Performing desires through mimesis & letters of love: Conjuring sufis, staging tawa'if-courtesans, and querying Qasim

Qasim Riza Shaheen

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Acknowledgements

For the nameless, faceless beloved.

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Abstract

This PhD route through Professional Practice is a three-fold project. Firstly, it reflects on and discusses two decades of my past works in relation to art practices of similar thematic or aesthetic concerns, primarily through autoethnography and self-reflexivity within an art museum and gallery context. Secondly, it explores the process of having made new work through imaginary epistolary and performance notes. Thirdly, it presents a film document of the live events along with rehearsal footage and interviews with participants and performers.

My original contribution to knowledge is the identification of the ways in which the exploration of desire through self-reflexivity, performance, mimesis and letters of love can be articulated through the mediation and staging of the artist-djinn in a selection of artist-initiated projects. Imaginary time-travel through shape-shifting creates new approaches in dialoguing with source communities and audiences in art museums and galleries. My contribution to knowledge is also in the exploration of queer Muslim identity through autoethnographic, creative and pedagogic methods that encourage an expanded field of self-knowledge and self-reflexivity.

The impetus of the artwork discussed and produced during this PhD is primarily led by the imaginaries of seventeenth century Punjabi Sufi mystic, Bulleh Shah, Tawa'if-courtesans and Khwajaseras. Furthermore, the live work produced for this research extends the cinematic frame of Kamal Amrohi's1972 film Pakeezah into a live performance- interpretation.

This commentary also interrogates the rhetoric around the term queer. Having loitered around the periphery of a Euro-American frame of reference, analysis and discussion of my art practice begins to radically revision this. I present queer notions and gender atypicality from alternative cultural perspectives centred outside of, or alongside western critical thought and academic discourse in identity politics, and through more personal, nuanced, familial and cultural codes of a diasporic Muslim South Asian heritage.

Figure 1: Qasim Riza Shaheen, *For my mother*, 1976.

Chapter One: Introduction

'I will dance to win the favours of my beloved even if it means becoming a whore.'

Bulleh Shah (b.1680 d.1757)

'P.S. And somewhere along the line we merged. In the course of these memoirs there were intersections that were mine just as much as yours. Meet me there someday.'

Qasim Riza Shaheen (b.1971)

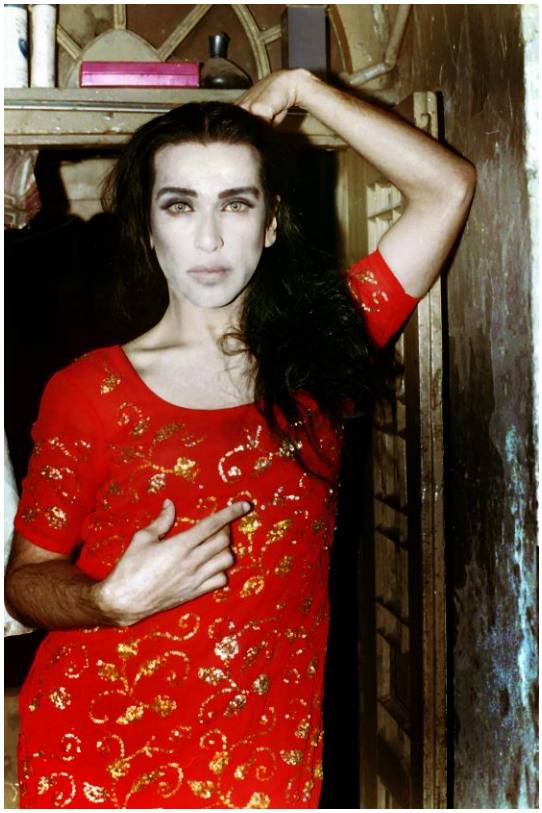

Figure 2: Qasim Riza Shaheen, Hira Mandi, Shahi Mohalla, Lahore, 2006.

I am Qasim Riza Shaheen because my late mother liked the name Qasim. It is an Arabic name which means the one who shares; the distributor. My late father liked the name Riza; a Persian name meaning the one who is content. My father's surname was entirely made up by him as a result of there being too many boys with the same surname in his class. My father loved poetry and in keeping with the tradition of giving oneself a pen

name he ascribed himself with the name Shaheen in the spur of the moment. Shaheen is a gender-neutral name meaning the royal falcon. In Muslim cultures it is commonly believed that a name affects and influences your life pattern as though linguistically shaping your personality. But for me to even begin to write this commentary about the art and work of Qasim Riza Shaheen, I need a beloved. Someone for whom I write, explain and perform this text. Without this beloved reader I fear that this entire act and expression of love would be lost. After all, why and for whom am I writing this? And more pertinently how will this queer introspection be received? Since I yearn to be fully witnessed, registered and experienced through someone else the idea of the beloved is intrinsic to my understanding of self. We can all conjure up a figure of a beloved in multiple guises and registers of love. Perhaps we can go so far as to say that the beloved is disembodied and that desire need not only be about the body and eroticism but instead something more abstract or formless, even ephemeral.

I grew up listening to mystical stories through verse and song and would regularly attend esoteric poetry recitals. When I would try to explain these narratives to people outside of the stories' cultural context, they would be understood within the realm of exotic fantasy. The difference lies therein; my formative years were embedded in empirical truths, religious doctrine and practice which I believed in as reality. One such truth was that of djinns; a creation which abides with humans in a parallel world. One which is just as accountable, diverse and unresolved as a human being, yet is far greater in force and prowess. With a lifespan of up to fifteen hundred years it has the potential to connect man from one era to another. In accordance with the Holy Quran, djinns are a parallel creation made from smokeless fire as opposed to humans whose origins are that of mud and dried clay. Djinns are mentioned several times along with an entire verse[1] in the Holy Quran[2] which describes fully their origin, nature and dwellings. Djinns can from time to time assume human and animal form, generally harmless but like most species they can be malevolent. Speaking from within an Islamic perspective and belief system we are all possessed per se. Each one of us is accompanied throughout our lives

[1] Quran 72, Surah Al Jinn.
[2] "And We did certainly create man out of clay from an altered back mud.' "And the Jinn race we had created before, from fire of smokeless flames"

by a companion djinn called the *qareen*[3]. It is there to witness us, misguide us and at other times succumb to the choices and journeys we make. This standpoint displaces the idea of autonomy and begins to position us as a pair of the seen and the unseen; and desire as a shared entity.

The version I would like to offer in this commentary as the figure of the beloved is a shape-shifting one who can inhabit a multiplicity of forms and one which can transport the possessed human across time and nation. Khalifa and Hardie[4] refer to such possession as a combination of 'biological, anthropological, sociological, psychopathological and experimental perspectives'. They also suggest that such inhabitations in the human body are more common among women and marginalised groups as they serve as a frame through which to speak against the status quo and vociferate about social and state injustices. The djinn in this project is a mystic, a tawa'if-courtesan and both patron and performer; conjurer and avatar. This non-binary, gender fluid spirit is the beloved which inhabits my work and perhaps my own body.

Project outline

I would like to begin to explain this three-fold project. First, I would like to reflect on and discuss past works in relation to art practices of similar thematic or aesthetic concerns, primarily through an art museum and gallery context. Second, I would like to discuss the process of having made new work during the course of this research through textual and visual chronicles. Thirdly, I will present a film document of the live events along with rehearsal footage and interviews with performers. Letters, voice recordings, lip-syncing and performance notes articulate the multi-mode research inquiry as well as document and archive insights made during the practice-led component of the PhD. These will be made available along with a rehearsal and performance film of the live event via permanent live URL links.

[3] Jilani b. T. M., (2018). "Jinn and its Effects on Muslim Society." *Glob J Arch & Anthropol*. 6(4): 555694. https://juniperpublishers.com/gjaa/pdf/GJAA.MS.ID.555694.pdf Accessed 25 September 2021.
[4] Khalifa, D.N., & Hardie, T., (2012). "Jinn and psychiatry : comparison of beliefs among Muslims in Dhaka and Leicester". https://drmsimullick.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/67.Jinn-Belif-Comparision.pdf. Accessed 30 June 2020.

This commentary is an attempt to unravel over two decades of my art trajectory. In doing so I offer an insight into where my thinking and my practice is currently situated. The desire to undertake this research project also comes from a generational exhaustion and gnawing pain to think and live outside the frame of permission. As a British artist of South Asian heritage, the labour of speaking out against inequity, power structures and systemic prejudice has also rested on my shoulders. Visibility has not always meant change, and the need to vociferate and campaign for positive representation has co-existed with my art practice. What has emerged for me is a desire to interrogate the rhetoric around the term queer. I have loitered around the periphery of a Euro-American frame of reference and begun to re-vision it. I wish to think about queer notions and gender atypicality from alternative cultural perspectives centred outside of, or alongside western critical thought and academic discourse in identity politics. I have often been interrogated as to why I was participating as a practicing Muslim and person of colour, as though these identities were mutually exclusive to being queer. Thus, I'm opting to understand queer primarily through the tawa'if-courtesan figure within a Sufianic frame. I will reimagine and resurrect her through nuanced familial, cultural and cinematic codes derived from my diasporic Muslim South Asian heritage.

Having said that, I am British and throughout my academic career I have probed and engaged with the term queer in the context which I now wish to interrogate and disrupt. Moreover, my art practice has been critiqued through that very lens which I wish to sideline in this commentary. I had a cosmopolitan upbringing infused with an array of cultural, political and religious influences. My personal identity further flourished amidst a familial code of conduct derived from religious stories; some quaint and others, dogmatic. Narratives from the mystical and the orthodox merged into a cloak of beautiful contradictions and moral dilemmas. This intersectionality often left me pondering over the question 'who am I?'. From a very young age I began to make self-portraits as if stepping out of myself to witness versions of Qasim longing for the beloved. This beloved had no form or body but instead an intangible, incomprehensible attraction and a desire to embody and be embodied. What was cultivated over two decades of art practice and enquiry were incarnations of the queer self and the self-

portrait. I use the word incarnations because with every rendition each version brought memories of past lives; and how in a dramaturgical sense it could be staged as a live art gallery intervention or exhibition.

The mimetics of love and acts of persuasion are key concepts within this study and focus closely on two past works which are central to the development of the performance trilogy, researched, developed and presented as the practice led component. It is useful to begin to establish the specific contexts and cultural codes through which I am referencing notions of love and selfhood. Aesthetics and narratives of sub-continental Sufism are central to this project because I situate myself as a disciple within a lineage, informed by its oral traditions such as devotional music, poetry and storytelling. Furthermore, the gestural language and mimetics of North Indian classical dance art kathak; my life-long apprenticeship, will also be closely examined in relation to tawa'if-courtesan culture, its history, politics and poetics and how they influence my artwork.

Thus the protagonists of this research and the impetus of the artwork produced during this PhD are primarily led by the imaginaries of seventeenth century Punjabi Sufi mystic, Bulleh Shah[5] and the depictions of tawa'if-courtesans from the film *Pakeezah*[6]. These figures metaphorically along with myself are seeking the nameless, faceless beloved through the aesthetic and thematic frame of the artworks produced. I will discuss the imagery, soundscapes and the apparel in my work in relation to the representations and the characterisation of these tawa'if-courtesan lives.

This commentary will provide an introduction and overview of my artistic practice within a framework supported by existing literature written about my work[7]. I will further explore how the selected past works were curated in consultation with source communities as

[5] Hirsch, B., (1989). *The Modern Language Journal, 73*(3), 362-363. doi:10.2307/327029
[6] Amrohi, K., (1972). *Pakeezah.* Mumbai: Mahal Pictures.
[7] Over the course of my artistic practice since 1994, there have been five artist books/catalogues published and three papers in academic journals. There have also been several articles and references made to my practice in art magazines and academic publications. An anthology of essays, reflections and visual narratives by academics, curators and artists about Qasim Riza Shaheen entitled *The Last Known Pose* is most recently published by Cornerhouse in 2018.

well as engaging in a wider discussion of museology. This will lead to a discussion of working with cultural communities and the problems of representation. By 'becoming' the other transiently and meaningfully I begin to pose the question 'Who am I when I am you?' to both myself and to those I become a reflector for. The frame and scope of this part of the commentary is to dialogue with and critically engage with the writings about my practice over the last twenty-five years. I recognise this privileged position I occupy between myself and my critics. Along with the tawa'if-courtesan I wish to resurrect my own archived voice as artist/author and reinstate my intentions, politics, biography and religion from where I stand now. I intend to navigate this discussion of my research through the route of Professional Practice along with methodologies of autoethnography, self-reflexivity, epistolary and hagiography. Through a discussion of my past works I will critically analyse notions of queer mediation and intervention in my artistic practice and specifically in the context of art museums and galleries. Not only does this research compel me to question my role and position as an artist but it also allows me to reframe my art practice and respond to an existing body of essays, reflections and reviews written by academics, curators, journalists and peer artists.

Leon Anderson observed that over the past fifteen years there had been 'an impressive growth of research that has been variously referred to as auto-anthropology, autobiographical ethnography or sociology, personal or self-narrative research and writing, and perhaps most commonly, autoethnography[8].' Autoethnographies according to Richardson[9] are 'highly personalised, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural.' Furthermore, poststructuralist theories somewhat lend support to autoethnographic research approaches initially by directing the researcher to 'understanding ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times' and secondly

[8] Anderson, L., (2006). "Analytic Autoethnography". *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373–395. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605280449
[9] Richardson, L., (2000). "Evaluating Ethnography". *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2), 253–255. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040000600207

freeing us from 'trying to write a single text in which we say everything at once to everyone.'[10]

Autoethnography is seen to be 'a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context'[11]. Thus, I will be applying the above methodology to frame aspects of this commentary. How can certain exhibitions challenge the heteronormativity[12] of institutions and its visitors and what is the effectiveness of such queer mediation and intervention? Issues of relevance pertaining to orientalism and postcolonialism will also be considered.

Chapter three and four of this commentary primarily consider two bodies of work. They are entitled *Stains and Stencils*[13] (2005-2007) and *Queer Courtesan: eight heroines in love*[14] (2007-2010). These mixed media works will function as my case studies or exemplifications for broader research topics and findings. Both chosen case studies have explicitly or implicitly embraced the ethos or spirit of Bulleh Shah and his life. The methodologies lend themselves neatly to the Islamic notion of *muhasabah*[15] or self-reflexivity. It is important for the reader to understand the key influences of my artistic

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[10] Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S., (2005). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

[11]Reed-Danahay, D., (2019). "Autoethnography". In P. Atkinson, S. Delamont, A. Cernat, J.W. Sakshaug, & R.A. Williams (Eds.), *SAGE Research Methods Foundations.* https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036815143

[12] James H. Sanders III uses the following definition in his article 'Queering the Museums', <http://aad.uoregon.edu/culturework/culturework37b.html>. Accessed 14 November 2018. "Heteronormativity is a term identifying the innumerable social practices, legal structures, semantic structures, definitions and rituals through which either explicitly or implicitly, heterosexuality is constructed as the only "normal" way of sexually being in the world. Sedwick (1990) asserts that any cultural analysis that fails to address the embedded heteronormative structures in social performance is fundamentally flawed".

