent wuss. I ran after him. He made his way to the gate of the other house and swung open the rusty gates by himself, gates that took three people to open every time the residents decided to spend their Eid here. He headed for the camp at the foot of the hill. The camp belonged to shepherds who grazed their sheep on the grass surrounding the hill. This camp was allowed to be set up by my grandfather so that the shepherds had somewhere to lay as the sheep fed themselves.
As my father neared the camp he let loose his fury and stopped only when his gun stopped puking bullets. Three men lay lifeless.

My father turned back and passed me like nothing had happened. I was stunned as I watched the bodies collect dust. I later found out that one of them had cut some trees on our hill that my father had told them not to cut, and when confronted, he had attacked my father with an axe. Out of the three dead, two were brothers. Their father was a truck mechanic who had been bedridden for the last few years. He took two lacs, one for each son, and asked for the guarantee that the expense of his daughters' weddings and the food on his table would be on my father's shoulders. The other man had only one son and a wife. The son did not agree to any terms, nor did he ask for anything; he only promised death to the murderer.

Some days later, the boy showed up at my school gate. He slit my arm with a pocket knife. I shoved him into the ground and snatched the knife off of him and held it to his throat. His eyes were just as lifeless as his father's corpse. "To kill a human was to kill all of humanity" I could hear my grandmother's words playing in my mind again and again. I let him go. By the time school security arrived, the boy was gone and after losing some teeth the boy, accompanied by his mother, left his village. After this incident, I was sent to a boarding school in Islamabad and stayed there for a long time. I'd spend my holidays there too, sometimes with family, most times not. I saw very little of my father after that, and we spoke even less.

I got a call from my sister a week ago. She informed me of what we had been afraid of all these years. My father was shot; he had seven bullet wounds and couldn't make it alive. The boy was caught from a bus station by the police. He was released and is now being held somewhere for me. My house was filled with people—people I didn't know; people I hadn't seen in years. Among those people was a man whose face I may never forget. He introduced himself as my father's friend, he was there when my father was shot and that he was with him in the ambulance too. Before leaving, he gave me the keys to my father's safe and said that my father told him that I would know what to do with them.

When the house had quieted down, I opened the safe. It had some money and a box. Inside it wrapped in a handkerchief was the very gun I had not picked that day. He had kept it maintained and clean all these years, as if he knew what was coming for him and that he was letting me know what he wanted from me.

I now stand in front of the fig tree after all these years, wondering if he ever saw me climb that tree, and if he had seen me, would he have known me any better? Or would he still expect the same as he had always done?

The writer is a student of BS English Literature (Year III)

The Unknown Voice

Syed Saqib Anwar (Jigar with affection)

"Next station is G.P.O station," she announced.

He didn't pay attention to the voice the first time, but, when she announced again, "Please do not take off your mask on the train," he started thinking about *the* voice. *What is this voice and why am I thinking about it? I came here to find a lawyer so that he could administer my case and help me take my land back from the master. I came to Lahore only to do my work, and take care of my file which I still have to show to the lawyer whenever I find him.*

The file in his hand detailed his name as Gulzar Hussain, son of Niaz Hussain, from Chicha Watni, Punjab. When he came to Lahore, he travelled by local rickshaws which proved quite expensive for a man like Gulzar. Then someone informed him of an alternate way of travelling, by Orange Train, to reduce expenses; an idea that he found to be quite indispensable, so he went to the train station and bought a ticket. He stepped onto the train and sat near the door. That was when he started listening to *that* voice frequently.

Over time, he grew used to the voice. He started riding the train, with increasing frequency, just to listen to that satisfying voice. He often asked people where the voice came from. Some said that it was computerized. Others said that this was the voice of a woman in a compartment to which passengers were barred entry. The first statement seemed unbelievable. *It cannot be the voice of a computer and what is this computer? I haven't even heard such a name before. It sounds like a food item.* So, he turned to the second, choosing to believe that she physically existed and made all the announcements from within that closed off compartment.

Gulzar performed hard labour during the night and he would arrive in the morning before the starting time of the train. His income was so small that he could only afford to manage two meals a day and a train ticket. He forgot his purpose for coming to Lahore as his obsession grew. The only thing that consumed his waking hours and his dreams was the voice.

This routine carried on for two or three more months. Regular commuters of the orange train did not spare any moment in disparaging him. They all now knew of his name and

his intentions. One day, while waiting for the train, Gulzar held his ticket in his right hand and beheld it with a little smiley face, while his left hand carried the file. When the train arrived, he stepped onto it as usual and waited for the voice.

This time, however, the voice he heard was not *the* voice he was accustomed to and expectant of. The voice had changed, morphed into an unexpected, unknown and wholly unwelcome voice. He started pushing through the crowd abruptly. He jostled the commuters of the train as he tried to get a better survey of the situation and attempted to understand why the voice had been changed. He moved towards the restricted compartment to see the proclaimer but the guards descended on him before he could reach it, snatched his file from his hands and was apprehended forcefully.

"I just want to confirm something, please leave me," he cried but they were indifferent and apathetic to his desperate pleas.

When the next station came, he was tossed out by the guards who threw his file in his face. He collected the papers through a blur of tears and disappointment. His name might have been Gulzar but his life was certainly *not*. The bystanders waiting at the station constantly stared at him and passed whispered judgements. Some showed sympathy for him and others among them jeered and mocked his state.

For Gulzar, solving the mystery of that voice had become his mission in life. It was only *that* first voice, which he had fallen for. The change in voices had changed the trajectory of his whole life. He was unable to focus on his real problem regarding the illegal seizure of his land. Instead, he was consumed by only one thought, only one thing, which was *the* voice.

That night he hardly slept a wink. He didn't even touch a morsel of food. Instead, he filled his time gazing at his file and recalling memories of her, which he had acquired over the past three months. He only regained a sense of normalcy with daybreak but still, his eyes remained full of tears and helplessness.

The next morning while he sat on a footpath, resting his head on his file and thinking of his situation – comparing his past and present, denying some facts and regretting certain moments – a man came and handed over a piece of bread because he had noticed Gulzar, who had been sitting here for two nights and hadn't eaten something. Gulzar passed a grateful look and as the man moved away from him to continue on his journey, he said something that gave him a glimmer of hope.

The man said, "I can see that you seek something which perhaps is lost, but my friend, do not lose hope. Try once more. I am sure this time your efforts will bear results."

Gulzar listened to his words carefully. He seized the file and started running to the train station. After he reached the station, he bought a ticket and went to the train bay. When he arrived, there were ten minutes remaining till the train's arrival.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his back, he turned and saw that a man stood behind him, wearing a black shalwar kameez. It looked like the man knew Gulzar and his story.

The man asked, "Are you Gulzar?"

"Yes, unfortunately," he replied.

"I have good news for you," the man said smugly.

"What is it?" Gulzar said with a hungered expression.

"What will you give me, if I show you the woman who made the announcements on the train and for whom you have fallen?" The man swept his cradle and spoke.

"I don't have anything except this file. Please take it and show me the woman," he said with longing.

The man pointed out a lady who was talking to the man at the counter, beyond the train track. For Gulzar, time stopped.

He said "I... A... I... I can't believe it," handed over his file to the man and thanked him.

He burst with uncontrolled emotion. When the lady turned and they made eye contact, his world came into sharp focus as he was pulled by the magnetic attraction of her eyes. He stepped over the safety line and went onto the railway track. Every single second brought him closer to that lady. He was already imagining his future with her and he had a strong belief in his love. *She won't reject me when I propose to her.*

Meanwhile, the man sitting at the counter, called to the lady, "Ma'am here is your cheque."

At that exact moment as Gulzar crossed the train track people started to raise their alarm. *What is this madman doing? Somebody ought to stop him!* Gulzar however, was deaf and blind to his surroundings; his only focus was reaching the lady on the other side. So much so in fact, that he didn't notice the blaring horn or the blinding light that fast approached towards him.

On the other side of the bay, the lady turned to the counter and as she received the cheque, she heard a voice call out to her. When she turned back to look at who had called her, all she saw was that the whole train track was painted red with Gulzar's blood. Perhaps she didn't realise his love and empathy for her but at least saw his blood on the track.

The next train came and the announcer announced, "The next station is GPO."