[13] This commissioned project by Shisha (International Visual Arts Agency) formally culminated in a solo show entitled *Khusra: Stains and Stencils* at Castlefield Gallery in Manchester in 2007.

[14] *Queer Courtesan* was originally commissioned by Dance North West and presented at Castlefield Gallery in 2007, it went on to be part of Port City (2007) at Arnolfini, Bristol; British Dance Edition 2008, Liverpool; The National Review of Live Art (2008), Glasgow; Trouble Festival at Les Halles (2008), Brussels; British Council/Teatro De La Laboral's 'Showcasing Performance in Alternative Creative Environments' (S.P.A.C.E. UK) Festival (2009) Gijon and finally at Norfolk House Music Room, Victoria and Albert Museum (2009).

[15] It is the ethos of Muhasabah that I wish to refer to in this instance rather than the orthodox religious definition discussed in Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi' excerpt "Time in the Life of a Muslim", https://kitaabun.com/shopping3/time-life-muslim-yusuf-qaradawi-self-invent-a-258.html, accessed 14 November 2018.

practice especially because the works discussed in this study were conceived and developed in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan over a significant period of time prior to having a British context and audience.

The first of the two past artworks will exemplify how a source community directly dialogues with and actively produces their own self-image and representation through an artist's borrowed body. With the first artwork *Khusra: Stains & Stencils*, I will offer a discussion of the means whereby an artist can effectively mediate between a source community and an art gallery. The focus of discussion will be on a body of work researched, developed and curated in the red-light district of Lahore in Pakistan with six transgender or 'khusra[16]' sex workers between the years 2005-2007[17]. I will analyse the process of generating this work, its participatory aspects, its curatorial concerns and the exhibition at Castlefield Gallery[18] in Manchester itself.

The second artwork, *Queer Courtesan* focusses on the prominence of the figure of the Indian Tawa'if-courtesan from her courtly milieu, shards of her representation in Bombay cinema, her syncretic classical dance vocabulary and how she enters my performance practice as a queer djinn. I will discuss how her embodiment can enter into a museum and specifically infiltrate into an English period room through live interpretation and interaction. Although this commentary centres around two key examples of my own work, it also considers other art exhibitions and experiential art works in order to further explore the ideas and concerns being addressed. The discussion around this case study considers the tensions associated with an artist's live mediation, its relationship to the

[16] "From within this very specific Pakistani cultural context emerges the 'he-shes' of Lahore. It is thought that the term khusra historically is derived from the term Khwaja Sera; the hermaphrodite or castrated male who had the physical strength to guard the women's harem of the Mughal courts, yet posed no sexual threat. Away from its grandeur, today khusra sits closely with the term 'faggot'." Q.R. Shaheen*, Khusra: Stains & Stencils*. Manchester: Shisha and Cornerhouse Publications, 2007, p.4.

[17] In 2005, I was commissioned by Shisha (International Visual Arts Agency) for a proposal that I had made to engage and spend a period of time with the transgendered communities in the red-light area of Lahore in Pakistan. In a climate where community initiatives were becoming integral to UK public policy, programmes such as 'Parampara' ('heritage' in Hindi), enabled me to conduct this project over two years during 2005-2007.

[18] For venue details, refer to <http://www.castlefieldgallery.co.uk/> Accessed 14 November 2018

visitor and the impact it may have on the historical memory and narrative of the assigned museum space as well as the artist's body itself.

This intimate live art performance intervention was held at the Norfolk House Music Room[19] at the V&A Museum in London in 2009. The specific areas on which I will focus are the relationship of the historiography of both the queer and postcolonial body and its depiction of an 'Indian oriental *nautch* (dancing) girl'[20] through the codes of kathak[21]. Moreover, I will consider the tensions of such a performance in an English period room at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and its dynamic relationship with the Empire and its vast South Asian acquisitions.

I conclude the discussion of *Queer Courtesan* by interrogating Paul Gabriel's ideas around queer museology and suggest that queer mediation and intervention through biography and body-based work can be an effective way of challenging heteronormativity in art museums and galleries. I will emphasise whether or not the exhibited works of an artist can be understood outside of their autobiographical frame of reference and highlight the extent to which the notion of queerness is transcultural. The intervention of an artist in a museum or gallery can potentially build an individual and collective queer experience for any viewer to partake in by entering the artist's personal and political realm.

Throughout this commentary I am going to modulate between scholarly writing and letters. This is to illustrate a shift in language and sentiment to articulate my creative practice and generate a more personal and nuanced narrative as a performance maker. In these letters I want to write unapologetically with messy, unfamiliar notions and thoughts that may require rereading, rethinking and realigning. Kindly consider my

[19] For historical details of the Norfolk House Music Room, refer to <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/n/norfolk-house-music-room/>,accessed 14 November 2018.
[20] The term 'Indian' is used here with a sense of irony. I draw attention to its pre and post-colonial nationalist as well as its Orientalist construction especially in the context of the performing arts traditions. Nautch is an anglicised distortion of the word 'Nach' which means to dance. The socio-political etymology of the word will be discussed later in the thesis.
[21] Kathak is one of the main classical dance styles of the Subcontinent and literally means "story-teller". It was evolved and refined in the Mughal Courts. For further details from a dancers' perspective refer to <http://www.nahidsiddiqui.com/kathak.htm>. Accessed 14 November 2018.

code-switching as an essential act of textual disruption on the otherwise neatly sign-posted course of academic writing. It is indicative of the way I arrive at making and explaining the work I produce. An imaginary epistolary of my influences for the artwork is akin to a poetic license which aids the reader to view and populate this live scenography. These letters are to Nahid Siddiqui, Kathak dance artist[22] and a life-long mentor. This correspondence functions as a practice-led auto-critique of the stimuli, research, development and presentation of the new work. An auto-critique[23] such as this can be an insightful and reflexive approach to research and rich in its potential contribution to the discourse and development of an artist's reflexivity about their own creative practice.

Haseman and Mafe[24] talk about Gray's six conditions for practice-led research. One such condition is 'repurposing methods and languages of practice into the methods and language of research'. As an artist and researcher, there were times where I felt that I could not find my place within academia and procedural writing methodologies. I wanted to find a ground where I could not only advance in my research ideas but also use the language through which I conceived and communicated my artwork as a methodology itself. Epistolary theory centres around the notion that letters are relational and viewed in perspective. These letters which feature in this commentary are "recipient designed" and reflect "implicit assumptions" concerning the intended reader or audience[25].

The specificity of the letter, its physicality and the intertexts are linked as structural components and they influence and are influenced by the responsive process of

[22] Nahid Siddiqui is one of the world's leading kathak dancers. She infuses deep, personal artistry into the interpretation of the music and text, superbly utilising the style's core elements - intricate hand gestures, fluid spins, and alternation between periods of calm and bursts of mathematical footwork. One writer has described her style as "Sufianic in its narrative ventures, yet precise in its embodiment of tradition", <http://www.darbar.org>, accessed 30 June 2020.
[23] I have used the term autocritique within the overall research methodology of this dissertation. Autoethnography and reflexivity along with the religiousity of the term autocritique will be explained further in subsequent chapters. For a further insight into 'examination of conscience' please refer to < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autocritique>, accessed 14 November 2018.
[24] Haseman, B. & Mafe, D., (2009). Acquiring know-how: Research training for practice-led researchers.
[25] Atkinson, P.A. & Coffey, A., (2004) "Analysing documentary realities", in Silverman, D. (ed.) *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*. London: Sage, pp.56-75.

recognition of different modes of writing. Epistolary discourse is a way for me to bridge the gaps between procedural writing and the more personal declarations and stream of consciousness in the commentary.

Liz Stanley[26] has offered three scopes through which epistolary narratives can be staged: dialogical, the perspectival and the emergent. She suggests letters are dialogical as they open up channels of exchange and reciprocity between the writer of the letter and the reader: imagined or otherwise.

The perspectival scope she refers to illustrates how 'their structure and content changes according to the particular recipient and the passing of time.' In these letters, I speak to Nahid with a multiplicity of voices: direct, echoed and dream-like. The visual artworks and their aesthetics lie in the space in between the letters written to this figure; juxtaposing and exploring the wider significance and context of the live work produced. This staging of 'the epistolarium[27]' enables me to perform voices and playfully adapt personae through the textual presence (and physical absence) of the writer (and beloved).

The third emergent scope that Stanley refers to could be a dissemination of knowledge and responses which evade 'researcher-determined concerns' and reveal 'their own preoccupations and conventions and indeed their own epistolary ethics.' Having established a disciple-mentor relationship in the west with Nahid and one rooted in eastern ideas of what is called an ustad-shagird[28] commitment, is that the delineation between learning time and personal time is blurred and a particular pace established. Thus, the dynamics of communication, observational learning and personal investment

[26] Stanley, L., (2004). "The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences". *Auto/biography*. 12. 201-235. 10.1191/0967550704ab014oa.
[27] Ibid.
[28] The word *ustad*, in Persian means "a master, teacher, tutor; an artificer, manufacturer, artisan; a barber; ingenious, excellent, celebrated, famed for any art or work of ingenuity", according to Persian-English dictionary. Shahgird (disciple) is derived from 'shah' (light) and 'gird' (those who surround it) and would be defined as a student of the ustad. However, in this particular process of transmission, a great devotion to the ustad distinguishes the 'shagird' from an ordinary student.

grafted in my letters with Nahid are beyond the frame of western academic convention.

Stanley reflects on the longevity of the letters or public writing she does, both past and as she writes. She questions the signature and the variation of meanings depending on how a letter could be signed off. My letters remain incomplete and unsigned as a way of acknowledging the continuity of this epistolarium beyond the scope of this project.

Letter to Nahid I

Dear Nahid

After a long period of devotional awe comes a time when you see your ustad (mentor) as a series of stories, repertoires and recitals. They remain the light that you have orbited around but this time even as you look away, they leave an imprint in your vision. The term shahgird (disciple) as you have explained many times to me is that faceless, nameless being which circles the shah (light).

I no longer sit at a threshold seeking permission to be who I want to be, instead I focus on being alive and embracing that permission is granted only when I unlearn my inhibitions. When Bulleh Shah turned up at the door of his spiritual teacher Shah Inayat after he had angered him, he asked who it was at hearing the knock. Bulleh Shah replied "Bullah", Shah Inayat in return said you are not Bullah but 'Bulleya' meaning 'forgotten' in a dialect of Punjabi. Perhaps when Bulleh Shah searched for a courtesan to teach him to 'dance to win back the favours of his beloved even if it meant becoming a whore' he wished to unlearn his inhibitions and dance ecstatically in circles & cycles until permission as a notion simply disappeared.

Throughout this writing project as a whole, I will address my thoughts and intentions to Nahid as interspersed acts of authenticity; incomplete and fractured yet an invitation to a reader, a beloved, to enter a more intimate mode of sharing. These letters are of

anticipation and longing and relative to an overarching distance; the distance between a seeker and a beloved, a disciple and a mentor, a question and an answer.

Contribution to knowledge

What is unique to my practice and methodology is the notion of a shared imagination where the potentiality of a shape-shifting artist-djinn can dialogue with and at times morph into the unseen beloved; fully partaking in the quest for love and union.

This commentary analyses the film *Pakeezah* as a way of extending the frame of reference of its depiction of tawa'if-courtesans into a live scenography. Moreover, in its analysis it asserts that the rejection of the fleeting ghostly character of Nargis in the film was based on miscegenation and anti-British sentiment during the Crown more so than her status as a tawa'if-courtesan. In memory of Nargis, I use the term djinn to illustrate a figment of my belief and imagination derived from Muslim cultures and especially familial and cinematic stories of South Asian heritage. This figure abides within both the theoretical and practical components of this research. It also reveals and interweaves itself through the different modes of writing and visualisations as though travelling across time and returning with knowledge of (queer) pasts and futures.

What is unique to this research is how the handing over of artistic control plays out between the artist, source community, participant and audience throughout the three works discussed. The creative and technical control of the camera in *Stains & Stencils*, the gaze of the audience-spectator (captured through a CCTV camera) in *Queer Courtesan* and the artist's self-remembrance renewed onto other performers in *The day after the day before I sinned, 2018.*[29]. In all three works there is an attempt to queer the postcolonial art museum and gallery experience through practice methods, affect and interpretation.

The artist-maker, the source community, participants-performers and the audience all engage in restorative properties of ritual, fantasy and reimagining life-worlds both past

[29] Live work researched, created for the PhD and presented at Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who Do You Think You Are?,* HOME Manchester, 2018. Permanent hyperlink created 31 October 2021.

and present. This research is invested in how the experiencing of art can heal and empower both the participant and mythopoeic figures of the past by reengaging with archival material and artefacts. The qareen-djinn becomes a witness-participant fully engaged in the acts of observation, interaction and influence rather than an obtrusive figure.

The contribution to knowledge is enabled by the practice methodology through which this sharing was possible. The sex worker-khwajasera, the Sufi mystic and the tawa'if courtesan co-existed in a shared realm of imagination where there is a shift in autonomy from self to the djinn. Within this frame the artist becomes a vessel for a djinn; a player across timelines, reuniting figures of history and switching between the djinn as artist and the artist as djinn.

Chapter Two: Who am I?

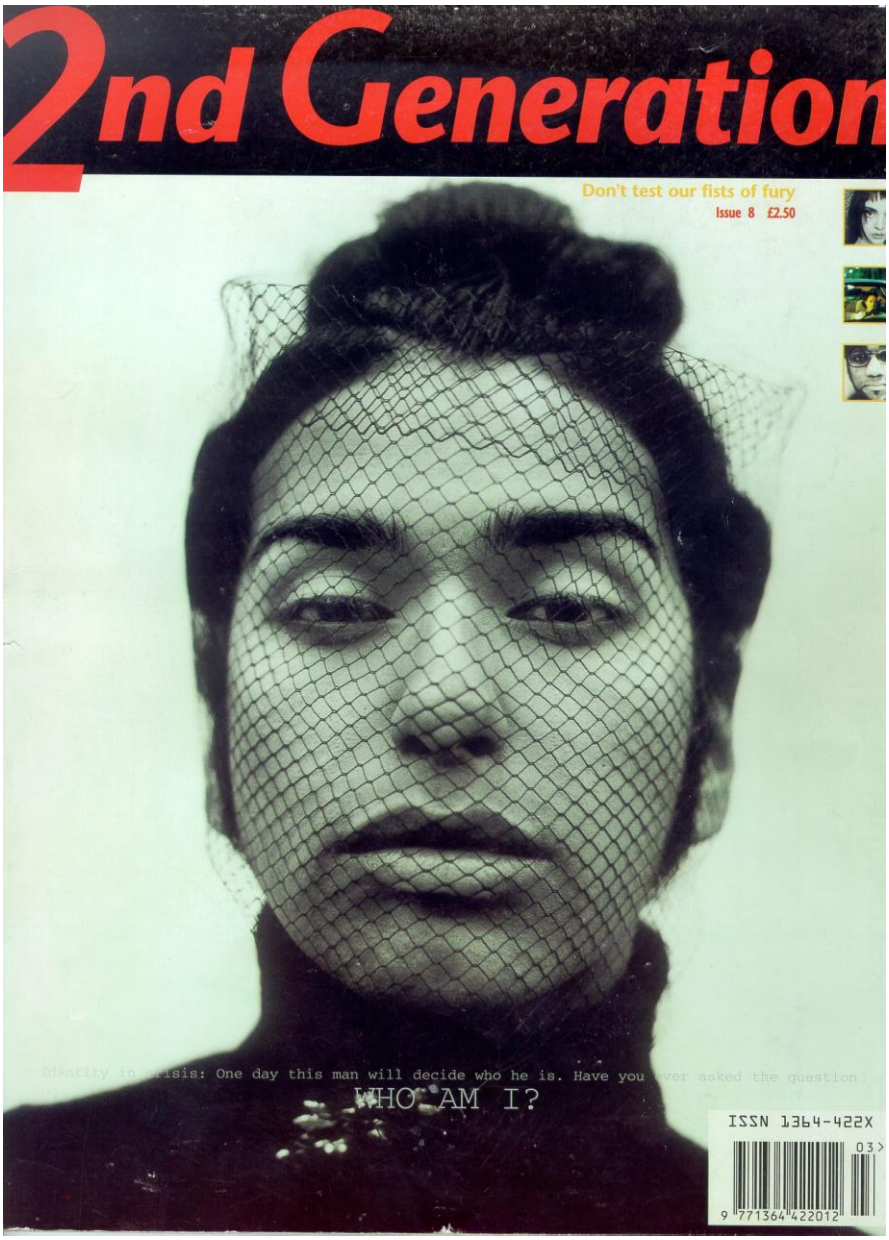

Figure 3: 2nd Generation Magazine, London, 1998.

Literature review

In 1998, I was featured on the cover of 2nd Generation Magazine (see Figure 3) published in London. The caption under my rather mournful photograph was "Who Am I?" followed by the provocation "Identity in Crisis: One day this man will decide who he is. Have you ever asked yourself this question?"[30] From the outset of my art career, I had been deeply affected by the life and sayings attributed to the medieval Sufi thinker Bulleh Shah[31]. One of the most celebrated kafi or classical Sufi poem attributed to him is one which translates somewhere between "Bulleh! I know not who I am" or "Bulleh! To me, I am not known". He continues by pertinently yet poetically declaring the following sentiments:

"In happiness nor in sorrow, am I / Neither clean, nor a filthy mire / Not from water, nor from earth / Neither fire, nor from air, is my birth / Bulleh! To me, I am not known"[32]

Madhavi Menon[33] in her insightful book *A History of Desire in India* (2018) reminds us of the capacious nature of our existences and life-worlds. She talks about the process of annihilation as a stage on which the lover and the beloved perform love. Her enquiry takes us a step further into questioning the distinction between the two states of being in Sufianic renditions of love. Not being is as valid as being; being invisible yet present and being present yet absent as key to understanding both embodied and disembodied desire. 'This poetic disowning of layers upon layers of identities bestowed by religious, cultural, familial and political values fuelled my very own personal exploration of contemporary identity-based art. For the years that followed I immersed myself in an indefinable yet definitively termed practice of live art'[34]. I say indefinable

[30] Imran Khan's stylish magazine *2nd Generation* was launched in 1995 in London with a focus on multiculturalism. "It reflected the zeitgeist and blasted the misconceptions many held about Asian youth." <http://samarmagazine.org/archive/articles/158>, accessed 14 November 2018.
[31] Rendition of this particular kafi attributed to Babha Bulleh Shah can be heard in the voice of Riaz Ali Khan through the following link. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOiBMheU0XY>. Accessed 14 November 2018.
[32] Adapted translation from Duggal, K. S., (1996). *The mystic muse*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
[33] Menon, M., (2018). *Infinite variety: A history of desire in India*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publications
[34] Shaheen, Q. R., (2004). *Only the moon to play with*. Manchester: Anokha Laadla.

because the artform itself when discussed at art conferences in the early nineteen nineties[35] in the context of Black British cultural politics was resistant to any definitive description. Like the term queer, live art forums too were still celebrating the term for the freedom it offered to break out of linear traditional practices yet at the same time resisting any definitions that locked it down institutionally.

This chapter is a literature review which intends to provide the reader with an overview of the main articles and essays written by leading academics in their respective fields, and mostly on my artistic practice. The writers considered and critiqued will be Paul Gabriel, Jonathan D. Katz, Fintan Walsh, Sandra Dudley, Salima Hashmi and Ananya J. Kabir amongst others. Ideas about posture, queerness, displacement and memory will be interrogated in the context of the case studies in question.

Since both the above works were exhibited within an art museum and gallery context, a critical engagement with queer museological literature will also be presented in this section. Gabriel in his essay "Why grapple with queer when you can fondle it? Embracing our erotic intelligence", illustrates his argument with a series of poignant personal experiences as a gay museum professional and outlines his concerns. He takes the reader through a quagmire of sexual mores and their impact on the politics and poetics of museology. But before he does that, he gently guides us through the origins and the history of terminology used to describe and engage with what he refers to as the "queer self"[36].

Gabriel offers us this article 'as a set of suggestions on how the museum community might collectively and individually use queer issues as a springboard for embracing something much deeper and more universal – *our* erotic intelligence'[37]. Through highlighting seven experiences he has had as the Exhibits Director of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society of San Francisco he recalls the pitfalls of

[35] See https://archive.ica.art/whats-on/mirage-20-years-discussion-and-screening, also see https://manchesterhistoriescelebrationday.myportfolio.com/national-black-arts-alliance
[36] Gabriel, P., (2010) "Why Grapple with Queer When you Can Fondle it? Embracing our Erotic Intelligence." In *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, edited by A. Levin, 71–79. New York: Routledge.
[37] ibid, p.72

negotiating queerness (both internally and externally) in the museums sector. He arrives at a juncture where he proposes "sorting out the queer junk"[38] by highlighting the problematic assumptions that are made in the name of upholding a queer self. He draws pertinent comparisons of this with early debates and stances on race, ethnicity, class and indeed, gender. He suggests that the 'queer self' is in itself the closet that is packed with redundant terms and misconceptions both internalised by queer persons and those who witness their identities.

"We are all inside it – and it is profoundly inside us – whenever this junk inhabits or haunts us individually or collectively in our professional interactions with each other. To clean it out is to grapple with and ultimately embrace in ourselves what it means to be a "queer self", which is to say a publically sexualised self. And so, how comfortable we are with "queer" can act as a barometer of how relevant we perceive sexuality in general to be to our work."[39]

Katz in his essay refers to me as a 'leaky queer'[40], who, having lived and travelled between both worlds, mediates between conflicting definitions of the term and has 'set himself the difficult task of explaining one group of queers to the other, the leaky to the unleaky.[41]' He suggests that the autobiographical and body-based aspects of my practice are a deflection which invites viewers to ask difficult questions about the subject/object positions we occupy when engaging with work in art museums and galleries. Moreover, in his essay he draws on the analogy that my art reflects, what looks like 'when a mirror looks in a mirror, when there is no clear relation of priority between seeing and being seen, no stable or permanent subject/object relations.[42]' Katz observes a process of 'activation' occurring when I create imagery of those I witness, making them a 'full partner' in my artistic exchange.

"Shaheen stages this fraught encounter of the leaky queer and the resilient queer in art-world spaces. There are powerful pleasures and compelling socio-historical rationales

[38] ibid, p.73.
[39] ibid, p.74.
[40] Katz, J.D., (2010), in Q. R. Shaheen, *Nine acts of reciprocity*. Manchester: Anokha Laadla.
[41] Ibid.
[42] ibid.

across both sides of this divide and in Shaheen's work, we glimpse the honour, complexity and, not least, authority of both versions of being queer."[43]

Walsh articulates the strategy of imposed posing in my practice as a way of inviting the viewer to question the role of the artist and his relationship to his subjects and collaborators. In his essay he differentiates the camp sensibility of my practice as one which does not undermine the implicated party in a discourse which often mocks gender and style or is comprised of 'strategies and tactics of queer parody'[44]. Walsh observes that: "When I encounter Qasim's art, I see lots of posing. The artist im-poses himself in a variety of community contexts, and through the medium of his own performative posing, ex-poses something of their shared connection."[45] Walsh suggests that my practice is less concerned with offering answers about the life worlds I occupy and more with reposing questions regarding where I find myself in the process. Interpretations of personal memorabilia serve as points of connection to the new environments and alter-egos I inhabit resulting in an assessment of my relationship with that experience.

Dudley observes that my works regularly take a serial form in her essentially tripartite re-thinking of displacement. She understands the first aspect of displacement in my practice as being one of 'separation' comprising a multiplicity of journeys 'by which things move across boundaries and thresholds and become displaced.'[46] The second phase is one in which the artist is situated in an in-between place of 'the liminal or transitional phase in ritual'. The third phase of Dudley's conception of displacement in her essay is re-incorporation where:

"The object's presence in a new world has the potential to bring about liberated, creative, powerful and sometimes painfully contradictory possibilities, connecting pre-

[43] ibid.
[44] Meyer, M., (1994). *The Politics and poetics of camp*. New York: Routledge
[45] Walsh, F., (2018). "Encountering the Pose", in Hushlak, M. A., & Pearl, M. (Eds.) *The Last Known Pose: Essays and Reflections on the Works of Qasim Riza Shaheen*. Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications.
[46] Dudley, S., (2018). "Displacement and the Sensory in the Art of Qasim Riza Shaheen", in Hushlak, M. A., & Pearl, M. (Eds.) *The Last Known Pose: Essays and Reflections on the Works of Qasim Riza Shaheen*. Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications.

and post- displacement worlds – both here and there; in the process, it is subjects rather than objects that now sometimes seem to become displaced."[47]

Through Dudley's tripartition I find myself drawn to the spaces between points. This distance between the material and its potential meanings are further observed by artist, educationalist and curator Salima Hashmi, daughter of Pakistan's most prolific poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz[48]. In her essay in the accompanying publication to the exhibition *Khusra: Stains & Stencils* she ponders about notions of silence and memory embedded in the aesthetic output of my art practice whilst making connections with the cultural memory of matriarchal roles in Pakistani familial culture. She poignantly suggests that 'the inverted gaze has forced open lost chapters in forgotten books. These images, laden with voice-over memories are imprisoned in garments, both comforting and smothering'.

She elaborates further about how my work foregrounds her own early memories of encountering the khusras of Lahore through to the details of embellishment on home-spun garments made by women in Pakistan. In relation to the works made in Lahore she comments that:

"To offer the 'subject' creative control of representation of themselves is startling in itself, but for the artist to invert the gaze, is hazardous. Shaheen circumnavigates with caution and sutures all into a generous mantle [...] The works are open, a mirror to one's own apprehensions and anxieties. Meanings alter, shift, merge and resonate. Their overlappings are seamless. Shaheen's self-portraits yearn to speak in many tongues, but the sound of silence may be ours."[49]

These varied readings of the above cultural theorists formulate the rationale behind this research and frame the theoretical basis of the chosen case studies. Further analysis of

[47] Hashmi, S., (2007). "No Trespass", in Q.R. Shaheen*, Khusra: Stains & Stencils*. Manchester: Shisha Publications, 2007, p.36.
[48] For further details refer to < http://www.faiz.com/>, accessed 14 November 2018.
[49] ibid, p.36.

the interpretations of my artistic practice as queer will be explored in subsequent chapters.

The first challenge of this research was writing as an artist about my own creative practice and ascertaining my position as a researcher. According to Leon Anderson[50] since the early years of American sociology there has always been an autoethnographic element in qualitative sociological research. With reference to Robert Park's graduate students at the University of Chicago during these early years, Mary Jo Deegan has also noted that: "The student sociologists often lived in the settings studied, walked the streets, collected quantitative and qualitative data, worked for local agencies, and had autobiographical experience emerging from these locales or ones similar to them."[51]

However, Anderson notes that seldom did they take up 'the banner of explicit and reflexive self-observation'[52]. Later studies do show a shift in analysis of social groups yet mostly still dismiss the notion of the researcher as a social actor. Scholars of that period did self-narrate in their methodological notes what Van Maanen terms as 'confessional tales'[53] of fieldwork experiences. To discuss further the historical development of autoethnography would perhaps go beyond the scope of this commentary but it is important to offer the reader a brief insight into the development of this methodological discourse.

In 1987 cultural anthropologist Robert Murphy wrote *The Body Silent*[54], a book that 'forcefully demonstrates that deeply personal and self-observant ethnography can rise above idiographic particularity to address broader theoretical issues.' The book is a useful exemplar and centres around Murphy's own battle with illness turning his

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[50] Anderson, L., (2006). "Analytic Autoethnography". *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373–395.
[51] Deegan, M., (2001). "The chicago school of ethnography". In *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 11-23).
[52] Anderson, L., (2006). "Analytic Autoethnography". *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373–395.
[53] Van, M. J., (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
[54] Murphy, R. F., (1990). *The body silent.* New York: Norton.

ethnographic gaze toward his own experience with spinal disease. Anderson suggests that:

"Murphy's book seeks connections to broader social science theory—especially in using his own experiences to argue that conceptions of liminality provide a more accurate and meaningful analytic framework for understanding human disability than does a deviance perspective."[55]

Referring back to my two artworks what comes to mind is Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont's observation that:

"[Auto]ethnographers-as-authors frame their accounts with personal reflexive views of the self. Their ethnographic data are situated within their personal experience and sense making. They themselves form part of the representational processes in which they are engaging and are part of the story they are telling."[56]

Autoethnography as a methodological approach can be effective in that it provides the researcher or artist with 'multiple reasons to participate in the social world under study, and thus, multiple incentives to spend time in the field.'[57] Moreover, it can provide access to insider attitudes, feelings, interpretations and meanings and a shared grid to formulate outcomes. The most valuable possibility for the artist researcher is gaining trust and knowledge from the social world they are studying through this methodology.

Taking an autoethnographic perspective enables me to explore the preceding case studies by considering my mediation and intervention within a broader socio-cultural context. This allows me to be introspective as an artist researcher and assess the impact on the project in an integrated manner rather than separating discussions of 'self' from 'other'. Laurel Richardson[58] observes that 'our sense of Self is diminished as we are

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[55] Ibid. p. 375
[56] Atkinson, P., Coffey, A., & Delamont, S., (2002). "Key themes in qualitative research: continuities and changes". *Canadian Journal of Education*, 27, 528.
[57] Anderson, L., (2006) "Analytic Autoethnography", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Volume 35, Number 4, 373-395 Sage Publications.
[58] Richardson, L., (2000). "Writing: a method of inquiry", in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research.* Thousand Oaks: Sage publications.

homogenised through professional socialization, rewards and punishments.' Further elaborating that '[h]homogenization occurs through the suppression of individual voices and the acceptance of the omniscient voice of science as if it were our own.'[59]

In other studies conducted in autoethnographic contexts, researchers have been able to combine research goals with a variety of interests, including pursuing personal spiritual goals.[60] This examination of conscience in terms of my artistic practice and self-reflexivity is not far removed from *muhasabah* mentioned earlier on in this chapter. This notion is a useful one to consider as one of the reasons that motivated me to opt for an autocritique research methodology. Especially because my artistic practice is rooted in the South Asian orders of Sufism and in particular bound up in intertextuality with narratives derived from the lives of medieval saints such as Bulleh Shah.