The writer is a recent graduate of the English Department (2022-26)

Suhrab My Friend!

Humza Jalil

Suhrab thought it was a brilliant idea to speak to his goldfish about love, loss, and lots of lights. He would do it every Sunday because that day of the week had something mystical inside the light it brought to him. I would like to think otherwise because Sundays are really short. That's not a sweeping statement. I would like to be humble enough to acknowledge that I can't prove it yet. We move because most of the brilliant ideas are replaced by other brilliant ideas. However, the idea that can destroy the pedestal where multiple brilliant ideas stand alongside like soldiers, is a fixed idea. *Idée fixe*. When a fixed idea devours your rationality, all brilliant ideas lose their meaning as they surrender to the ignorance of obsession. That's exactly what I told Suhrab when I got to know about his habit of speaking to his goldfish about love, loss, and lots of lights. I wanted him to know that it's not usual to speak to a goldfish. I confronted him every now and then, and he would just dismiss my ideas by calling them insensitive. He used to say that I wouldn't be able to understand the concept of speaking to a goldfish because I never had one. Some parts of his statement made a lot of sense. It made me want to rethink what I was thinking. I never had one? A? Gold? Fish? That's right! I never had a goldfish, but I love someone who loves goldfish, and loving someone means loving all the things they love.

I may be insensitive, but I am not an a***ole. The worthy reader must understand that it's the failure of our conscience when we find ourselves blinded to a point where we can't differentiate between insensitivity and a****lery. Suhrab thought I was just another insensitive jerk. I thought I could be anything but a jerk. Despite my constant struggle to prove myself innocent of this accusation, I often found myself lying in bed with a moral conflict that surpassed the apex of procrastination. I started doubting myself until one morning, Suhrab invited me to his place at noon. I accepted his invitation without a second thought. On my way to his apartment, I observed less traffic on the road. It was a damning Sunday! After reaching his apartment, I found the door open with two crushed tulips lying on the beige doormat. He was a florist. He could do anything. That's what I told myself before stepping inside his apartment. As I entered his room, I saw him sitting on a couch with sixty crystal bowls providing a prosthetic habitat to sixty goldfish who looked identical. I rubbed my eyes and the number of bowls decreased to thirty, but this time, all of them were different. I rubbed my eyes with the back of my left thumb to find

a single fish swimming in a huge crystal bowl that resembled a football or something similar to that. I couldn't understand anything! I thought about greeting him after regaining a sense of control over my words.

"Suhrab! My friend! I am not an a***ole."

"Mustard! My foe! Sit down! Sit down!"

"I am not here to sit. I am here to talk!"

"But you can sit and talk. Can you?"

I sat on a red plastic chair placed right in front of his couch. We were separated by the large crystal bowl filled with clear water for the goldfish to swim in circles.

"Why have you invited me here?"

"I invited you because I wanted you to meet my friend."

"I can't see your friend here. Are we waiting for him?"

He pointed his index finger towards the bowl where the goldfish swam with a bizarre sense of misgiving.

"Meet Leo. We have been talking about love, loss, and lots of lights."

I felt as if I teleported myself into a nightmare where it's all good at the start, and then, everything turns bleak. I didn't know what to say to him. I needed some water to make my voice sound stable. I didn't want my fear to grow apparent. Hence, I swallowed my spit, cleared my throat, and decided to speak.

"Hullo? Leo? Ha-ha-ha"

"What are you laughing at? Mustard? Are you disrespecting Leo?"

"No. I am trying to respect Leo! Do you want me to respect Leo more?"

I stood up from my chair, crouched a little towards the crystal bowl, and gave the goldfish a military salute.

"What the heck are you doing, Mustard? Why can't you be serious for once?"

"Haa-ha-ha-ha! My bad. Apologies! Apologies!"

I thought he took my joke lightly, but something in Suhrab's face instantly changed, and I felt the tension in the air of the room. I took my seat again and apologized seriously.

"It's okay. Don't try to do it again. Leo is a saint. If you make fun of Leo, you are going to hell."

"I get it. What's going on? Seriously?"

"Let me show you something."

Suhrab stood up and went outside the room. He came back with one of the two crushed tulips lying on the beige doormat of his apartment.

"What's going on?"

"I will show you in a moment."

I wish I could go back and block this weird florist from all my social accounts, but it wasn't that easy. I don't know. Why are people like this? Why am I yapping? He finally sat where he had been sitting before. After looking at me for ten seconds, he held the flower near the bowl and started laughing like someone who would cry a great deal if you asked them about their day. Suhrab suddenly stopped and asked what I was thinking. I replied that I wasn't thinking about anything, that I was tired and would be going home.

"Mustard. Do you know why it is important to talk to the goldfish about love, loss, and lots of lights?"

"I never really thought about it. I would like to hear your opinion."

"It's simple. They are great at listening. They forget what you tell them. They don't judge!"

"Isn't that obvious? They don't even speak, Suhrab."

"But Leo speaks. Leo will speak now. Hear! Hear!"

He suddenly put the flower in the crystal bowl and started clapping with rare enthusiasm. I took it for one of his lame jokes until my gaze met the eyes of Leo that were burning like cold embers, holding stories too cruel to be spoken in a casual setting. I felt as if Leo's gaze pierced my heart in ways I could not describe. I felt a pang of horror when I

realized that the fish was looking at my face with a reasonable amount of contempt. What for? I don't know. My body stood frozen, and nothing except my love for music could save me. I started humming different songs in my head, and in the middle of these songs, I heard a voice too shrill to be human. It was metallic, cold, and frightening to the point where one might pass out. The voice kept calling me until I gave in to the nightmare of confrontation.

It was the voice of Suhrab's little friend, Leo.

"Tulips die when poets cry!"

"What do you mean, Leo?"

"I don't remember what I said."

"You said that tulips die when poets cry. What do you mean?"

"I mean nothing. I love tulips. I hate you!"

"Why do you hate me, Leo? What have I done?"

"Tulips die when poets cry!"

I looked at Suhrab's face. His eyes were bleeding, and I could find no trace of eyeballs in the sockets of his eyes. Just plain white sadness. My heart started thumping in my ears. I wanted to run as fast as I could, but I could not feel my body. I was numb to the point of emotional invisibility. I couldn't say what I wanted to know. Perhaps I wrote a poem about love, loss, and lots of lights.

The author is a graduate of the English Department (2018-22)

Persistence

Womik

"Does she ever think of me or even remember me?" The thought rang itself in my head as if it hadn't been a guest who had overstayed its welcome for years since Mama left. I stand by the kitchen counter, what used to be our usual meeting place, unsure of what I want. I look at a box full of oranges my father had left me. He was never good at picking the best fruit so he overcompensated by buying more than he could afford in hopes one would turn out good. I am very specific about what makes a fruit taste as it should be, in oranges I look for its imperfections, the webs, freckles, bumps (but not too many), thin skin, average size. I pick two which fit my measure of imperfections but I was not feeling much of an appetite. I just wanted an excuse to justify my purpose in the kitchen…and I did not want to give him the satisfaction of knowing I swallowed a morsel of what he had chosen. I put one back in its place making sure the pile of oranges looked untouched, as full as it was, just as the food he had attempted to cook. I took the cleanest possible small plate out of aggressively washed dishes, most of their coating flaked and had specks of food stuck still. He was not made for household chores as much as he tried to make me believe. What even is believing? A constant charade of expecting less while asking for more. In fact what even was my father made for? He used to be an artist, a painter turned photographer by profession in a studio paid for courtesy of Mama's wedding jewelry and his rich best friend's pity gift wrapped with kindness. When photography didn't make ends meet, the loaning of bread loafs and tea boxes from corner shops led to shoplifting, after much fighting and begging he started working for his brother's film production company as a trolley operator and a part time custodian and that's where he has been ever since, a moss covered stone. I peeled the orange, arranged its slices into a circle around the plate covering the flaked bits. I even sprinkled some salt and pepper on