A textual work entitled *(I am) mute (with love)* exhibited at mac[61] in Birmingham and at Twelve Gates Arts[62] in Philadelphia was installed in the medium of vinyl on the gallery floor and as a suspended panel of text, respectively. Atif Sheikh co-director of Twelve Gates Arts comments that:

"In his [Shaheen's] writings, a Sufi poem blends into pop art imagery, and the line between personal memory and cultural icon is easily blurred. In the end, his audience ~ whether it be of his writings, visual art, or performances ~ are so moved and challenged by the private complexities presented honestly by the artist that they become a part of his work."[63]

In the particular works that he refers to I enter into my own mythic tale as a protagonist.

The story reads as follows:

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[59] ibid.
[60] Marti, G., (2005). *A mosaic of believers: Diversity and innovation in a multiethnic church.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
[61] For details of venue refer to < http://www.macarts.co.uk/>accessed 14 November 2018.
[62] For details of venue refer to < http://twelvegatesarts.org/>, accessed 14 November 2018.
[63] Sheikh, A., Twelve Gate Arts, <http://twelvegatesarts.org/%23new1artiststst.php?id=1052>, accessed 14 November 2018.

"Once upon a time in a distant land I was a boy who danced in six colours. My master demanded my devotion. On the eighth day of each week I sucked my master's tongue for knowledge. One day I so angered my master that he could no longer speak to his twice-born. Since I knew his love for dance, I searched far and wide until I became a disciple of a courtesan. She taught me how to win back the favours of my beloved. When I finally returned to the abode of my master, I asked him to take me as his bride. I pled. He refused. I ate his heart. Forgive me, for I may have sinned."[64]

In this textual work histories collide and memories are exchanged between medieval folklore and a contemporary re-imagination of it. Episodes of the lives of saints combine with metaphors and memory, creating interpretation panels for visitors to decipher. Kabir in the reading of my artistic methodology alludes to how:
"...the personal is used to dig out submerged connections between the private world of the individual and the public sphere of the nation, between one set of pasts in Manchester and another set in Lahore. His images disrupt commonsense binaries—male/ female, public/private, home/ away, secular/ religious, masquerade/ reality, exterior/ interior."[65]

Once again, the intertextuality of these works resonates with that of the intensely personal life stories of Bulleh Shah often sung in qawwali[66] renditions. Ananya J. Kabir notes how the Sufi sacred is profoundly familiar and defamiliarising in my work and quotes me as one who turns to the 'remembrance of a Sufi mystic who, centuries ago, took to dancing in women's clothes in order to win the favours of his beloved, even if it meant becoming a whore'.[67]

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[64] Shaheen, Q.R., (2009) programme notes, *Prodigal Son: Traces of a disciple astray*, Shout Festival, Mac Birmingham, UK.
[65] Kabir. A. J. (2007). "*Of Longing and Belonging*" in Shaheen, Q.R. *Khusra: Stains & Stencils*. Manchester: Shisha and Cornerhouse Publications, p.40.
[66] "Qawwali is considered as music is a group song performed by qawwals, professional musicians who perform in groups led by one or two solo singers. Qawwals present mystical poetry in Farsi, Hindi and Urdu in a fluid style of alternating solo and group passages characterized by repetition and improvisation. The vigorous drum accompaniment on the barrel-shaped dholak is reinforced by hand clapping while the small portable harmonium, usually in the hands of the lead singer, underscores the song melody." R. Burckhardt- Qureshi, Sufi Music of India and Pakistan, The University of Chicago Press, USA, 1995, excerpt from Preface.
[67] Shaheen, Q. R., (2004) *Only the Moon to Play With*, Manchester: Anokha Laadla.

The artworks that will follow were born out of several years of a mix of field work and establishing a network of friends and colleagues who were generous enough in sharing their experiences and knowledge with me. The case studies also implicitly reflect an internalised longing for a number of saints that over the years I had developed an imaginary relationship with. Kabir notes that 'unsurprisingly, Qasim has never been to Ajmer[68] himself, and he is content to have brought Manchester, his hometown, into the compass of the sacred geography that he feels spiritually part of.'[69]

Letter to Nahid II

Dear Nahid,

I was thinking of that time when we sat together and talked about 'bazari & bhakti'(for the market & for the soul). You started talking about how your early years of dance training were in Pakistan and because it was not nurtured as an art form post-partition, dance was not something a girl could pursue professionally. But you were adamant in not allowing anyone to interfere in your choices whether it was dancing in school or humming songs around the house. You spent time being aloof and finding your creative expression. Bazari, you insisted, was the person not the dance form - its onus and connotation was upon the person who offered it to its audience. You stressed upon the manner in which it was understood and the intention with which it was conducted that ultimately mattered. You spoke of exploitation of the form in the name of bhakti just as much as how spiritual stations could be realised through entertainment. 'Practice as prayer' was your mantra. You gave examples of renowned musicians and how their riaz (daily practice) became a mode of enlightenment for them. Yet, you were weary of how repertoire was not questioned by dancers instead being transmitted as parrot fashion tradition without revisiting reason, social structures and cultural codes. You questioned the distinction made between the 'pure' and 'dramatic' elements of kathak.

[68] For further details refer to < http://www.chishtiajmersharif.com/>, accessed 16 November 2018.
[69] Qasim Riza Shaheen in conversation with Ananya J. Kabir, private communication, Manchester, 13th December 2004.

In doing so does one imply that one aspect is impure or unauthentic? Can there not be room made for realising the individual dancer's interpretation of pure technique? Is pure technique not a dramatic construction of authenticity as well? Forgive me if I take what I have learnt into the bazaar again in homage to the tawa'if-courtesans of the past, on whom the Khwajaseras of Hira Mandi base their dance repertoires and self-image on. I am neither a Sufi, a tawa'if-courtesan, nor a khwajasera. I have absorbed your image into my body through deep observation - *seena baseena* - as you refer to it. I am about to look back and revisit the way I applied your dance into a space for healing. I seek your blessings.

The chapters that follow aim to address some of the observations and critiques of my art practice as I offer the artist's perspective and intention behind creating works both past and current. I will highlight the process of self-reflexivity (*muhasabah*), performance notes and an implicit dialogue between theory and practice. I implicate my practice as a form of prayer and communication, transcending the geospatial context and locations of Sufi shrines and allowing them to resurface within the diaspora. The art practice creates space for imagination and introduces a shapeshifting djinn to question the actors of history across time and alter the narratives of Sufi mystics, khwajaseras, and tawa'if-courtesans; who exist in oral culture, lived experience and through exploring film archives respectively.

Chapter Three: *Stains & Stencils*

The following chapter discusses how my time spent in Hira Mandi resulted in a creative exchange with a small circle of sex worker friends in the khwajasera community in Lahore between 2005 and 2007. I will also situate my extended lived experiences in relation to other media practitioners such as photographers and documentary film makers. In light of the personal nature of my journey, I begin with a homage to the friends I made in Hira Mandi. I say they were friends before they can be discussed as khwajasera-khusras or as sex workers. Over many cups of tea and cigarettes we talked about our day-to-day experiences, our past and our future within the realm of fact and fiction, lived and imagined. The following series of images, *They were already dead,* were performed by me for my friends. I am dressed, made up by beauticians from local 'beauty parlours' who have a regular khwajasera clientele. I am positioned in detail by them along with their photographer and become a muse for their collective artistry and fantasy. The mimetics and gestures in the photographs are derived from Indo-Pak film choreography and posturing, and their manifestation into popular culture such as film hoardings and product advertising. The imagery and the costumes themselves are from the wardrobe store of a Lahore film studio. Access to the apparel was granted to us through mutual connections. I had been able to access a wardrobe store containing old film costumes from the 1970s/80s for the photoshoot.

The following series of six assisted self-portraits stage pre-existing conventions of film hoardings and banners often seen displayed outside cinemas. The duality in these portraits resonate the notion of the companion djinn, both watching and witnessing. This archive of film costume apparel originally worn by actors, depicting dancers in a multitude of genres, enters the frame of the contributors' accompanying stories, as titles to each image. Beneath each assisted portrait is a story I had also asked them to tell me which I could attribute to their respective portrait as a title to these works. Once in a fleeting conversation I remember someone saying in Punjabi '*assi te pelai to marey hoye aa*'. Having been rejected by their biological families and communities for their gender atypicality, my friends often said 'it had taken the life out of them' before they found themselves on the streets. I translate and title the work in response to that very

sentiment and our resilience. In the original catalogue I had juxtaposed my collection of pinned butterflies and moths with the visceral experience of these transformations. These six distinct self-portraits; each a kind of stencil of sorts depict faces of Punjabi female beauty inspired by Lahore's film industry and filtered into local beauty parlours. My friends depict their personal icons; curating my body through hair, make up, costume, styling and through sharing stories. The considered and mindful navigation around our day to day lives and genuine concern for wellbeing, sexual health and emotional support gave permission to each of us to access the other's life-world both imaginary and real.

They were already dead, self-portrait titles 6/6, Qasim Riza Shaheen, 2007.

Rozi offered supplications dressed as a man and needed a concealer for the mark left on her forehead from prostrating five times a day.

Figure 4: Qasim Riza Shaheen*, They were already dead 1/6*, 2007.

Chanda married a married man for 116 days and had a fractured rib and a broken heart for most of the marriage.

Figure 5: Qasim Riza Shaheen*, They were already dead 2/6*, 2007.

Gauri wanted to be fair and lovely and believed she was possessed by a Hindu djinn who had been present at the death of Momin Khan Momin in 1851.

Figure 6: Qasim Riza Shaheen, *They were already dead 3/6*, 2007.

Madiha spoke Urdu six out of seven days and only visited the district once a week now that she had assimilated well with the wives at the cantonment.

Figure 7: Qasim Riza Shaheen*, They were already dead 4/6*, 2007.

Alisha fell in love with a wardrobe assistant at a film studio and for him she wanted to look and speak English like his favourite film star.

Figure 8: Qasim Riza Shaheen*, They were already dead 5/6*, 2007.

Sheetal only had 403 colour memories and didn't have long to live but she could certainly pout to save her life so her wife kissed her where it hurt the most.

Figure 9: Qasim Riza Shaheen, *They were already dead 6/6*, 2007.

In 2005 I was commissioned by Shisha, the international agency for contemporary South Asian crafts and visual arts in Manchester, United Kingdom. Shisha was established during the period of the New Labour government and took up a social inclusion agenda to improve the representation of South Asian identities in the North West region of England. In a climate where community initiatives were becoming integral to UK public policy, programmes such as '*Parampara*' (literally meaning 'heritage' in Hindi), enabled me to conduct a socially engaged project of my choice. Shisha which translates as 'mirror' was opening up South Asian art, craft and cultural practices to the diaspora and its appreciators. It was also a platform for inward inquiry into what belonging to a South Asian heritage meant to British Asian artists in the UK.

"Although my forefathers were from the Punjab and a part of my British sensibility was yearning for a warped romantic validation of my ethnicity, I must confess that there was a distinct lack of nostalgia attached to my journeys to Pakistan. Yet childhood stories of saints and whores, the learned and the transgressive of centuries past marred my mind, just as my escapades with present-day models and designers, prostitutes and pimps fueled my imagination."[70]

The above extract is from a paper I wrote in 2009 and on rereading this I noticed the lens through which I talked about a journey I had made. I noticed how I was making a distinction between my sensibility and my cultural heritage. I primarily derived my sense of nationality from the privilege of travelling freely across borders with a passport that held global currency. I played by the rules and enjoyed British civil liberties at the expense of understanding my heritage as inferior to my nationality. Home was a place we had left as a result of colonial displacement and choices based on personal economy and wider opportunities. Our hybrid cultural identities were built on what we had gained rather than what we had lost. One existed in relation and at times at odds with the other. Home was never good enough, stable enough or viable enough to return to, at least this is what we made ourselves believe. My lack of nostalgia was a reaction to the trauma of longing yet not belonging fully to either cultural reality. Both

[70] Shaheen, Q.R., (2009). "Queer courtesan (sixteen processes of beautification)", *South Asian Popular Culture*, 7:3, 211-215, DOI: 10.1080/14746680903125549

homes were defined through the telling of stories, incidents and memories; righteous and fabricated. Like a horse wearing blinkers I was led through school with partial and biased histories and told to focus and not get distracted. I wore a poppy to commemorate my forefathers who had served in the British army in both world wars yet I was never allowed to forget how much the British had done for us. I recall when on my way home from school one day a passing elderly couple noticed me wearing a poppy on my school uniform and with a beaming smile one of them said "we are glad to see that you are grateful for what we did for you".

It was as though our familial and community contributions went unacknowledged and that assimilation meant having to negate one identity for another. This carefully considered balance inculcated a forgiveness and a type of obliviousness towards the atrocities of the empire and the injustices of Britain, yet never forgot the shortcomings of Pakistan in comparison. I grew up appreciative of being British rather than grateful, as gratitude wreaked subservience and went against the pride of independence and the creation of Pakistan in 1947. I was proud of being of Pakistani descent yet divorced from its political, social and cultural realities. I was as Pakistani as British television and imported VHS programmes of that time from the subcontinent permitted me to be. My diasporic identity was caught up between familial nostalgia, Pakistan versus England cricket matches, the British media, its journalism and a new dawning modernity in Pakistan. As years went by Pakistan became further removed from its reality and became a figment of my imagination; one which I longed to visit.

I also distinctly remember a conviction and a strength of will to make this journey come what may. In retrospect there was something unexplainable too. It felt like an irrational calling, not from a person but a force which would take me to places both strange yet familiar. As far back as I can remember I would always indulge in the idea that there was someone with me. At times I felt a presence or perhaps it was my imagination but either way it was a figure not bound by age, gender or time. I also felt a strong inclination to dance even before watching the tawa'if-courtesans of cinema and the influence they had on my psyche later in my formative years. My aunt would often forewarn my mother of the mischievousness of djinns and how she

sensed a shadow cast upon me. She gave me many amulets and consulted exorcists for further probing. She was told that a djinn had fallen in love with me when I was a child. Apparently, I had been sleeping in the open air with my long tresses hanging off the edge of the bed. It had married me and now abided in my hair and will not let me be with anyone else; it was androgynous in nature and of another faith. It is as though I was being fearlessly led by the same force into the unknown and I went along with it.

I am aware that by acknowledging a force without proof and evidence in academia, my motivation to embark on this journey may come across as esoteric. However, not highlighting this overwhelming feeling and drive would not do justice to the explanation and discussion of the works in this commentary. It is as though the djinn my aunt was so very convinced of, had led me to its origins and through my body longed to revisit the life-worlds it was once part of; this time as an embodied participant.

Over the next two years, I forged connections and lived with mothers of houses of the transgender or the third gender community in Shahi Mohalla or Hira Mandi; the infamous *lal bazaar* (red-light district) of Lahore where I befriended six sex workers; Gogi, KumKum, Reena, Choti, Simi and Aashi. It is important that I share their personally chosen pseudonyms with you since each name slips off the tongue with its own unique rhythm per se. As much as I understand this work through friendship, it is important to note that I will refer to these *gurus* (mother figures) and *chelas* (adopted family members), as the source community. The third gender communities in this geographical area in present day Pakistan, along with other hereditary inhabitants, were witness to a lineage of courtesans, dancing girls, sex workers and their patrons since the seventeenth century. Historically during the Mughal empire third gender people were advisors and artisans for the ruling class far from the status and role of khwajaseras in the present day. Not far from Lahore in Kasur is the shrine of Bulleh Shah and it is primarily his thinking and life stories which gave the impetus for this journey. I became the whore whom he was willing to become to win back the favours of his beloved.