the side like Mama used to though I was never fond of it myself but I miss her way of doing things. The trash bin was filled to the top so I took the peels along to my room. I read somewhere online that if you keep orange peels around your room it keeps the bugs away so that was something to hold onto. My room had become a terrarium of dust bunnies, spiders and breeding mold keeping each other company while I stayed out late wandering after college. I did not have much friends…or I suppose I couldn't keep anyone around for too long as we could not afford to stay in one place for more than a year, a house never became a home. I never had much to say to people when it came to conversing, I don't think there is a possibility of making a riveting conversation about your missing mother and deadbeat father. So, I stuck to picking up hobbies I could fabricate a personality out of, the ruins of which entombed my room. I collect DVDs, CDs, Books, art supplies, even wrappers and receipts from moments I find worthy of sentimental value. This made me come across as smart and interesting but on the flipside I still could not hold a decent conversation because I'd know of Aronofsky and Tchaikovsky while the boys in my school and neighborhood were more into discussing the results of cricket match, wrestling and what their fathers brought back from their trips abroad whereas my father only brought misfortune as Mama used to say. I cleared the week-old lunchbox he had made me from my bed and sat down next to my sleeping cat to eat the orange. I liked eating the skin of orange seeds, even if I sometimes bit into their bitter insides. I'd peel them inside my mouth, like tying a cherry knot, except it wasn't as tasteful. I could see the steam of mold escaping from the lunchbox. I could throw it and say to his face that I don't want his disgusting food, that it tastes of rot even before I let it reach that stage, that the pain of starvation feels nicer than any new recipe he tries to tempt me with, that even the food he brings from outside somehow carries his sickening essence. Somehow, I let myself believe he will eventually have to learn to take the hint and stop acting like a dog waiting for its master to come back. I checked my phone to see if Mama called me. She hadn't. The orange was tasteless.

The Price of a Book Copy

Muhammad Ihtsham Farid

It was a cold night in Lahore. The calendar hanging on the wall of John's room showed the 20th of December, 1931. Although John was very excited about Christmas, he had already fallen asleep. Mr. Herald, John's father and the Deputy Commissioner of Lahore, was reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, sitting in front of a beautiful Victorian hearth. John was a student at Aitchison College. He was not only a brilliant student but also one of the best athletes at Aitchison College. As an influential personality, he had many important friends from different princely states, like Prince Amarjeet Singh of Patiala, Prince Manmohan Singh of Kapurthala, and Prince Ahmad Khan Abbasi of Bahawalpur. These boys were part of the cricket team at Aitchison College and used to represent their institution at the Gymkhana cricket tournaments. They were very fond of roaming around the famous roads of Lahore.

Karim was the chauffeur of the Herald family. He used to drive John in their lavish red Chevrolet. Sometimes, he would take the boys to the Lawrence Gardens, where they would spend their time observing nature. John's attitude was in accordance with his regal life: arrogant, rude, and conceited. He always used to scold Karim for his late arrivals.

Mr. Herald, an old Ravian, was a very strict civil servant. He was filled with jingoism and loyalty towards the Crown. He had signed many execution orders for locals on charges of treason and revolt. He was considered one of the most loyal government officers in British India and, at the same time, one of the cruelest administrators towards the locals because he raised taxes and crushed the livelihoods of many by evicting vendors from their stalls. Nevertheless, he wanted John to follow in his footsteps, ultimately joining the civil services.

One Sunday morning, Mr. Herald, with a newspaper in his hand, was sitting in his reading room. John entered and sat on a chair facing his father. He had a book in his hand, a famous piece of literature. Mr. Herald, after looking at John's confused face, gave him his full attention and asked John about his confusion. John told him about the book he had bought a while ago and a passage in it that he was unable to understand.

"Father, how can social inequalities and poverty ignite people to stand against the throne when the person sitting on it is far more powerful than the lower social class?" asked John in a very curious way. Mr. Herald smirked and replied, "Son, let me tell you a story. Before us, the Mughals used to rule this land of the Indus. They had an emperor whose name was Aurangzeb. During his reign, social and economic inequalities rose, which pushed local leaders like the Jatts, Marathas, and Sikhs to start uprisings against the Mughal Crown. Eventually, the Mughals became weak, and we, the British, were the ones who availed the opportunity to hold the reins of this land. Now, remember one thing, my son: always follow this rule of mine--never let these people become wise enough to know their rights." Ironically, the locals were not happy with Mr. Herald either. A volcano of anger was silently boiling within them, and the streets of the town could foreshadow an inevitable destruction.

After a few days, when the chauffeur dropped John at the Herald Bungalow, John saw a young boy standing in the garden. He inquired in a very cold tone, "Who's this boy?" Karim said, "Humor! He is my son, Imdad Husain." John didn't bother much and entered the house emotionless.

These were the days when the movement of civil disobedience had already stirred the country, and there were many protests erupting across the country, with Muslims, Hindus, and the other native Indians, taking part in them. Mr. Herald was dealing with these matters with the utmost priority. John was also aware of this chaotic situation.

On one weekend, John was sitting in his garden, enjoying the fine sunlight. Mrs. Herald went to the market with the chauffeur. Karim's son, Imdad, was sitting at the threshold of the house. John noted that the boy was staring at him. John called him, "Hey, you! Come here." He quickly ran towards him and stood straight, with folded hands and a lowered gaze.

"What were you looking at? Huh!" asked John.

Imdad replied, "Nothing, sahib!"

"What is your name?" asked John.

"Sarkar, Imdad Husain!" said Imdad.

"You are the son of Karim, our chauffeur, right?" asked John.

"Ji, Huzoor! I am the son of Karim, your chauffeur."

"Hmmm!" exclaimed John and gestured for him to go away.

Imdad ran away and sat at the doorstep. Imdad himself was indeed a brilliant student and used to study at the Central Model School in Lahore. He had a great interest in reading books of various genres.

One fine day, John was at college, and Imdad was waiting for his father in the kitchen. Karim and his son, like many native Indians, were considered outcasts and untrustworthy by the British, so they were usually kept away from the belongings of the house. Imdad was about to leave the house when Mrs. Herald called and ordered him to clean John's room. Imdad went to John's room with a dusting cloth in his hand. John's room was nothing less than a luxurious suite of a five-star hotel. It was full of expensive furniture, antique objects, and, most importantly, a vast collection of books on different subjects, including languages, literature, fiction, and non-fiction.

Imdad was dusting the cupboards when he saw a famous book that had been recently published: *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck, a revolutionary book and one of John's favourite books.

It was a very rare work available in India and wasn't easily accessible to Indians. In fact, it was the very same book that John was reading the other day when he went to his father to understand a certain passage about social inequalities. Imdad had heard about this book but couldn't afford it. He faced a dilemma after seeing that book. He wanted to take it, but he knew what the consequences would be. Eventually, after thinking a lot, he took it. He thought that he would simply return the book to its place after reading it. He took the book, put it in his bag and left the room.

Mr. Herald's car entered the premises of the house. Mr. Herald entered the house. Imdad went to his father and they both went home. On the very next day, there was complete chaos at the Heralds'. John was screaming and throwing things all around his room. His parents seemed worried and inquired about the situation. Karim, who was washing the car, suddenly stopped and crept to the door of the house. All he could hear was, "Where

is my book?" He had never seen John this angry. He quietly went back to the car and started cleaning it again. Imdad wasn't there with his father that day. It seemed like he was enjoying reading the book he had taken from John's bookshelf. "Some slave has stolen my book," screamed John. John's parents were trying to calm him down. The book wasn't only rare but also very expensive.

When Karim went home, he told Imdad about what had happened that day. A sudden thought flashed through Imdad's mind. He remembered the act he had committed in ignorance the previous day. It could have been considered a heinous crime in the British Raj.

The next day, there was an unusual scene at the Deputy Commissioner's House. Every servant of the house was being questioned, and so was Karim. Karim was an ordinary chauffeur and didn't know anything about the incident. Imdad was present with his father. When his father was being questioned, he remained silent and didn't say a word. In the evening, when they both went home, Karim was a bit worried because all the servants had been threatened. Imdad was sitting on his charpoy, holding that very book. Now, he was worried, too. When they had eaten dinner, he went to his father and reluctantly confessed to him about the book he had taken from John's room. Karim, who was drinking some water, spat it out suddenly and yelled, "What?" He couldn't digest the words that had just come out of Imdad's mouth. Karim started trembling. He couldn't think of anything. "Imdad Husain! How could you do that? You have destroyed us completely. You have left us with no place to go," cried Karim. The situation was more than horrible and worrying. Karim knew the consequences of being exposed to the Heralds. He was trapped in a dilemma. Should he tell them or not? After thinking for a while, he decided to tell them, as he hoped for forgiveness, and for that reason, he took every member of his family into confidence. He didn't even consider any of the explanations given by his son. Imdad only wanted to read that book because he couldn't afford it.

Tomorrow seemed like Judgment Day for Karim and his family. The next day, Karim, knowing the consequences, hesitantly entered the Deputy Commissioner's House. Karim started doing his routine chores. At 2:00 p.m., he went to Aitchison College to pick up John and take him home. Karim had decided that he would tell John about his son's mistake and ask for forgiveness.

On their way back, Karim hesitantly returned the book and said, "Sir, this is the book you are looking for." His hands trembled, and the book fell at John's feet. "Sir, my son mistakenly took it from your room to read it. I'm very sorry! Please forgive us." "What in the blue hell did you just say?" said John furiously. "I'll tell you what happens when you steal something in the British Raj."

The car entered the house and stopped in front of the porch. John didn't wait for the chauffeur to open his car door and got out of the car angrily. "Mother!" shouted John. "What happened?" asked his mother. "This coolie and his son have stolen my book. I want you to throw them out of our house," said John. Mr. Herald came back home at this very moment and inquired about what had happened. Mrs. Herald told her husband the whole story and asked him to punish the chauffeur and his family severely.

Karim, who was standing there with folded hands and a lowered gaze, went to his knees and started begging for mercy. Mr. Herald, the Deputy Commissioner, said that his entire family would face the consequences. He continued begging, but his request was denied. Ultimately, he asked for one favour as his last wish: that his family be forgiven and that only he be punished. They accepted his final wish. He was arrested and taken away.

When the news of Karim's arrest reached his home, panic broke out in his house. His wife started wailing, and his children started crying. Imdad was crying with painful emotions because he knew what had happened to his father. He ran towards his father's room and picked up a letter from the top of a cupboard which his father had instructed him to open in case he didn't return.

He opened the letter while wiping his tears. There was a message written for Imdad.

"Imdadya, you are my son, and all my love is for our family. If something happens to you, your mother will lose her sanity. I'll ask them for forgiveness. If I succeed, we'll meet again, but if I don't come back, go to your uncle living in Mochi Gate and ask him for help. Take care of the family. Rab Rakha!" Imdad couldn't hold his emotions and started crying. His mother took them and went to the Deputy Commissioner's House. At first, they were not allowed to enter the house, but after she begged for a long time, they were allowed to enter with the permission of Mrs. Herald.

Mrs. Herald was standing on the stairs of the porch. All members of Karim's family ran towards her and started wailing. Karim's wife begged for mercy for her husband. Imdad stepped forward and said, "Madam! I want to accept responsibility for the deed which was committed by me, and because of that, my father has been arrested. Please forgive us! I didn't do it on purpose. It was a mistake. I just wanted to read that book. We are sorry, madam! Please! Forgive us." John himself came outside. He had listened to every single thing that Imdad and his family had just said. "There will be no forgiveness for you brown people," said John, and went inside.

The guards came and pushed them outside the gate. They were crying and begging, but all their cries were in vain. Imdad helped his mother and siblings up, and they went home. Imdad had only one option left: he had to meet his uncle, who lived in Mochi. He took permission from his mother and went to Mochi.

According to the address mentioned in the letter Imdad went to Mochi and knocked at the door of a house near the Masjid of Saleh Kamboh. A tall man with a huge moustache opened the gate and asked, "Who are you, boy?" Imdad introduced himself. His uncle recognized him, hugged him, and took him inside. Imdad told his uncle everything, who was one of his father's cousins. After listening to Imdad, his uncle answered, "Don't worry, son. I'll handle this. Nothing will happen to your father." Imdad, after meeting his uncle, returned to his home.

It was almost sunset when Imdad reached home. He knocked at the door many times, but nobody answered. At last, he jumped over the wall and entered the house. There was pin-drop silence in his house. He shouted, "Mother! Mother!", but there was no answer. His feet started freezing. There was sweat on his forehead. He moved towards his mother's room. He quietly opened the door, and what did he see? His mother was lying on the floor, and his younger siblings were trying to wake her up. He also tried to wake her up, but she wasn't moving. He ran outside and quickly called one of the hakeems who lived nearby.

The Hakeem came with him and examined her. He said that his mother had passed out due to a sudden shock. He prescribed some medicine and advised him to take care of her.

After a few hours, his mother regained consciousness. She started screaming. Imdad asked her what had happened. His mother said, "Karim! Karim! Karim! Your father is no

more. They have killed him, they have killed him!" and she started wailing again. The world perished in front of Imdad's eyes. He was helpless. He did not know what to do. On the other hand, Mr. Herald and his family were good as usual. They did not concern themselves with Karim's execution. He was nothing but an ordinary chauffeur. The news of Karim's execution had already reached his cousin in Mochi. The sun had set. Darkness had prevailed. A police van stopped at Charing Cross. Two constables got out of the van, carrying a bier on their shoulders. They put the wooden frame at the side of the road and left.

This display was a warning to the locals never to go against the "Gora sahib." People started gathering around the bier. The news of this cruelty had spread like wildfire. People were already very angry with the local administration. Slogans were raised. Protests had erupted. Karim's cousin had also reached there. The gathering had turned into a mob. They wanted only one thing: justice.

The angry mob lifted the funeral bier onto their shoulders and started moving. They knew where they were going. The mob was moving towards the cantonment, and more people were joining it. The mob reached the Deputy Commissioner's house, broke through the gates, and entered the premises.

It was the night of December 24. Mr. Herald, the Deputy Commissioner, was sitting on his sofa, trying to enjoy the silence of the gleaming winter. Suddenly, some chaotic noises reached his ears. He stood up to inquire. Nothing was visible, but something was audible. He went out to the porch. A mob was standing right in front of him, with Karim's cousin leading it. The guards were in no position to stop them. Karim's bier was placed in front of him. They were only chanting one thing:

"Justice! Justice!"

Mr. Herald tried to manipulate the mob into negotiations so that their demands would be heard, but the mob refused to be deceived. Imdad's uncle stepped forward and struck the Deputy Commissioner with a stick. He fell to his knees. When the rest of the mob came to beat him, he begged for mercy, but the angry mob didn't want to listen to anything. They beat him to death. Upon hearing Herald's cries, his wife also came outside the house to see what was happening. When the mob saw his wife, it swallowed her and beat her to death as well and left.

The next morning was Christmas Day. John woke up a bit late because it was a holiday. He went to the living room to greet his parents, but there was no one there. He went to all the rooms, but there was no one. Finally, when he came out of the house, he saw two bodies shrouded in white, with people gathered around them. He didn't know what that was. Everyone saw him and lowered their gaze.

Eventually, the senior superintendent of police came to him and told him, "Mr. John, I'm very sorry to inform you that Mr. and Mrs. Herald were killed last night by a violent mob." John couldn't believe his words. He was thinking about how it could happen to him. He was emotionless. He didn't know how to express his feelings. He had become completely numb.

He didn't know that his furious behavior would lead to such large-scale violence in British India. He had lost everything. All of a sudden, the happiest day of the year had become John's worst nightmare.

The writer is a student of BS Political Science (Year III)

Music that Refuses to Fade

Rania Ahmed

Soft music plays in the café in Gulberg, Lahore, mingling with the drizzle falling outside. The walls are lined with sepia photographs. Across the room, there is a door painted deep green that appears functional, but no one opens it. Nearby, a record player loops *"Mera kuch samaan tumhare pas pada hai…."* endlessly. The table is set with two cups of coffee.

Natalie sits alone at the table, poised and evasive, hiding her vulnerability, waiting for something for years that refuse to be counted. Paras enters hesitantly, drenched slightly in drizzle. He stands earnestly, craving forgiveness. Nearby is the waiter—silent, mechanical, the eternal witness.

"It's… familiar," Paras says, "the teacups, the old table, the rain. Almost like that cafe near Liberty. Remember? We went there after your exam…"
Natalie looks at the cups, untouched and cold. "It only resembles the place, made from memory, not cement and steel."
Paras forces a smile, half laughing. "So, what, we're in a dream?"
"Dreams end," she says, "this doesn't."
He looks around, notices the still air. "No waiter. No sound from outside, just the same song… You always played it when you didn't want to talk."
"I didn't play it. It played itself through my muscle memory," she replies, staring past him. "Like we do."