As I reflect on my participation, the process and the exhibition itself, it is important to highlight the relative ease with which I understood and accessed these communities. Signifiers and similarities such as ethnicity, Indo-Pak cinema, devotional music, queer aesthetics and a familiarity with cultural and religious codes of behaviour were factors which created space for assimilation from the outset. This is not to suggest that the process of assimilation was in any way easy and that likeness was a guarantee of entering social circles. My desire to be there was led by an irrational sense of connection and empathy as though I was being brought there to experience remnants of another time period.

There is a subtext which surrounds each of the six staged self-portraits (see Figures 4-9) bearing witness to much of what we shared and experienced over this period; stories of unrequited love, loss and grief, lived, imagined and retold. We witnessed one another's pain, longing, suffering and laughed in the face of adversity. We danced at weddings, functions and private parties and became all that was required of us. We were holders of secrets, desire and often violence and ridicule but we all searched for love, as transient and unpromised as it came. We roleplayed using gestures and mimetics borrowed from scenes of cinematic seductions between heroes and heroines, new and old. We intertextually referenced one film with another as we contended with harsh realities and reimagined them as film sets providing us with fragmented melodies from fleeting cars and our nearby surroundings.

Then there were the often quiet narratives of our private lives, conversations in the early hours of the morning; before sunrise and continuing after morning-*fajr* prayers until we fell asleep. Only towards the end of my visit did I feel that we had trusted and disclosed enough to each other for me to then immerse myself into their internal and external geographies. I wanted to create and curate an authentic and meaningful experience; where we could become producers of our own self-image and participate in a collective healing repertoire.

Video Vignettes: Which one is me? Which one is you?

Figure 10: Qasim Riza Shaheen, video stills from six short film vignettes, circa 2005-2007.

My givens were six distinct rooms inhabited by each of my friends, their occupation, our histories, our memories, a video camera and the potentiality of my body. This exchange translated into a corporeal transposition and transformation. It became a vessel through which the desires, aesthetics and fantasies of my transgender, sex-worker-friends could be showcased. These private performances of mine were a homage to each of these lives and were crafted together into six video vignettes. These intimate disclosures were adaptations of their self-image enacted and displaced onto the borrowed body and sensibility of an artist-friend.

"I am a world away from theirs yet become a mediation of sorts between them and you: watching them watching me re-tell their stories through my gaze. I am in their clothes, made up by them and carefully positioned and postured. As their clients, friends, pimps and madams carry on with their chores around me, I enact these visions and soundscapes of seduction. Listening through rooms, peering over balconies and looking out of windows, seeking the beloved..."[71]

The works formally culminated in a solo exhibition entitled *Khusra: Stains and Stencils* at Castlefield Gallery in Manchester in 2007. The term khusra is a pejorative term derived from the word Khwajasera[72]. I use this in the spirit of reappropriating a derogatory term into one which becomes affirmative, like queer, in its subversion. Kwong Lee, former director of the gallery comments on my methodology in the accompanying catalogue and reflects that:

"His vision of involving the khusra community not as subjects but as producers has been a driving force. In the production of some of these images he has deliberately handed over control of the cameras to the khusras, thus shifting the power dynamics and revealing the complexities of gaining access and trust".[73]

Historically, the notion of otherness has often been represented by 'another' per se and hence equity and balanced representations are difficult to achieve. Positionality, reflexivity and participatory ethics are intrinsic in recent museological debates. These have consequently led to more equitable ways of reengaging with cultural identity, through negotiating ideas between museum curators and representatives of source communities. Moreover, an invited artist becomes part of the art museum or gallery once they are commissioned to produce a body of work for an exhibition.

This first case study thus not only exemplifies the process and methodology of my creative practice but also focuses on the relationship building between an art gallery

[71] Shaheen, Q.R., (2009). "Queer courtesan (sixteen processes of beautification)", *South Asian Popular Culture*, 7:3, 211-215, DOI: 10.1080/14746680903125549
[72] Khan, S., (2016). "What is in a Name? Khwaja Sara, Hijra and Eunuchs in Pakistan." *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 23(2), 218–242.
[73] K. Lee., (2007). "Preface", in Shaheen Q.R. *Khusra: Stains & Stencils.* Manchester: Shisha and Cornerhouse Publications.

and a source community. In this collaborative socially engaged project I become a mediator and my body a site for shared memories; staging scenes of reflexivity. Auto Portraiture extends from capturing the self into creating the self on another body; a gesture resonating with that of belonging to a house and its mother passing on its aesthetics to its adopted family. Most art museums and gallery curators of an exhibition strive for neutrality in interpretation for their visitors when representing a particular source community. I would argue that the process of curation is in itself a political, ideological and aesthetic point of view and that neutrality is perhaps not always an ideal perspective to strive for.

Within the scope of this autoethnographic and practice-led methodology I had assumed a subjectivity of a cross-dressing androgyne embodying notions of a 'woman' as substitute prostitute[74] and artist as djinn. Somewhere between the source community and my role as a visitor I lay bare my own personal history and gender atypicality which needed to be exchanged and opened up to new cultural interpretations. Looking back, the principal aim of this socially engaged project was to reclaim and challenge the representations of the khusra community that had been appropriated by news journalists, media agencies, and the creative industry. In my experience there had been inadequate communication and little dialogue between such collaborators and the source community. Often due to time constraints and a pre-planned agenda the source community seldom ever saw the final outcome let alone be involved in the storyboarding or editing process of these projects. Such approaches where the curatorial frame had been conceived outside of a shared context, and lacked consultation, often silenced and appropriated their narratives rather than present their stories. Peers and Brown suggest that more equity between a source community and an institution may lead to a more trusting dynamic and resist upholding past anthropological hierarchies. [75]

[74] The terminology of 'substitute' prostitute was coined after several conversations with 'heterosexual' male clients of transgender sex workers during my period of stay in 'hira mandi' - the red-light district in Lahore

[75] Peers, L., & Brown, A., (2003). *Museums and source communities*. London: Routledge.

From Falklands Road to Sonagachi to Hira Mandi

When I first came across Mary Ellen Mark's set of photographs from her exploration of what she refers to as the lives of 'prostitutes' in Bombay's Falklands Road, I saw erotically charged images which were 'candidly posed'. Mark's prostitutes performed for her camera as though it were a potential client. The posture and the gesture reminiscent of those photographs in which the gaze is directed to a real-life client. One is left with a feeling that some of her photographs are directed by the photographer herself. For instance, there is a striking image of a prostitute staring into the camera with her necklace held between her lips (see Figure 11).

Another image frames a prostitute looking pensively into the mirror, almost waiting for that moment to be captured (see Figure 14). These subjects are very much aware of their participation in her photographic frames through her camera. They appear as actors performing their lives for an American photographer visiting India. Mary Ellen Mark in her introduction to the monograph of this body of work describes in detail her time spent with the communities of sex workers and clients in Bombay, India from 1978-79. She made several trips to India between 1968 and 1981, although the photographs in the monograph were taken in the late 1970s over a few months when she befriended members of the source community. She talks about the resistance she experienced during her earlier visits, her shift in approach and the gradual trust-building and acceptance of her as an outsider experiencing the interior spaces of these lives.

In retrospect Rod Siemmons[76], Director of the Museum of Contemporary Photography Columbia College Chicago observes how 'the Falkland Road images are less rigorously formal than Mark's later work, reflecting more the cramped quarters and limited opportunity of productive shooting than aesthetic choice'. Siemmons articulates Mark's project in terms of limitations and productivity of gaining access to these private spaces in a manner not that dissimilar to the objectives of a documentary camera crew. He continues to remind us of the lengthy introduction to her monograph which not only

[76] Mark. M. E., (2002). Programme notes. *Twins,* The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago.

provides context to the images but also prevents 'simple moral condemnation and dismissal'.

Since I was aware of Mark's endeavour to photograph a source community prior to the *Stains & Stencils* work I was averse to the idea of exclusively photographing subjects and situating them in different art museum and gallery contexts. I wanted to generate a different kind of shared experience and intimacy where both the artist and the source community navigated the creative outcomes. I encouraged these dialogues in a way that the outcomes were also produced by the source community and collaborators that they had had a long-standing relationship with.

Mark reflects and wonders in the afterword of the same 2005 reprinted book that 'access to the explicit and personal world of Falkland Road would be much more difficult today. Because the world has been connected by the Internet and cable television and everyone is much more aware of the power of media'[77]. She wonders how the women of Falkland Road would react to her now. She is nostalgic and appreciative of the friendships she made over the years and talks of her returning visits and reconnecting with the people she had photographed and journeyed with.

I began my journey that very year in 2005, almost picking up from how this body of work affected me and how I wished to tell a different kind of story where the source community worked with the artist as a muse for their own visions and scenography rather than mine. Mark acknowledges the shift in the power of the camera and the photographer since her time in Falkland Road. I believed that the work we produced in Hira Mandi would be a byproduct of the shared lived experience itself without objectifying my sex worker friends and giving them permission to engage with my body as a muse and artist-mediator. The role of the videographer was also central to how our day to day lives were documented at functions and dance events. The familiarity, aesthetic considerations and the trust already existed between the source community and the videographer. As mentioned earlier, I was what Katz refers to as a leaky queer setting himself 'the difficult task of explaining one group of queers to the other, the

[77] Mark, M. E., (2005). *Falkland Road*. Göttingen: Steidl.

leaky to the unleaky'. On rereading Katz's essay on my work, I am surprised at how perceptive the closing lines of his essay are, 'he is our medium in both senses of that word, conjuring spirits out of thin air; his body the material form they/we take, together'[78].

There was no clear moment of disclosure of 'being an artist' as I did not differentiate between my art practice and theirs. They became producers of the work that would travel from Hira Mandi to Manchester for which I had their blessings. They had given me an insight into their lives, our lived experience and how I amalgamated my queerness with theirs in the same way that there was no questioning of heritage and belonging when I first arrived; we simply abided in a shared space. Perhaps, a collective pursuit and passion for roleplay had allowed a space for this creative exchange to occur with such ease and equity. Expectations of longevity and commitment, notions of permanence and forever friends were romanticised amongst us yet engulfed with temporality and the harsh reality of losing people to brutality, violence and simply going amiss. There was no specific point of departure from my friends; instead, it happened gradually as I moved out from the red-light district to a place of my own in another part of the city. I then began visiting and maintained contact through phone calls and text messages.

[78] Katz, J.D., (2010), in Shaheen, Q.R. *Nine acts of reciprocity*. Manchester: Anokha Laadla

Artist as muse

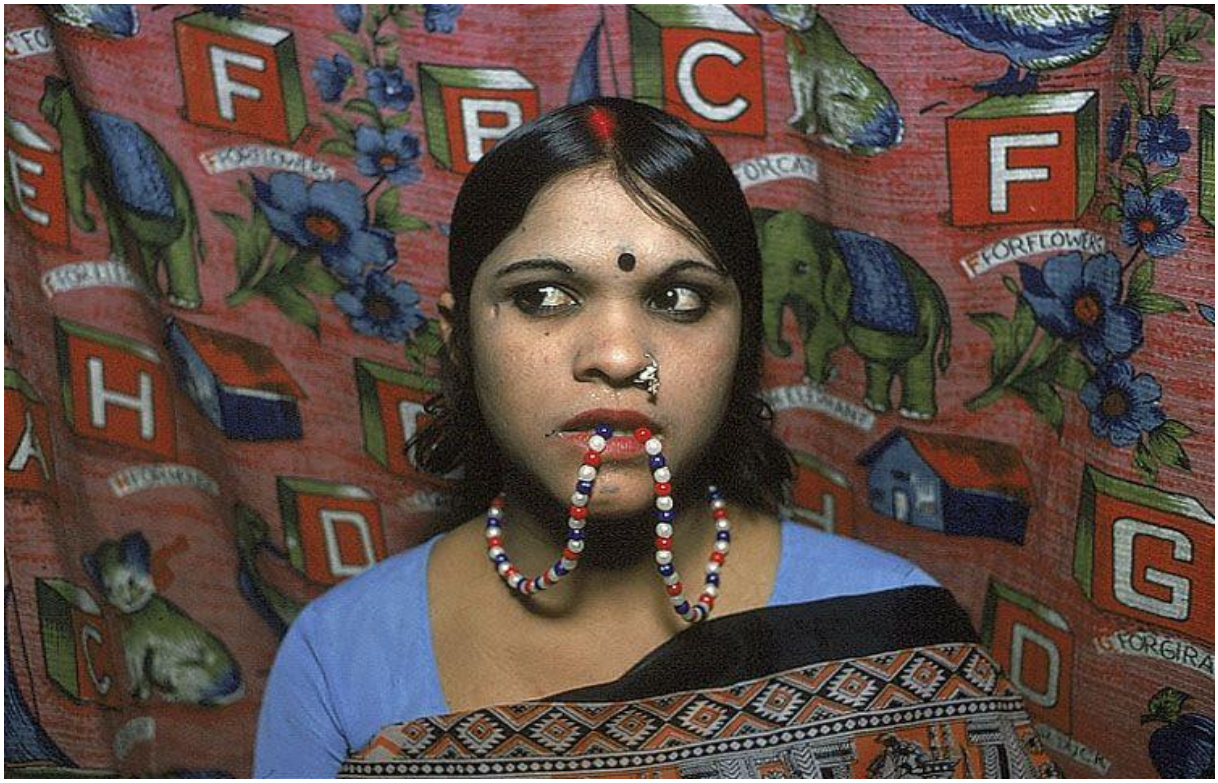

Figure 11: Mary Ellen Mark, *Falkland Road*, 2005.

Figure 12: Mary Ellen Mark, *Falkland Road,* 2005.