Paras leans forward, speaking softly. "Then what is this place?"
"A café, a memory, a reckoning," she replies. "Call it what you wish. Words are mortal. They don't last an eternity."
"Eternity?"
"You'll understand soon."
She gestures for him to sit. He does but still unsure. The record clicks; the song begins again.

"How long have you been here?" Paras asks.
"Don't know. Time doesn't pass here. It circles. You'll learn to stop counting soon too."
He looks toward the window that would not budge. "This seems like hell? Eternal. Never-ending."
"If you must label it," she says, unbothered. "But not the kind of hell we all grew up fearing. The flames, the demons. None of it is here. Only ourselves, infinitely reflected."
"Then, why us?"
"Because we built it. Together."

The record echoes.

Natalie speaks again, mapping out their prison. "Every lie turned into a wall of this place. Every half-spoken truth became a window that refused to open. We built this café with our choices and actions, Paras."
"You're poetic as ever. Even here." Paras remarks.
"Poetry is a defense for me. It gives me words to say out loud what hurts."
"And what hurts?"
"That you always asked questions but never waited for the answers."
He looks away. A long silence stretches across the table. Paras embodies his bad faith through tenderness, confusing sentiment with true sincerity.
"I thought I treated you well." Paras defends himself. "I was kind."
"Kindness is the form of control when it refuses to see the truth," Natalie challenges. "You loved me gently, so you wouldn't look at what was sharp in me."
"And you, you wore detachment like a badge," he counters, his earnestness turning sharp. "You acted above emotion, above need."
"Perhaps. I confused calm with clarity," she admits. "I thought stillness meant peace. It didn't. It only made my fears quieter..."
The record skips, breaking her train of thought.
"It always skips before the last loop of *tumhare pas pada hai*," Paras notes, glad for the distraction. "Like it's afraid of finishing the sentence."
"Maybe it knows there is no end to what we left behind."
"So, we are here to talk? To confess?"
"We are here because we could not talk when we could have," Natalie explains. "Now there is nothing left but talk and useless words that will lead to nowhere."

He sits back, defeated. The rain outside thickens, swallowing the remaining sounds of the outside world.

Quietly, Paras speaks, "You make it sound like we failed. But I remember laughter. I remember warmth. I remember the moments."

"Warmth is not true," Natalie counters. "Even a lie can be tender if it's told softly enough."

"You always speak in riddles."

"Because you prefer riddles to reality. You like to play. You romanticized and fantasized everything, even your guilt. Every time I pulled away, you said I was exotic. I was not exotic, Paras, I was just… absent."

"Then why stay at all? Why did you not leave?"

"Because absence felt safer beside you."

A long silence follows. The ghostly sound of cutlery clinking brings faint reminders of other tables, other lives.

"Maybe we just were not made for each other." Paras sighs.

"No. We were made from each other," Natalie corrects. "You needed someone to forgive you for your gentleness or, perhaps for half-baked love. And I, too, needed someone to mistake my evasion for strength. We were perfect, Paras, for ruining each other this beautifully."

"Then what now? We sit here until what…redemption?"

"There is no redemption here, only repetition. We don't burn; we remember."

He looks toward the door. The green paint gleams against the dim light in the café.

"That door, does it lead anywhere?" Paras asks.

"Everywhere and nowhere. I've opened it many times," Natalie warns him. "It only returns you to this table."

"You're lying."

"Try."

He rises, walks to the door, and opens it. A blinding darkness. He steps forward, then stops.

"So, this is the punishment, to relive the same conversation forever?" Paras asks.
"Not punishment, but proof that we never meant what we said about freedom."
"Freedom?"

"You spoke of it all the time. 'We are free to choose, to begin again.' But you chose safety. You mistook comfort for love and habit for devotion."
"And you…you prided yourself on never belonging." Paras fires back, turning around to face her. "You were so afraid of being held that you built a temple of solitude."
"Maybe we deserved this."
"No. We chose this. You chose this."

She looks at him as if she approves the precision of that word.

"Yes. That's Sartre, isn't it? 'We are condemned to be free,'" Natalie says. "Condemned, yes, because every choice builds the prison, we then blame the world for. The prison we are in right now."
Paras half-smiles. "You still quote philosophers mid-argument."
"Only when they agree with me."

A quiet laugh passes between them. Soft, brief, human.

"So, what happens when we accept it?" Paras asks. "When we admit that this is hell and we deserve it…"
"Acceptance will not bring any escape either," Natalie responds. "Nothing will. It's merely lucidity. We see clearly that the door is never locked. But still, we can't just know what to do with the space beyond it."

The record clicks again. The line repeats infinitely: "*tumhare paas pada hai*…"

"Do you ever think of the real Lahore? Noise, people, light, life moving forward?" Paras asks, looking at the sepia walls.
"That city is here too, replaying in loops," Natalie replies. "Every horn, every drizzle, every cup of coffee."
"So, Lahore itself is hell?"

"Could be. Could be not. But it for sure prepares you for it."

She smiles faintly. He almost laughs. Both go silent for a long time. The lighting fades warmer, golden.

"How many times have we had this talk?" Paras asks.

"Enough for me to know your every question and the answer to it," Natalie whispers.

"Not enough for you to stop asking."

"And if one day I don't ask?"

"Then perhaps the record will stop."

"That simple?"

"Nothing is simple here. Even stillness requires effort."

He looks at her, completely exhausted yet tender.

"You always looked most beautiful when you were tired of pretending," Paras murmurs.

"And you, when you believed that love could redeem what it could not understand," Natalie answers.

The drizzle outside stops. The song fades.

"You said once that songs save us," Paras remembers.

"They don't. They preserve us. They keep us," Natalie says. "Like pressed flowers, beautiful, but lifeless. We are lifeless too."

"Then let it play."

She nods and resets the record. The scratchy vinyl begins again: "*Mera kuch saamaan tumhare paas pada hai*…"

"That's the music that stayed," Natalie tells him. "Not because it's beautiful, but because it refused to leave. It has nowhere else to go."

"Like us."

"Exactly. Like us."

They sit in silence as the song loops once more. The door stands open, and the darkness can be seen beyond it.

"Do you think this ever ends?" Paras asks.

"It ends the day we stop performing what we once called love," Natalie states. "But that's the tragedy, Paras. We love our performances more than each other. More than the actual love."

He looks at her, not with love, not with anger, but with comprehension. Something final settles between them. They are condemned to an endless reenactment of the self.

"You're right," Paras says. "Hell isn't fire. It isn't demons either. It's the versions of ourselves that we have chosen to create. The versions of ourselves that we live in and can't escape."

Natalie adds softly, "And just like that, this music also refuses to fade."

The record clicks again "*tumhare paas pada hai*…" and the drizzle outside resumes.

TRANSLATIONS

- that is not my world // woh duniya meri nahin hae
- slaughterhouse, kingdom, alleyway

that is not my world

Waqas Khwaja

only because you are visiting
have i clothed myself
in this garment of mist

you will but in this
way alone get to perceive my presence
outside of this you cannot see me

that world is not mine
that world in which
i once lived
and you too

you who have come visiting
are already not the same
i left behind

and i too am she no more
as when we parted

here there is time
nor place
here there is no you nor i

what exists
exists whole
together without difference

difference is but a dress worn

this garment of mist i am granted
only because i once loved

and you did not cease
to seek me out when i left

go back to your world
and when you
arrive at that riverbank
where seasons end
where tides cease
you too
shall be able to come this way

you are yet

but a prisoner of time and location
how can I go back with you

relinquish this pursuit

nothing
is ever extinguished
were all that is left
but a phantom particle

whatever happens
remains happened
forever in changing husk and casing
of dress and clothing

such excess
such waste
such fabrication

such travail
of perpetual becoming
such beauty

such vanishing

woh duniya meri nahin hae

Waqas Khwaja

sirf issliyay kay tum aaey
maen ne ye
dhund ki poshak orrhi hae
mujh ko tum bus
iss tarhey he dekh sako gay
iss kay bahar maen tum ko
nazar nahin aa sakun gi