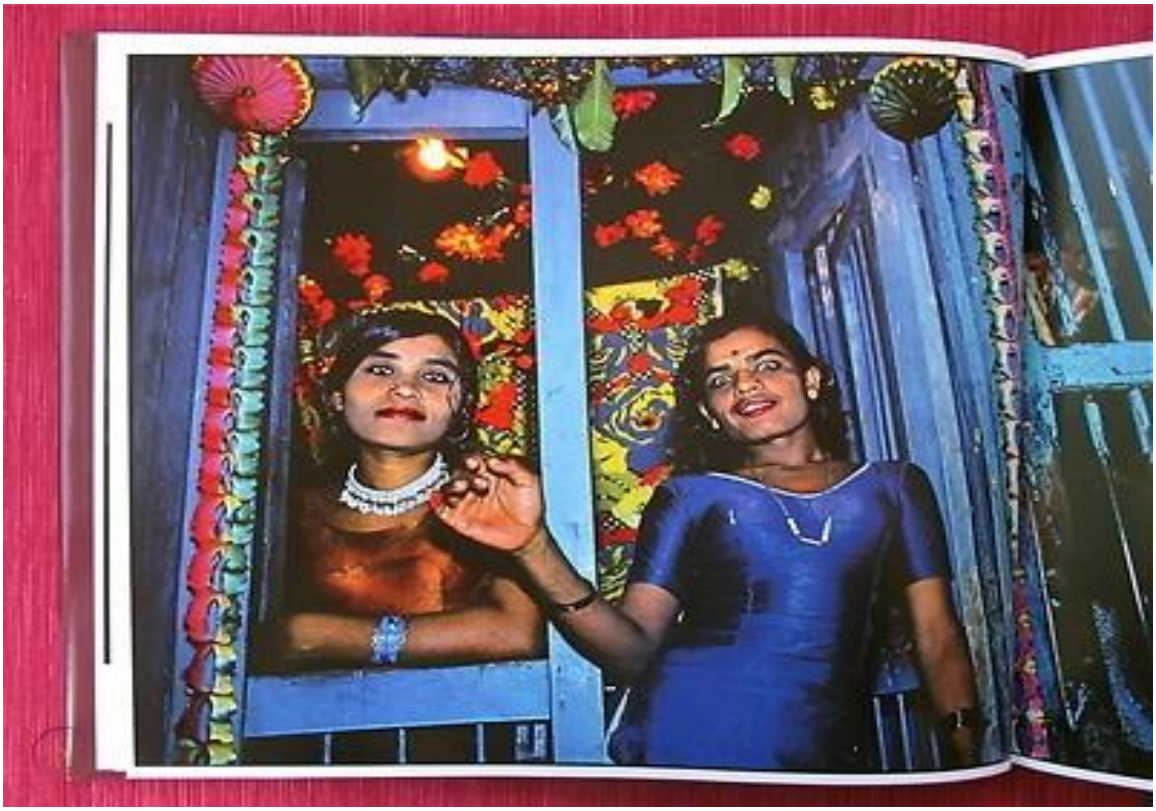

Figure 13: Mary Ellen Mark, *Falkland Road*, 2005.

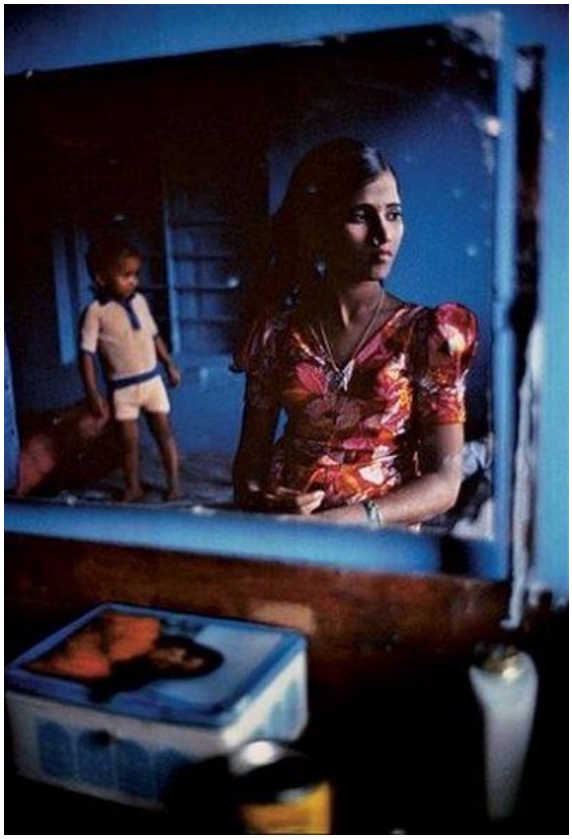

Figure 14: Mary Ellen Mark, *Falkland Road*, 2005.

Mark believes that being a female photographer allowed the prostitutes she had photographed to relate to her as another woman. She asserts that a male photographer would have created a very different set of images.[79] In my case, positioning the khwajasera sex workers in control of the camera with their regular videographer allowed me to perform back to the community vis a vis the camera. The camera - had it been in the hands of a television crew, a journalist or even myself as an artist, my performance-recipient would have transformed the nature of my presentation into more of an enactment.

The access Mark gained in her project, over the four months she photographed the prostitutes of Falkland Road, was a result of her privilege as a white, American photographer. She was also a foreign woman - a *memsahib* - reemerging within a

[79] Lance, E.A., (2011). *Standing on Falkland Road, sitting in America: Mary Ellen Mark's representation of the Indian other.* https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/handle/10355/14552. Accessed 21 August 2021.

postcolonial landscape of intergenerational memory. Power structures based on race and gender were still prevalent since Mark began making this work only twenty to thirty years after independence. Such access to source communities is often the case with journalism and news reportage as the credentials of the outsider and the agency they represent is key to unlocking these private worlds. *Stains & Stencils* was born out of submission and annihilation rather than power and privilege. I was not standing apart nor was I expecting to be treated any differently to other members of the community. Ethnically, culturally and linguistically I was at home and not an outsider due to my own duality as a British Pakistani person. My queerness and gender atypicality further invited and submerged me into these lives. The difference lies herein, I was not seeking access, but acceptance and kinship.

In Mark's interview with Elizabeth A. Lance the discussion centres around funding and resources which made the trip possible[80]. It was also very specifically commissioned for Germany's leading reporting magazine GEO, although published in Stern as the former magazine deemed the images too explicit for their readers. Lance questions and probes Mark to discuss her technical choices in terms of camera lenses and lighting allowing a further insight into the manner in which the set of images were generated. Technical considerations of whether the footage we produced in Hira Mandi was of broadcastable quality was never discussed, with either the gallery or with my friends who participated. The process of generating material through means which were most accessible and affordable were used throughout. It is also important to note that the time period spent in Hira Mandi was unfunded and not restricted by deadlines, curatorial expectations or specific outcomes. Although SHISHA and Castlefield Gallery both had an invested interest in the exhibition there were no specific expectations of the media and were fully committed to my process.

Another photographer whose work I have only recently discovered is London-based Australian artist Antony Luvera. What strikes me most about his practice is his methodology of assisted self-portraits. By giving access to his own technical expertise and equipment he creates a space where the source community he works with can

[80] ibid.

enter at their free will. The idea of voluntary participation and transparency of intention is key in Luvera's practice. He welcomes questions and provides a clear frame through which the collaborative work can be generated, discussed and processed into new contexts. Through regular workshops with participant-led choices of location and subject matter, Luvera shares his skillset as a photographer and transforms his role into a facilitator and technical advisor. The work made together with homeless people is researched, developed and carried out in London and other urban centres; spaces familiar to both Luvera and his participants (see Figure 15).

Figure 15: Anthony Luvera, assisted self-portrait of Sheila Clarke, from *Belongings*, 2011.

Although the cultural context and the roles that Luvera works within are very different, the similarity of my work in Hira Mandi lies within what he refers to as the 'richness of the relationships formed within the archive'[81]. In my case the corporeal, the memorious and the imagined archive as well as the one through the lens.

During the period that I was in Hira Mandi, my anonymity and desire for invisibility was challenging. The need to 'disappear' yet reappear as I became a reflector for the lives around me often heightened my self-awareness. It allowed me to discover our points of

[81] Kern, M., & Luvera, A., (2010). *A Rocky Boat: reflections on research, process and representation Margareta Kern and Anthony Luvera in conversation,* Cities Methodologies Bucharest. http://www.luvera.com/anthony-luvera-and-margareta-kern-in-conversation/. Accessed 10 October 2021.

connection through empathy and mindfulness. Luvera[82] also found that it was a process of research and exchange based on trust and his curiosity about the source community's lives which became the impetus for his project. Although at times he admits to feeling discomfort and ambivalence in using a recording device yet he still finds himself compelled at the same time. The discomfort he describes can be understood as constructive and critical in nature, leading to a deeper engagement with the source community, and resulting in various forms of transformation through the artworks being produced. The fundamental difference between Luvera's assisted self-portraits and mine is that the source community become the producer and have creative control over my body as a muse leaving the viewer with the question of whose self-portrait are we viewing and who is assisting whom. The blurring of lines between this exchange creates an equity which is often missing in documentary films and photojournalism.

[82] Ibid.

Escape or empowerment?

Figure 16: Kauffman and Briski, film still, *Born into Brothels*, 2004.

Figure 17: Kauffman and Briski, film still, *Born into Brothels*, 2004.

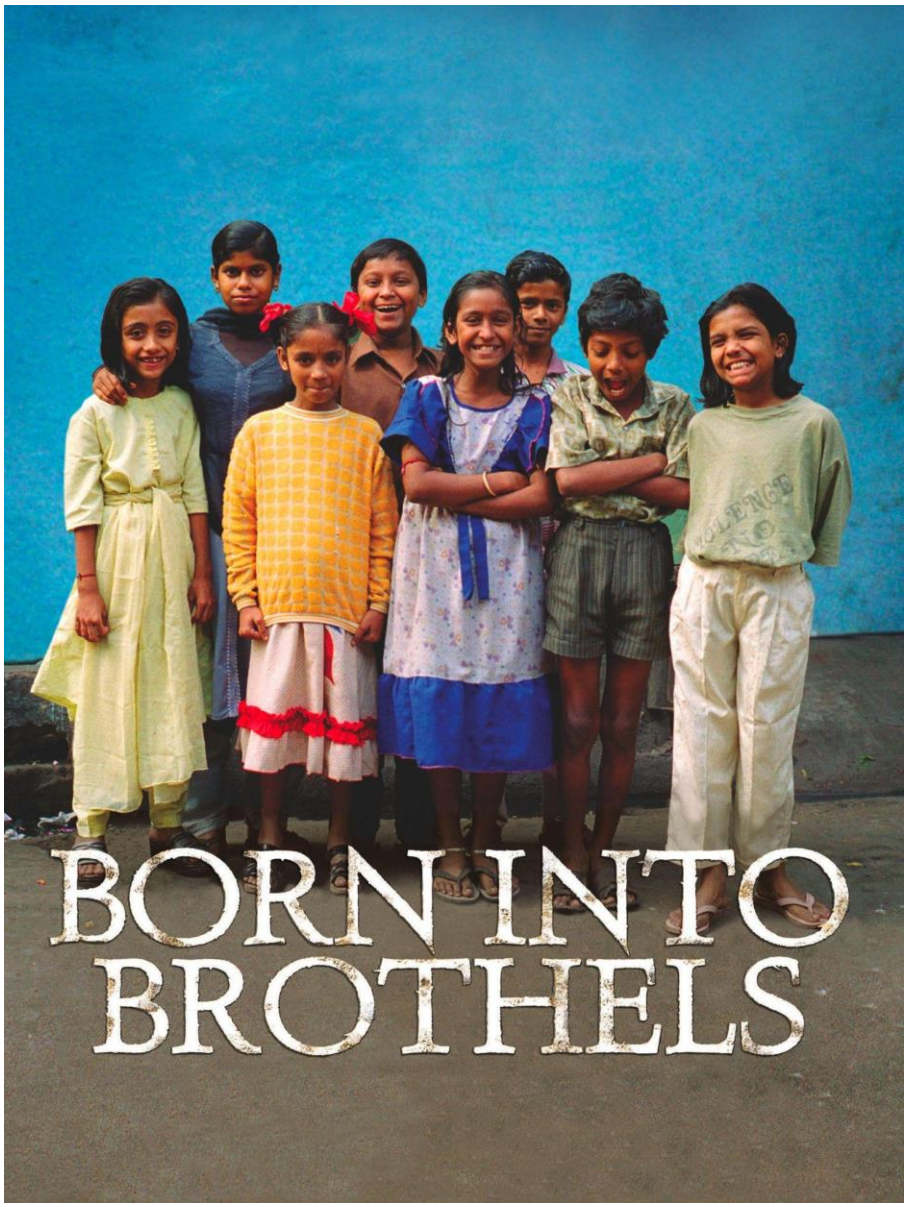

Figure 18: Kauffman and Briski, film still, *Born into Brothels*, 2004.

Born into Brothels[83] is an Academy Award winning documentary film about Zana Briski, a British photojournalist and US film editor Ross Kauffman, who ventured out to Sonagachi, Calcutta's red-light district to live with and photograph the lives of women there. What transpired was the cultivating of a relationship with the children of the brothels. She taught them photography - providing them with an insight into framing, composition and perspective. These children roamed their neighbourhood with snapshot camera's loaded with 35mm film. They photographed passersby, their living quarters, contrasting details of their surroundings and poignantly, self portraits with arms stretched out and the cameras facing them. These introspective outcomes would then be celebrated, discussed and critiqued by 'Zana aunty', as the children affectionately called her (see Figure 18).

Figure 19: Kauffman and Briski, film stills, *Born into Brothels*, 2004.

[83] Kauffman, R., Briski, Z., Dreyfous, G. W., Boll, P. T., Baker, N., McDowell, J. (2005). *Born into brothels*. California: Lion's Gate Home Entertainment.

Briski's objective quickly turned to getting some of those children into a boarding school so that she could save them from a life in the brothels. The documentary shares some of her struggles in getting those children enrolled into a school and even trying to get a passport for a promising young child to participate as jury at the World Press Photo Foundation Forum 2002 in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Briski secured a show at Sotheby's in New York showcasing and fundraising for these children and the documentary itself won several accolades including an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 2005. Throughout the documentary there was a stark contrast between the privileged and those from the brothels. The idea that these children needed to be rescued, reformed and relocated was central to Briski's narrative. I wished to avoid the pitfalls attendant on documentary projects where there is a danger for the cultural outsider to become the sole crusader.

Mark and Briski's projects seem to suggest that the source communities they worked with were without local help, resources or collective agency. Briski wishes for an escape route for the children from the brothels in order to save the children from their 'doomed' lives. Neither Luvera nor I intend to 'rescue' anyone through our art practice. Rather, it becomes a platform for collective reflexivity and creative exchange.

Central to my thinking when I lived in Hira Mandi was the acceptance and mindfulness of the spaces I shared without creating a hierarchy between British cultural codes, values and systems and those I was experiencing. I was not there to rescue anyone or intervene in their life choices and circumstances. As a friend I advised what was best for us in any given situation we were in together. I cared about basic amenities, health issues, emotional wellbeing and safety within the context of the time we spent together. I did not assert assumptions or comparisons of a better life elsewhere, nor did I think that exhibiting at Castlefield Gallery was any more of a success or achievement than sharing the work on a television monitor in one of the brothels. Being present, authentic and honest was enough. I did not wish to make promises such as that of a wider international audience or that by presenting the work at a gallery their lives could in any way be impacted. I lived and worked at a mutual pace and at a tempo which resonated with the rhythms, nuances and spoken/unspoken rules of our group.

What is similar about Mark, Luvera and Briski is their desire to be present, mindful and engage in meaningful conversations with the source community. However, Mark and Briski had both worked with their assistants and collaborators. They were not entirely alone in that journey as is often assumed because the narrative leads us to believe that these works are the result of the photographer and the community. I was alone in Hira Mandi and I had not submitted a letter to the British consulate that I was living there and working on a project in case of emergency. I was not in contact with SHISHA or Castlefield Gallery during that period although I did email from time to time from public cyber/internet facilities. At that time I had a Nokia 6210 mobile phone, a very basic model even at that time, and was very limited in terms of communicating and documenting through my device. All these aforementioned choices and limitations led to a vulnerability, fragility and dependency which brought me closer to my shared-lived experience. The idea of fate (*kismet*) and destiny (*muqadar*) were so deeply embedded within me through my religion and the syncretic nature of my familial culture that it allowed me to take a leap of faith. I had also been affected by endurance and duration based live art practices of artists such as Ron Athey, Franko B, Kira O'Reilly and La Ribot to name but a few with whom I had been programmed at festivals of live art in the early 2000s. It was the symbiosis of these very different contexts that became the driving force behind this experiential, process based and ephemeral body of work. A lot of the artwork in retrospect went undocumented, shared into shards and distributed into intangible nothingness; like the unseen beloved, the nameless-faceless one or/and the djinn.

Source communities & television documentaries

Figure 20: Saira Khan in conversation with Roop, *Saira Khan's Pakistan Adventure,* 2007.

A two-part BBC documentary called *Saira Khan's Pakistan Adventure*[84] (2007) directed by David Hickman was under production during this period. This British television presenter's quest to find home involved a journey which started from Sindh and ended up in her ancestral village in Kashmir. This programme offered a 'crash course' for a British television audience about the troubled yet exotic landscape and cultural spheres of Pakistan. Both the researcher and the presenter of the programme offered a sensationalist and at times reductive insight into the lives of philanthropist Abdul Sattar Edhi, a transgender television host Begum Navazish Ali and a fashion editor of a men's magazine amongst others. Each segment of the programme compared life in Pakistan to that of Britain and set a premise where it undermined and highlighted the cultural inequities of her homeland. At the outset of the programme, Saira poses a question to herself and her implicit audience 'can it ever be 'my' Pakistan?' creating a hierarchy between the diasporic and the subcontinental subject.

During her escapades she nervously meets with a particular group of 'hijras' in what she refers to as a 'secret world' in one of the most dangerous areas of Karachi. Ironically Saira, the BBC film crew and her team are protected and shielded from the

[84] Hickman, D., (2007). *Saira Khan's Pakistan Adventure.* London: BBC.

dangers she worries about. She visits them in their dwellings, sits with them with her footwear whilst everyone else is barefoot; a customary and respectful act when visiting someone's home. They begin explaining that they have a 'lady's soul' and that they belong to a 'third world' of gender. In response Saira asks them "were you born a boy?" They are then abruptly asked what they do for work and respond that they perform at ceremonies and ask for their rightful fee (see Figure 20). Saira responds "So you ask for money?". Suddenly, a mobile phone belonging to one of the hijras rings and she answers it. Saira laughs at the audacity of receiving the call during filming and then sternly responds "Roop, hurry up". Despite Roop telling her of her childhood abuse by her family due to her gender atypical behaviour and how she has found her way to dance and seduce men, Saira feels 'strangely relaxed' in the company of these hijras because they appear 'comfortable against all odds'. Before leaving, Saira is seen assisting Roop in applying her 'shiner' makeup product adding a glow to her blusher and reassuring her that she is 'beautiful'. She asks others in the group how Roop looks after she has added her touches to her look. Her departing comment on screen is saying that she has left (making up) her eyes as that will take her forever. Despite their hospitality and all she has learned about them there is no attempt made to delve deeper into those declarations of trauma and life stories. The quick questions Saira fires fit neatly into the fast-paced story-boarded narrative of the programme. There is no room to reflect or consolidate nor is there a dialogue which disrupts stereotypes, presents alternative perspectives and shares their stories; they end up yet again performing exactly how they are expected; this time in Saira Khan's Pakistan adventure.

Such self-righteous interactions promise representation and visibility on some level but in return for these, often in kind, insights the participants are left vulnerable and longing to see the filmed footage. These production crews often leave the source community with a hope to see the conditions of their lives improved but leave with a one-sided story which meets the criteria of the producers and the airing channel. These were also the recollections and experiences of the friends that I had made in Hira Mandi when they had encountered television drama and news producers and researchers. My friends had also begun to see these visitors as a sort of clientele to

whom they could perform their personal stories to. Their living spaces were at times rented out by television producers for a more authentic backdrop for their actors. Fees for their services, if any, were often nominal compared to industry rates. I wished to create a more equitable and amicable space with my role and provide a transparency of intent during the time spent with this source community. Although I was aware of the various methodologies one can employ in ethnographic research such as passive observation, interviews, focus groups, archival research to name but a few, I had begun to question my role as an artist. I wanted to investigate alternative learning models and more appropriate ways of displaying shared experience through life and work and somewhere in between disguised participant observation, yet mindful and authentic when participating in creative endeavours. The journey to Lahore was intended to be experiential from the outset. This enabled an organic curatorial process without formalising outcomes in terms of medium and methods of documentation. Central to my approach was an artistic intent to witness and be witnessed by those communities with whom I engaged and most importantly at a conducive trust-building pace.

What I had been questioning was the position that I would occupy in these relationships. Elizabeth Crooke states that:

"Many in museums refer to the need to connect with communities, create community collections, and be deeply involved with social, welfare and developmental issues. Proponents support a grass roots approach that is more relevant and acceptable. Some will go so far as to advocate a service that has its objectives set by the community, on its own terms".[85]

[85] Crooke, E. M., (2008). *Museums and community: Ideas, issues, and challenges*. New York: Routledge.

Figure 21: Mawaan Rizwan in conversation with Kami, transgender model from Pakistan, *How Gay is Pakistan?*, BBC, 2015.

In a much later BBC programme in 2015 directed by Masood Khan[86], Pakistan born British comedian Mawaan Rizwan journeys to Pakistan and upon arrival describes Karachi as 'one of the world's most dangerous cities notorious for terror attacks, kidnapping and organised crime' creating a frame through which to understand 'the two worlds which never collide'. Mawaan seems already convinced at the outset that 'being gay and Pakistani do not go together'. As we venture with him to his first gay party in Karachi he wonders whether it will be like Soho in London. Such comparisons may give a sense of familiarity to a British audience but do little to understand the cultural climate Mawaan is visiting on its own terms. Through the programme he discovers activists, transgender communes and even a spiritual reparative healer of homosexual tendencies. Even though Mawaan is of Pakistani origin the programme situates the viewer in an 'us versus them' plot. When faced with different challenging realities he feels lucky that he 'can hop on a plane to London' or wanting to go back to Zone 2 London' because he is 'done with Pakistan'. As he prepares to return back to the UK after two weeks in Pakistan, Mawaan concludes that he has 'seen a society which at its worst rapes and threatens violence to gays and at its best turns a blind eye or offers up cures'. This leaves me with the question that when the director and Mawaan pose the question 'Just how gay is Pakistan?', whose yard stick exactly are they measuring it with? Would it not be more fruitful to reflect on the intricacies of

[86] Khan, M., (2015). *How Gay is Pakistan?* Documentary, London: BBC.

another homosocial culture and understand the nuances of same-gender intimacy which have their own codes of behaviour?

Figure 22: Mobeen Azhar with Khwajaseras, *The Best Pakistani Transgender Retirement Home,* BBC, 2019.

Another recent BBC programme[87] broadcasted in 2019 *The Best Pakistani Transgender Retirement Home* directed again by Masood Khan and reported by Mobeen Azhar progressively looks at a different demographic of khwajaseras in Lahore. This time the programme introduces us to a forward-thinking guru who is establishing a retirement home for third gender people, an aging sex worker and an elderly cross dresser who sees himself as a reformed man. This programme yet again asks probing questions which beg to be picked apart in terms of who is doing the asking and what the reporter wants to hear. The reporter claims that Hira Mandi is Lahore's worst kept secret which is not brought up in polite conversation and further claiming that this is where 'society's outcasts have lived for centuries'. Time and time again narratives are constructed about the moral ground of source communities on their behalf and

[87] Khan, M., (2019). *Our* World: *The Best Pakistani Transgender Retirement Home*, Documentary, London: BBC.

programme participants are coaxed into framing their identities according to script, frames and the reporter's line of questioning.

As discussed above, there have been several initiatives within mainstream media and through photojournalism to commission documentaries and editorial stories about transgender sex workers in South Asia. My role as an artist engaging with the source community in creative pedagogies of storytelling and self-reflection was an alternative response to such photojournalism, documentaries and films. In my experience, the source community was often left disempowered and vulnerable and without any resolve, closure or return. In my time spent with the khwajaseras of Hira Mandi, equity, alliance, and a strong sense of empathy was the driving force behind our creative expressions. Without the time, commitment and inevitable risks, such bonds are difficult to make, especially, as funded projects work on strict deadlines and limited timeframes. Most importantly, I did not want to take anything with me from this experience other than what was given to me as an expression of trust and in the name of friendship. I did not want to create an objectifying exhibition of my friends, where they would be locked into moving and still images corresponding to my gaze and objectives. Rather, my intention was to collectively choreograph scenographies of our mimetics, sentiments, gestures and search for love and belonging.

In *Stains & Stencils* the contribution to knowledge is articulated through the act of handing over the camera and scenography to my friends from the source community itself. I was not directing the journey, I was simply going on a journey with them. They were navigating me and I was relying on them to enroll me into their life-world and accept me. There was also an agency a djinn already had in that culture and community which needed no introduction or explanation. The idea of '*djinn-chambarna*' or being possessed by a djinn was very matter of fact and not esoteric. This state of possession was also understood as a form of trauma or the manifestation of a mental health issue and could be used interchangeably at times.

The time-frame within which these friendships occurred felt akin to being together in a moment of crisis like a hijacking or being shipwrecked on an island. Locked within circumstances which were shared amongst all of us. We were understanding one

another based on those lived experiences within that encapsulation. It is within this immersion that my friendship evolved naturally as a confidante and facilitator of their everyday creativity.

It is also vital to remember that the mode of communication and articulation of what was being produced collectively was not any more or less important than getting dressed up for an everyday 'function'. The difference here was in the opportunity offered to my friends to reflect and contribute to a vision which would be exhibited in different cultural contexts. It was a platform which invited self-appraisal and self-reflection both individually and as part of a community. I became a muse to their artistry. Being ethnically South Asian and of Pakistani descent I was fluent in both Urdu and Punjabi, thus I was not questioned about my nationality when I arrived in Hira Mandi. When initially introduced and greeted by members of the community I was referred to as '*chikna*' or '*gora-chitta*' meaning glabrous and fair-complexioned as a compliment. Since I was taken under the wing of a well-respected guru my associations were only with that house. It was also not uncommon to maintain a secrecy around one's family and locality once initiated.

Whoever I was and wherever I had come from, I had lived with my friends on a common ground and with shared experiences. I kept no distance nor made a distinction between observation and participation. We were in this together. From the outset I was careful of my own assumptions around the power of representation through technology and documentation. Rather than generate material based on the idea of directed self-portraits where my vision was being executed by the source community, I was willing to entrust my friends with the authority to generate an aesthetic which was theirs rather than mine. What was most obvious about my time with my friends in Hira Mandi was that they had their own aesthetics, symbols of beauty, portraiture and methods of inventing personas. I had posited myself within a pre-existing register of multiple channels through which my sex-worker friends manufactured a performative public self. I had not arrived to bring something new but rather to submerge myself fully with a world that existed before I came and continued after I left.

I did however bring concern, mindfulness and mediation which resulted in trusting and meaningful friendships.

With the *Stains & Stencils* exchange I wanted to become a mediator rather than a cultural tourist like in these later and more recent programmes. In facilitating the khusra community to become producers of their own cultural representations through the displaced site of my own body it allowed scope for personal empowerment, reaffirmation, political action and cultural ownership. The otherwise objectified source community became curators of my body as a site on which to tell their stories on their terms and through their aesthetics; I became a messenger sent to a gallery in the UK. Peers and Brown suggest that "at the core of these new perspectives is a commitment to an evolving relationship between a museum and a source community in which both parties are held to be equal and which involves the sharing of skills, knowledge and power to produce something of value to both parties.[88]" The work was seen in one of the houses in Hira Mandi, as though being traditionally blessed by the khwajasera elders before it made its return journey to the UK. The idea of permission and blessing is also central in my own life long ustad-shagird relationship.

The self-portraits at the start of this chapter and the six film vignettes use radically alternative representational conventions cultivated collectively at a pace and within a lived and shared context.

Letter to Nahid III

Dear Nahid

I realise I didn't tell you fully what I was doing and going through in Lahore when I was there between 2005-7. I knew you would have asked me 'why'? and I would not have had an answer. Even as I write this now, I grapple with this notion of reason and intent. I remember when I would visit you that you would notice changes in my appearance and in my behaviour. I needed to keep that world separate from you and how differently we understood dance. It was as though I was

[88] Peers, L., & Brown, A., (2003). *Museums and source communities.* London: Routledge.

learning to integrate the pure and the profane in how my body remembered the dance you had taught me and what was required of my being in Hira Mandi. Those distinctions which I carried between what was right and wrong seemed to have brought me to a place where, like Bulleh, I too would dance to win the favours of my beloved even if it meant becoming a whore.

But then what is a whore? A vessel for someone else's desire? Someone who wishes for something of greater value than the sanctity of their own body? But then what is sanctity? The day after the day before I sinned? The act of marital consummation? Whether it is ceremoniously blessed or whether it is an illicit transaction are these marriages ultimately not about submission and subjugation? Or is it not as linear as that? Can power be achieved through self-annihilation? Can sanctity be reclaimed? How do we differentiate between the holy and the transgressive?

There is a Mosque in Old Delhi known as 'randi ki masjid' or the strumpet's mosque, a misnomer for 'Masjid Mubarak Begum'. It was built around 1823 by a courtesan named Mubarik ul Nissa. She was one of 18 mistresses of a British officer called David Ochterlony. It was not uncommon in that period for wives of nobility to commission the building of mosques, but this dichotomy of devotion and defiance was rare by a courtesan. She was a dominant character and achieved much status and power and was also referred to as 'Generallee Begum'. As a gesture of love Ochterlony had even bought a garden for her and named it 'Mubarak bagh' in Delhi. After his demise in 1852 Mubarak Begum built a residence for herself in the same garden and this mosque with part of her inheritance. She later married a Mughal soldier and became a revolutionary during the mutiny of 1857 against the British. Although there is little mention of her in archives it is said that she died that same year.

Closer to home I stumbled across a mosque in Pappar Mandi in what was once known as Chowk Chakla, situated in old Lahore's bazaar, called Mai Moran. I came to realise that it had been renamed only around a

decade before I was there. It was originally called Masjid-e-Tawaifian, the courtesan's mosque and was built in 1824 just after Masjid Mubarak Begum. Mai Moran was a prolific courtesan of her time who had married Maharaja Ranjit Singh and had great influence during his ruling years even as far as having her name minted on the currency of the time; a gold coin called 'Moran's coin'. Legend has it that Ranjit Singh spent the night with Mai Moran on the minaret of Wazir Khan Mosque in Lahore in full view of the city. In the morning they were both engulfed in an unexpected physical pain. It is said that as repentance for their transgression and desecration of Wazir Khan Mosque the courtesan's mosque was built.

The Sikh maharajah went against law and norms to have married a Muslim courtesan in the first place and was subjected to public flogging although it is said that due to someone's intervention he was only flogged once. I do sometimes wonder whether the act of making love to his Muslim wife-concubine on a minaret was another conquering of sort by this Sikh maharaja. It is said that Mai Moran was a skilled artisan but is remembered mostly for her philanthropic deeds long after the demise of Ranjit Singh. I felt this deep longing to return to that period as if I belonged there or as if something was reminding me of my lost connections. I woke up at times wondering what brought me here and why I had surrendered myself to this life.