woh duniya meri nahin hae
woh dunya jis mein
maen bhi thi
tum bhi
ab nahin hae

yahan maen hun
aur tum jo aaey ho
woh nahin ho

jo maen chhorr kay aayee thi
aur maen bhi tau woh nahin hun
jo tum sey bichharr gayee thi

yahan waqt hae
nan dunya
tumhari dunya ye nahin hae

tum apni dunya mein wapis challay jao
aur jab tum
uss kinaray pohancho gay
jahan mausamon ka anth hota hae
jahan mad-o-jazr bhi nahin rehtay
phir tum bhi
iss taraf aa sako gay

tum abhi
waqt aur zameen ki qaid mein ho
maen tumharay sath kaisay aa sakti hun

yeh khoj chhorr do
kuchh bhi tau kabhi
zaya nahin hota
agar jo bachay bhi tau bus
ek pur-asrar zarra hi kyun na ho

jo bhi ab tak huwa hae
jo bhi hota hae
waisay he rehta hae
hamesha libas aur poshak kay
badaltay khol ya chhaal mein

itni afraat
itna ziyaan
itna farib

daimi nae roop sakht karnay ki
mehnat mashaqat
beybaha husn aur dilkashi

aisi gumshudgiyan

slaughterhouse, kingdom, alleyway

Sajjar Shabbir

[This is an English translation of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's *Hum Jo Tarik Rahon Me Maaray Gaye*]

we, the famished, in the longing for
the phantom blossoms of your plump lips,
we were hanged like condemned fruit upon
the gallows' parched, unyielding bough.

we, the light-starved, in the ache for
a traitorous dawn of your glowing fingers
we, who were slain in half-darkened lanes

upon the scaffolds, the noose stole our breath,
far from our own lips, your mouth's scarlet
wildfire flickered, and burned our eyeless dark.
even as chains carved anthems on our wrists,
your hair's drunk tempest rained lawless wine.
even as they erased our tongues, your palms'
cold moon outshone the executioner's sun.

when twilight bled out in alleys, where shadows
gnawed out our last names, where cruelty reigned
we walked until the earth split up beneath our feet
a mutilated ghazal's carcass on our lips, in our chest,
the kerosene lamp of grief, quivering

our sorrow stood witness to your beauty's tyranny.
look, how we swallow, how we endure, even now,
we, who were slaughtered on light-devouring roads

if our foul hands were fated to fall short of sky
your love was a knife sharpened with our ribs
who dares question the pilgrimage of desire?
every road of longing ends in a slaughterhouse
of separation.

see how they pluck our banners, harvest our bones
from the killing fields, where new caravans will rise,
drunk on the soil of our decomposition. their feet
tracing maps we drew when we folded continents.
into the distance between two souls. for you.

we played the role of an emperor of decay
gambling kingdoms to keep your legend alive
we, who were fed to hungering, dimly lit lanes

POEMS

- homeward bound
- Limbless in Gaza
- It is so very small, is it?
- Faith and Inheritance
- Two Parallel Poems with Point of Conjunctions
- Mother
- Open Wound
- I Fell Asleep
- Son of the Wasaib
- Musings on a Wet Monsoon Afternoon
- A Meeting with a Tree
- Keeper of Sheep
- Daughterhood OR Confessions of a Grenade
- Burn Away Your Mask
- A Window for My Missing
- O Changeling!
- A Bowl of White Rice
- A Lonely Man
- Dream of a Language
- The Seeker's Path

homeward bound

Waqas Khwaja

exiles refugees
unwelcome aliens
among fugitive residents
without memory

birds in flight
from homelands
locked forever
in the heart's shut eye

now where was it
they left
or where
they first set out

and is there someone still
who waits for them
in the doorway
of that no-longer place

and is there a doorway still
or that lane that led to it
that house
that courtyard of garrulous evenings

how is it
they came so far
and survived their journey
while all they loved was lost

or did they indeed as well
perish with those they loved
and what survives
is someone they were not

that bird that took to air
on its young wings
they cannot find again
try as they may

or the way
back

Limbless in Gaza

Mehvash Amin

[*"Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with Slaves"*
From a poem by John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*]

They sink unfiltered
Into my mind
These states of Gaza.
Slaves, Mill.
Limbless in Gaza,
Children, milled.
Leviathans,
Their power
Not in their hair,
Like Samson,
But in the endless
Churnings of their
rotted minds, milling
Children into powder.

Then the victim becomes
The perpetrator.
"Promise was that I
Israel From Philistine yoke
Deliver... no, no, erase.
Change to: "Promise is
That I Palestine from
Israel's yoke deliver."

Things are upended,
So change too the poems…

The author is a Pushcart-nominated poet based in Lahore. A gold medalist in English and French Literature from the University of the Punjab, she studied Modern Letters at the Sorbonne, Paris. Her poetry has appeared in international literary journals, including Vallum and Sugar Mule, and in Capitals (Bloomsbury). She is the Editor-in-Chief of The Aleph Review and founder of Broken Leg Publications.

It is so very small, isn't it?

Bakhtiar Ahmed

Another turtle?

The last one died.

I want another one now.

I think I'd keep this one alive.

And I'll talk to it.

About the quiet growing of the grass around your ankles, as your face gathers dirt, and your tongue tastes so rotten gray.

The last one wasn't here to hear about all that.

About how I lost my way one night, and fumbled from one street to another, chased and besotted.

This city is my God.

With its tumbling scriptures, and its bent windows opening up to beauty- not me, not me, not me.

I'd like to remember everything it has ever told me, and like a swinging vine, reach up to its throat and hold, ever so tightly.

The nights were prayers.

Unanswered.
And about the hunger too.

They say you can't truly eat unless you've gone hungry for a week.

Just as I did.

They're stupid. And so was I.

Can God forgive us for what we've done to each other?

And can I forgive myself for what I've done to this b-o-d-y of mine?

Would it have been easier had the turtle lived, looked at my tiny huge hands and said:

"They're not yours. They're you"

And he would have said it about the fat too, and the hair, and the shoulders, and the legs, and the feet, and I would have listened.

And I would still be myself.

I'm looking for another turtle.

But there aren't any turtles anymore.

There's just a lawn chair with claw marks.

I should learn to listen to myself.

I should learn to take care of myself.

Not poetry, not a confession.

Help.

Love.

Yourself.

And the trembling fingers.

There's nothing much left in me.

And there never will be much left in me.

Will that be enough?

The dead turtle says something.

I can't hear it.

My answers must be my own.

Someone should tell me to stay home today

Now that I've lost another turtle

It creeped through the door, found a bus, and clung to its wheels

There is no shame in saying I loved my turtle

I just forgot to close my doors and love does not close them for you

Twelve years with it. Lovely lovely years, of which I don't remember anything.

There's something about prayer-

Red,blue,white, purple, grey, never green-

That makes me think I should never have spoken in my life

It tires me out, and softens the gums, and sinks my head.

Should I pray for my turtle to return?

When yesterday, I dreamt of it,
Happier.

Do I want to be like him?
No.
I never could be.

Me, so self-effacing yet so arrogantly self-loving.

I should have been staying home today.

I should have been doing a lot of other things too.

It will be easier if I remember to close my doors.

Or if I finally figure out the right one to

open.

My memory only serves the most meagre of purposes

I would like to be reminded of childhood again.

Without those tyres passing over my feet.

The world begins from there.

It is so very small, isn't it?

Faith and Inheritance

Hira Ali

Most poetry comes from loss
You know this because when
You passed a similar street,
You thought of home
smelling like cardamom
and something burning.

Home is a prayer, father, that forgets how to end
and you prostrate for so long
you forget how to rise again
& religion becomes a bruise
for your love of god, like a proof
that you are loved just as deep and hard.

This is to say,
you love god just the same as your
father, and your father's father and their father
You love religion like a philosophy that
You forgot how to read by yourself

Faith is an inheritance, father,
But so is shame & every day feels like a wound
If you stay with yourself
for too long,
Father, do you know what it feels like
to be a maggot dreaming of becoming a larva again?
Each time you become something more
than yourself
You want to race to god on the first
prayer flight you find
Without the fear of what it is you have become
& as fate would have it
your love for Him
is the only thing you never
learned
how
to kill.

Two Parallel Poems with Point of Conjunctions

Mohattar Bashir Mughal

Today, Tonight,
they braid they untie
your hair
with jasmine, with water,
until
every bud every prayer
permeates your body.
They dress They wrap
your hands
in henna. in white.
You remain still with
a throbbing heart , a stagnant heart,

beneath a fabric
of prickly organza. of cold linen.

They turn your face
towards a groom. towards the Ka'abah.

Mother

Mohattar Bashir Mughal

The ebony fan's fingers tremble where I lie,

and the sheets refuse to keep me warm,

storing my nights like unripe mangoes

my mother hoarded in the store

green and hard,

her husband bringing kilos to atone

for debts no apology could ever own.

My mother's hands will never tuck me in bed again.

The *Jhelum* moves beyond my window,

Will the angry Moses not part it, if I drown?

I think of mothers who drowned sons,

of the *Kan'ans* barred from the Ark.

Will there be an *Asiya* to save me?

Unripe sweetness left to rot in the dark

I will not sleep again tonight

Open Wound

Sara Javed Rathore

Last night I dreamt—

Of hands not soft: never

soft.

My teeth bit into an apple.

It became a mouth guard.

Reeked of blood and

Childhood, innocence.

Something else. Something lost

Sacrificed at the altar of

violence. Lit cigarette. Blood

on blue

Sheets.

My teeth bit in—

Pomegranate seeds

Unfurled on the apex of my

thigh.

I couldn't let the wound fester.

So I let your lips cauterise

Blood like penance

Wrought in iron and ink.

The shape of your ruin mirrors mine.

I Fell Asleep

Humza Jaleel

The stars kiss each other
I wake up in my bed again
All the heavy little animals
No one says a word about
The Sun stands still in awe
The Moon detects loneliness
Consummate before the fire
The delirium of old zombies

[NIGHTMARE ALARM RINGS…]

The stars kiss each other
I slept without my pillow
All the heavy little animals
Red is what we call the day
The Sun stands still in awe
The Moon slept in your eyes
Rejoice without fearing death
Dead is what we call the night

[DREAMS ARE NOT REAL AT ALL]

Son of the Wasaib

Ahmad Zeeshan

I am the son of the Wasaib, born by the restless Indus,
Where the river feeds empires, yet forgets my thirst.
My hands sow gold in the soil, but my plate remains empty,
A cultivator of abundance, condemned to silent hunger.
My voice dissolves before it reaches the marbled halls of power,
For I am subaltern, unheard, unseen, unrecorded.

I am the son of the Wasaib, heir to dust and denial,
My father tilled, his father too, yet chains remain unbroken.
They brand me 'mafia' from their distant, cushioned thrones,
While my Haq is stolen in daylight, again and again.
This land is mine, yet I live as a stranger upon it.
Still I stand by the Indus, waiting to be claimed.

Musings on a Wet Monsoon Afternoon

Haris Ali Virk

In a quiet hour of the day
when the morning crows have taken a respite from their relentless cawing
and the sky has turned into a bright shade of grey
the dark clouds laden with rain still wander in the distance
far away in vast patches of wet grasslands
greener than ever
lazy-moving cattle make their way through the landscape
with half-naked young boys running around them
the afternoon air is filled with earthly smell after rain
and the scent of freshly cut grass
frogs are humming, singing water-songs

I close my eyes and let my mind meander around aimlessly
there is little sweeter in life than the promise of love
even a love that is far away
a distant possibility
it stirs your memory with all the good things in life
small gestures of kindness
friendships and gratitude
days of old, when life was simpler and less wanting
and yet it thrills you and keeps your heart on the edge with all its pulsating excitement
and uncertainty
like clouds that haven't yet decided where they will fall
it is here in this realm of endless possibilities that life is at its most beautiful

I know this afternoon will not stay
the rain will pass and the grass will dry and the frogs will fall quiet again
but I think the mind keeps things the way soil keeps rain long after the sky has cleared
some duller day it will come back to you

not quite as memory but as a feeling with no name
I think that is what love is too
not yet arrived but already being kept somewhere

I think that's how life is
the sweetest things arrive already leaving
so you learn to hold them differently
not by keeping them still, but by letting them move through you
there are bright days without rain during winters
and there are windy days soaked in rain during summers
there is a love still far away, being kept the way this afternoon is being kept
and yet it is not that far.

A Meeting with a Tree

Anees Adam

Between buildings,
old worn-out offices of advocates
and dingy apartments of bank employees,
There was this giant tree,
badly grown
and rudely cut in places
I tried to take a photograph
One good enough photograph
and then I could go on
wander the neighborhood
and thrift something
But I could not figure out the right framing
and an angle which will capture
what was in front of me,
and perhaps beyond it
And thus, after almost two decades,
after years of black-and-white photos,
late at night, one day,
I returned to colors
I started to draw in my notebook
I drew the tree. Badly.

Keeper of Sheep

Anees Adam

Happily! Happily I would have been
a keeper of sheep, in the black mountains,
In love with stones, and wildflowers—
My slingshot would have kept foreign ghosts at bay,
and stars would have guided my path—
Happily I would have been
a keeper of sheep, in the black mountains;
But, I was cursed with a blind heart— early on,
"I had to grow up, in broken ways,
and dragged along for many long years."

The questions of horror, surveillance and death,
have haunted a thousand and one of us—
Alien eyes have stared down my soul,
and nameless fears have greeted me, casually
like a child, on his way to school,
passing through the village graveyard, everyday;
Whom to be? How to name the vast world?
Who am I? I haven't had a language—
"True life was elsewhere— home was another place."

Known to the impossibility of little things of hope,
of melting in another's arms,
of faith, forgiveness and belonging—
of greeting myself in the mirror
like an old gentle friend—
Mired In the crisis of the modern soul,
I was in pain, frightened and abandoned—
Unknown to my own grief,
until I arrived at poetry, across ruin and abyss.

Poetry did not promise me redemption,
and I did not expect impossible things, like
my drowning soul to be miraculously saved
from absence, and indifference—
But only to remember, the remnants of home,
and treasure ordinary things of nature,
like counting stars in the face of life's necessities,
and once in a while, to be able to see
myself in the eyes of another.

Daughterhood OR Confessions of a Grenade

Umamah Farooq

My mother brushes my hair
and I am reminded of chaos,
the way it calms in the warmth of a
calloused palm,
she tucks every strand into a braid
each one tighter than before but I don't
tell her to stop because I know that
my childhood is not yet a distant memory
to her as it is to me.
She says I have
changed but I do not have the heart to
tell her that i am turning into a version
of her she never let us see.

How do you give gratitude to a person
who becomes the Sun for everyone around,
burns themselves to ashes only to rise
and do it all over again, who embraces
an eternity of a void if it means that you get to live in a world full of light.
How can tenderness turn the body it

inhabits into a broken china doll?
Ma you taught me to be soft
despite knowing how bad it hurts.
I do not know how to exist unless
I am being put to use.

I think I took up too much space
inside of my mother's body,
so much so that a dreamer had to get
rid of her dreams before they
even learnt how to breathe,
so much so that I think she never
stopped stretching to make room for me,
so much so that sometimes I wonder
if I can be the person she thought her
little girl was gonna grow up to be.
I am more disappointment than girl

But Ma, a girl is only a girl until you tell
her she isn't anymore, a girl is only a girl
until she's scared of becoming a woman,
a girl is only a girl until she sees what
her mother has hidden for many years;
My happiness is flying too close to the
sun just like yours does and the burnt
smell reminds me of home.

My mother searches for a home inside me
but I do not know how to tell her that
her daughter sets fire to things she loves
and chokes on the smoke,
her hands are matches striking against
brittle bones of the ribcage.

I cannot tell my mother that I'm not ready to do what she did for me because
I'm scared that I will never be enough
for someone who spent their whole life
trying to be a person they never thought
they'd be.

So Ma, you should know that you gave
birth to a grenade.
I self destruct when things get too rough
and I'm sorry that you are always the only other casualty.
I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry
I'm trying, mother

Burn Away Your Mask

Naqeeb Rehman

Ripped out of his childhood by poverty,
stomach ulcers, and baggy unfit clothes,
it was then that he started talking to God on a walkie-talkie, they say.
Earthquakes visited him in his dreams,
and he died many times from overeating,
mistaking bread, Coke, and butter for love.

One day, in a state of satanic impatience,
he climbed the *Gibraltar Hill* in the village
and asked the skies for a companion,
and his prayers fell on my doorstep.
I went to his school the next day,
chased by my own grandmother's Arabic nightmares.

He usually dreams about his elder brother
who died from eating a poisoned apple.
And when he wakes up, drenched in sweat,

boredom weaves webs into his heart
until it becomes like an old storeroom
where grey doves of pain flutter
every afternoon and commit suicide.

He now studies in my class as a student.
Not only that, he is a walking dictionary, they say.
Scared of losing himself, he learns new words
as if to pin down his mind against the plain wall of life, one word at a time.

Saturday can't recognize him because his father never loved him.
And he runs short of good memories on Sunday
though he digs into his soul for them
with the passion of a gravedigger.
On Monday, like a lean, virgin poet,
he loves to write poems about birds that don't return
and village girls and purple love that doesn't knock anymore.
He grows sad on Wednesday,
listening to his radio, waiting for God to speak to him through it.
But does God ever listen actually
or is he busy playing chess as usual?
That's the question he asks on Thursday,
because on Thursday he only asks difficult questions.
And on Friday words bleed blue,
and he licks his wounds and tends to his black desires,
preventing them from spilling.

Today is Thursday, the day of the difficult questions.
He visits me at the office.
Do emotions change colors? He asks.
When emotions are spent,
do they turn into ash inside our hearts?
What if those emotions that are turned into ash
catch fire and burn again?

And now that they have burnt our skin and our red shirts,
And when our thoughts have died,
Do our dead thoughts leave their corpses inside our bones?

I remain quiet and stare into his feverish eyes
and imagine how his lungs must be filled
with buckets of love, spices, and tears,

He hates festivals; fishing is a sin for him.
He enjoys the speechless company of dry trees, though.
He loves to look for the sterling eggs beside military camps
and console the cooing birds.
Books are his prayers!
Dogs don't bark inside my bones anymore, he told me last Monday.
That's how his days drift away
Leaving trails of saddened memory.

He doesn't speak a lot:
Solitude is the only religion he believes in, they say.
He loves the silence in people
More than the words stuck ready like bullets inside them.
Nothing stays for long inside us anyway, he tells me.
Some things ooze out through our eyes,
Some through our pens,
And some even through the wounds we carry inside us,
Which we want to wash with love and sunlight all the time.

Now years later, I have almost forgotten his face.
He does not talk to his God on his radio anymore, they say.
He has started wearing his black mask again
And that means he is barring the shrieks and groans
Gathered inside him like a spiraling storm!
Oh, a Greek tragedy is awaiting!

Now that time has baked my sensitive heart
And now that his voice has disappeared from my memory,
only leaving dead butterflies,
Let's go and find him once more
And give him his smile back, folded in pink flowers.

A Window For My Missing

Mahnoor Aizaz

The writer is a student of BS English Literature (Year III)

Each night I lay my body down to drown,
Eyes wide open, dreaming with no sound.
I rise into a courtroom built of glass and bone,
Where every face that judges me is my own.

A mirror sits where mercy failed to find
the ghost of everything I left undone behind.
I, the executioner, hold the blade against my neck.
Oh, how great a tragedy to perish in this wreck.

Who do I speak to? What do I say?
What became of me? How do I stay?
To have no expectations is to watch your spirit fall,
But to have many is the worst fate of them all
To fly on fire, crossing a broken line,
Burning away before you reach the divine.

Yet I only wished to drift the way a cloud forgets its shape.
Wrapped in the scent of hills, without a crowd, just to escape
To let the crisscrossed light stream softly through,
and melt back gently into the dirt that gave its birth to you.

For I am but a fearful monster eating from within,

Devouring my own potential beneath the skin.
Wasted in my cages, I strut in borrowed plumes,
Lost to who I used to be, slowly fading to hollow fumes.

The heavy bars bleed through my skin, a cold and binding mesh,
Until the cage becomes my skeleton and binds my dying flesh.
I drape myself in liturgy I never could believe,
A desperate pantomime of faith to watch the faithful grieve.

But when the shadow steps too close, and grace is at the door,
The heavy weight of being saved is what I most abhor.
I wrap the quiet round my head and sink into the deep.
Before the lips of the divine can breathe into my ear,
The blade is drawn, the throat is torn, and drowns out the fear.

I cut the cord to end the bitter trial,
To silence every voice within, if only for a while.
But silence is no freedom, and death cannot undo.
Tomorrow, the trial begins again, and I must face it too.

O Changeling!

Sarah Tahir Bukhari

Must thou too long to listen take,
And thy attention wander make?
O Changeling!

Why dost thou ne'er be quick to act?
Obey; be prompt – don't counteract!
O Drifter!

Ere thy awareness sylphs ensnare,
Thy eyes begin to cloud, beware!
O Wanderer!

Thy mind adrift forevermore,
Unbridled, travels shore to shore.
O Rover!

Sink thou in ceaseless depths of thought,
Thy world may quake, thou notice naught!
O Vagrant!

Avast! Afore thy efforts fail,
Thou'dst mark these words and fain prevail!
O Careener!

Have courage, lest thou crash and burn!
In spite of crashing, thou wilt learn!
Hark thou! Ere long thy luck will turn,

And thou to thy outset return!
O Changeling!

A Bowl of White Rice

Fatima Asif Jamal

A bowl of White rice, filled to the brim.

Full of disgust, I have no appetite.

Pristine, white and palatable rice.

Yet no hunger in sight.

Will the rice satisfy the non-existent desire?

In distress, I take a spoonful of it and swallow with pain.

Scratching my throat, they end up in my stomach.

Feeling squeamish, I throw up.

Chunks of white rice in watery and slimy liquid, now Red.

Is it the rice or is it my stomach?

Is it the disgust in myself or is it the void keeping me full?

I was full without eating.

It is the void! Red and dreadful, hollow yet stuffed.

Feeding on me, and starving me.

I'm full, I have always been full.

Full of embarrassment, full of discomfort.

I have never known appetite.

Dark, disquieting red with teeth, consuming me from the inside.

I have never had a stomach.

Before the food, I taste blood.

Before swallowing, I'm full.

"Come back and finish your bowl!"

How do I say I also long for a spoon, that will not become dirt in my mouth.

A body that has appetite. A body that has a stomach.

How do I say, I don't have any.

If I eat, it becomes blood.

But everyone eats; without throwing up.

What is this innate disgust?

Can everyone have a bowl of white rice?

A Lonely Man

Fatima Mehru

I met a lonely man on a lonely road
And asked: Where do you live?
In people's memories, said he
Where are your people? I inquired
Into the sea present in me, told he
Where would you like to move now? I asked
At the tree, he pointed with his index finger
And took a deep sigh!
I kept on asking him about his lodgings
But all he could remember was
A road, a boat, and a lonely man
standing on a shore

Dream of a Language[2]

Momina Raza

In a far away estranged land,
my bones do not carry my mother's grief.

It no longer weighs me down,
worn-out threads beg to reach you.

Language was born between us,
out of silence and longing. Yet, I speak it

alone. When the wilted flowers bloom,
I'd like to believe that you think of me.

Every poem I write is a torn hem
I keep stitching wrong– maybe, one day, I'll get it right.

But for now, I dream of a language
that can hold our longing in a poem.

A lark tries to sing our aubade
that the world has forgotten.

Maybe, in this far away estranged world,
I have a love that refuses to leave my body.

[2] *First published in Borderless Journal, May 2026*

The Seeker's Path

Adnan Sami

Oh, the rendered queen of the splendid world,
Sunk in the darkness of man's cold domain
Unaware of the voiceless' truths and fears,
By which the universe's circle turns.

Oh, the mismatched lady of the divine design,
Seek the light, and wear the grace it brings-
For the labour of knowing what's unknown,
Unravels every mystery within

Oh, the secret of this whispered valley of lies,
Begin the journey, set foot on the path,
Search out the horizons of the storied streets
The pull of hidden lore, to echoes high

Behold, seeker of the world's deep wisdom-
You needn't to travel from the west to east
Take a while to sink yourself in deep
Or the archives of your blurred and early years.
You'll find out someone …



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