I kept my distance from you because knowing you were in the same city reminded me of another life and made it harder to continue living in those conditions. Nahid, I did not know who this beloved was which I yearned to dance for, immaterial of how many witnessed or watched me dance. It was not about their gaze anymore - my djinn was ecstatically dancing through me and to its own tune.

***

I am sitting on the steps beneath a deteriorating tenement in Lahore's Shahi Mohalla (Royal Quarter). My face is washed clean of

make up, I am dressed in black and my long hair tightly bound in a single plait. A passing man approaches me with uncertainty and asks "*aap bazar mein baith ti hain*?" This question is not so straight forward to translate. He asks me whether I am of the people who sit in the marketplace; 'sitting' implicative of a lineage of performers and of the word baithak (sitting room or a sitting session). In other words, he is asking me whether I am saleable yet at the same time questioning his own assumptions. Note he refers to me in the feminine. I imagine myself as a battle-bruised yet indestructible warrior queen.

Before I can answer him, I see Zuljanah - the mythical white horse of Imam Hussain, majestic, loyal and handsomely adorned in all its glory yet surrounded by melancholy and mourning. This is the symbolic horse that bore arrows whilst encircling the figure of Hussain as he prostrated in prayer. Zuljanah returned, drenched in blood, to the surviving relatives bearing news of Hussain's death. The ultimate scene of remorse and penance is recreated on the 10th day of Muharram, memorialising the battle of Karbala 61 AH (AD 680). Zuljanah trots through men who are rhythmically swaying to self-flagellation on the day of Ashura.

I am no longer in Hira Mandi. I left the memories of that body behind; injured, vociferous and forlorn. I am back home in Manchester. I think about what I have brought back with me and what I left behind. I think about the stains and stencils on my body. I reminisce how within this theatre and spectacle of mourning is a temporary acceptance of those who sit at the margins, those who are often ignored and not deemed pious enough to otherwise participate. On this day they too partake in these memorious acts of devotion. A collective enactment of grief which takes in its folds not just the death of those revered historically but also the present-day deaths and resurrections of violated bodies and sentiments of my sex worker friends. Perhaps it is also a time for remorse, regret and repentance for a life in a brothel which has little sanctity and worth in the

predominant puritan religious culture of Pakistan. This ritual of flagellation and self-fashioning ironically becomes restorative and healing for those outcastes who yearn to be part of a religious congregation. The spectacle of Ashura opens up a civic reality which is often denied to those who are perceived as transgressive or profane. I come away from those years with an impression of how integral religiosity is in relation to transgression and how there is a recurring desire for redemption and resolve during many shared experiences with my sex worker friends.

Chapter Four: *Queer courtesan*

Figure 23: Uday Shankar as a nautch girl in a Paris studio, circa 1930s. Photo: Courtesy Ashish Khokhar.

Figure 24: Qasim Riza Shaheen as a nautch girl. Photo courtesy Karin Albinsson, *Queer Courtesan (Sixteen processes of beautification)*, Manchester, 2007.

In a field of sleeping horses where the breeze blew blue in a sapphire hue
I wonder/I wondered if I can be you. Which one is me? Which one is you?[89]

In the following chapter I would like to critically consider this one-on-one performance intervention work of mine entitled *Queer Courtesan* and continue to position it in the theoretical field of museology. In particular how this endeavour, at its core, was an attempt to offer alternative ways of understanding and approaching community projects. This writing builds on the work *Khusra: Stains & Stencils* previously discussed and specifically on the tension between my voice as a reflexive practitioner and observer, and a body of literature about my art practice. I attempt here to delve deeper into the personal motivations underpinning *Queer Courtesan* and to step outside of my positioning as maker-performer. In terms of theoretical perspectives, I will be considering Richard Sandell, Ruth Adams and Diana Taylor amongst others.

As part of the exhibition *Khusra: Stains and Stencils* in 2007 I had been commissioned to produce a movement-based work for an event at Castlefield Gallery in Manchester. This one-on-one performance was inspired by the two years of a shared embodied experience with my six sex worker friends in Lahore where we had produced six vignettes reflecting each of their lives on the site of my body. The new work naturally evolved itself into my seventh cubicle becoming an intimate yet voyeuristic performance playing out the relationship between embodiment, dance and seduction. Only many years later, when I was studying in the department of Museology at the University of Leicester, did some of my methodological choices begin to piece together in retrospect. Richard Sandell who was a faculty member and whom I studied under believes that the manner in which interventions are presented in art museums and galleries both enhance visibility and destigmatise difference. The desire to 'offer new ways of seeing and understanding which replace, challenge or subvert dominant negative modes of representation' are central to the artist's intervention.[90]

[89] Shaheen, Q. R., (2004). *Only the moon to play with*. Manchester: Anokha Laadla.
[90] Sandell, R., (2007). *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*. London: Routledge.

Figure 25: Qasim Riza Shaheen, *Queer Courtesan*, Live one-on-one performance as part of the exhibition Khusra Stains & Stencils, Castlefield Gallery 2007.

Queer courtesan: eight heroines in love

The durational and interactive work *Queer Courtesan* was based on a subversive reading of the Ashtanayikas[91] or the eight heroines in love; a notion derived from the ancient Indian treatise of the performing arts. These classically performed feminine figurines were queered through recoding their mimesis. These private acts of simulated intimacy were performed for a limited audience. I had interpreted these heroines as courtesans and each journey a performance of love. I performed eight versions of the queer nayika in distinct contexts and for different venues[92].

Letter to Nahid IV

Dear Nahid,

Find below performance notes for my eighth heroine in love, *Queer Courtesan*, the final act to be presented at Brighton International Festival 2010, curated by Brian Eno.

"2010 marks the completion of a major work. Queer Courtesan, a cycle of eight performances depicting 8 heroines in states of love (encased in almost 500 one-on-one, one minute, unrequited affairs with bespoke melodies on vinyl). Queer Courtesan was programmed in: Khusra: Stains & Stencils, Castlefield Gallery, Manchester 2007; Port City, Arnolfini, Bristol 2007; National Review of Live Art, Tramway, Glasgow 2008; British Dance Edition, Unity Theatre, Liverpool 2008; British Council S.P.A.C.E., UK; LaBoral, Gijon 2008; Trouble, Les Halles, Brussels 2008; Friday Late: Making a Scene, Victoria and

[91] A narrative concept often used in classical Indian performing arts, the Ashtanayika or eight heroines depict different states of mind, physical attributes and encounter varying circumstances in the pursuit of love. For a detailed reading of the concept of the Ashtanayika in dance refer to Banerjee, P. (1986). *Dance in Thumri* New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, p.13.
[92] Originally commissioned by Dance North West and presented at Castlefield Gallery in 2007. The subsequent development into 'eight heroines in love' went on to be part of Port City (2007) at Arnolfini, Bristol; British Dance Edition 2008, Liverpool; The National Review of Live Art (2008), Glasgow; Trouble Festival at Les Halles (2008), Brussels; British Council/Teatro De LaLaboral's 'Showcasing Performance in Alternative Creative *Environments*' (S.P.A.C.E. UK) Festival (2009) Gijon, Norfolk House Music Room, Victoria and Albert Museum (2009) and finally at Brighton International Festival, The Basement, Brighton 2010.

Albert Museum, London 2009; and Brighton International Festival, The Basement, Brighton 2010."

(Nahid, this part is the audio only - to be read live to each participant before they enter the cubicle)

"[I] Suddenly you emerge from my thoughts but I decide to leave this life incomplete.

[Djinn] Destitute is he crying and gathering the pieces of a broken shrine singing through his bleeding liver, his eyes awaiting his beloved's return. His world spins like the splendid frock of a courtesan (during her most perfected pirouette). His ankle bells break as he dances a saturated plea and presents his suitors with broken bells of wisdom. During each dawn's recurrent light he hears dead daisies sing, 'your prayer mat is the magic carpet. Your innermost self, your cynical love. Your hair grows longer each day you wait. You become Aladdin and he becomes the stone you dare not touch'.

[I] At this point he ate another slice of the time cake.

[Zuljanah] (The headless horse finally declares his love for his rider).

[I] What good are those three wishes through a lamp if I know what I want is you? A stone, a heart, or a bridal veil? I wish I never see you."[93]

Nahid, we spend hours perfecting the art of movement on our bodies whilst staring at our reflections, yet the subject is in the body. How can the mind and all that it retains not enter the body? Are we not subjects of experience intertwining timelines?

[93] *My longhaired cynical love* was written in 1994 as a love letter and first performed at greenroom, Manchester in 2000. It was reprised in 2004 as *Only the moon to play with*, marrying this work with *In my father's footsteps* (2003). This extract was performed as a preempt during the finale of eight acts of *Queer Courtesan* at Brighton International Festival, 2010.

The scope of this study only allows for an analysis of the seventh incarnation of this performance series which occurred within a period room setting in a museum. This fantastical union between a shape-shifting djinn, this time in the guise of a tawa'if-courtesan, and a restored English period room echoes with reverberations of the 'nautch dance' and its colonial interpretations; which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. The notion of a museum as a site of colonial prowess will be interrogated in this writing and is pivotal in understanding the dynamic relationship of *Queer Courtesan* with the specificity of the performance encounter. After describing the work in some detail alongside visitor responses, the primary focus will be on how such an intervention impacted the tangible and intangible histories embodied in the site and in the artist's body memory through gesture and posture. As supporting examples of similar artistic endeavours and explorations works by Sonia Sabri Dance Company[94] and artist Pushpamala. N will also be referenced.[95]

The museum, as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill conceives it, is largely a western phenomenon and an institution that houses particular 'constructions' of history, cultural heritage and memory[96]. In 2000, ICOM (the International Council of Museums) engaged the profession in re-defining the museum of the twenty-first century[97]. In short we might note the discipline of museology has largely been concerned with preservation, collection and notions of permanence. Sharon J. Macdonald observes how museums were historically established as 'sites for the bringing together of significant "culture objects"' and led to being 'appropriated as "national" expressions of identity.'[98] Drawing on Macdonald we might note museums as monuments of power that had been erected in the colonies such as in India and their impact on the psyche of young independent nations in the making. In Western and non-Western, colonial and postcolonial contexts the resulting sentiments of new nationalism

[94] Sonia Sabri Dance Company, <http://ssco.org.uk/>, accessed 09 July 2019.
[95] Pushpamala N. is an Indian artist born in 1956 and lives in Bangalore, India.
[96] Hooper-Greenhill, E., (2015). *Museums and the shaping of knowledge*. London: Routledge.
[97] ICOM, Code of Ethics definition for 'museum' <http://icom.museum/the-vision/code-of-ethics/>, accessed 9 July 2019.
[98] Macdonald, S., (2012). "Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities." *Museum and Society*. 1 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242704933_Museums_National_Postnational_and_Transcultural_Identities Accessed 9 July 2019.

positioned museums according to Alessandra Lopez y Royo as 'self-appointed custodians of the past.'[99] Ruth Adams in her paper on the display of collections from the Indian subcontinent in the late 20th century and the influence of the Empire at the Victoria and Albert Museum reinforces this position. Adams suggests that

'Museums are primarily discursive institutions which seek, through modes of taxonomy, display and interpretation, to make otherwise mute or ambiguous objects intelligible. However, as postcolonial theory has demonstrated, these discursive frameworks are never neutral, may obscure as much as they reveal, and can also function to reinforce the hegemony of imperialism through partial representations of non-Western cultures.'[100]

Therefore, in keeping with both Royo's rhetoric and Adam's positioning of the Victoria and Albert museum as historically 'a propagandist for the British empire'[101], the intent behind *Queer Courtesan* was to offer a subversive mimicry of deeply embedded notions of ornamentalism[102] through understanding the 'museum as the microcosm of the Empire.'[103] *Queer Courtesan* made an invitation, in an age-old courtly tradition and involved myself as artist-djinn dancing to a selection of seven-inch vinyl records; a rich and at times incongruous mix of Hindi and Western, classical and pop. Not only did this piece strive to disrupt nationalist and gendered objectifications of the female form as a desirous tawa'if-courtesan, it also attempted to queer the onlookers gaze. Furthermore, it subversively evoked the politics and poetics of the late nineteenth century freakshows 'in which individuals perceived to possess unusual or explicable bodies performed for and were stared at by the paying public.'[104] Sandell describes how these shows, which had largely disappeared by the mid-twentieth century, 'nevertheless cast a powerful shadow over contemporary museum practice.'[105]

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[99] Lopez y Royo, A., (2012). *South Asian Dances in Museums: Culture, Education and Patronage in the Diaspora*. Roehampton University.
[100] Adams, R., (2010). "The V&A: empire to multiculturalism?". *Museum and Society*. 8. 63-79.
[101] ibid, p.63
[102] Ibid, p.66
[103] The notion of 'the museum as a microcosm of the Empire' is taken from Adams, R., (2010). "The V&A: empire to multiculturalism?". *Museum and society*. 8. 63-79.
[104] Sandell, R., (2006). *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203020036
[105] Ibid, p.161.

Although Sandell's research in this instance was to do with the practice of staring and disability it is relevant here because in his findings curators 'expressed anxiety about the implications of displaying material in ways which might invite and authorise disrespectful and otherwise inappropriate forms of looking.'[106] My particular artist intervention disrupted these curatorial assumptions in the context of queer and nonbinary bodies as empowered spectacles and dancing to their own tune.

[106] ibid, p.161.

Letter to Nahid V

Dear Nahid

It is 1431 AH (AD 2009). I am in a London museum in a room which is open to the public. It is a music room and I am surrounded by mirrors and antiquity. A djinn undresses me and costumes me carefully; marking the end of a cycle. Although I appear alone in this room I sense its presence in the space.

The first time I saw you dance I knew my life would never be the same. I had never seen anything quite like it before. A woman on stage wearing a long black robe whirling to the rhythmic chants associated with Rumi, Konya and the Mevlani order of Sufism. The choreography blended seamlessly with Kathak. But even the kathak I was unraveling was of a different temperament, pace and flavour to what I had seen before. The question of authenticity and legitimacy is closely connected with dance lineage and who you are learning from. Your dance spoke to a young Muslim man in Britain. You stood tall, timeless and distributed the energy back into those around you. It is said that the whirling dervishes hold out one palm facing the skies and the other towards the ground with their head tilted towards the heart.

Don't you find it poignant that in 1977 a person-less space shuttle launched by NASA sent the sounds of 5000 years of human evolution echoing 30 billion miles?! More so, it included the vocals of a Tawa'if-courtesan-singer, Kesarbai Kerkar rendering the lyrics '*jaat kahan ho akeli, gori?*' (*Where are you venturing alone, oh fair maiden?*). It makes me smile that there could be aliens listening to this haunting rendition by a tawa'if-courtesan somewhere in the galaxy. Here on Earth we are so caught up with ideas of respectability and the stigma of prostitution which gets attached to kathak and tawa'if-courtesans. The stigma of Muslim identity in kathak is even deeper because of the manner in which the colonial project delegitimised the Muslim Mughals and the cultural and

artistic practices associated with them. I wish to put all these conversations together in this work at the V&A.

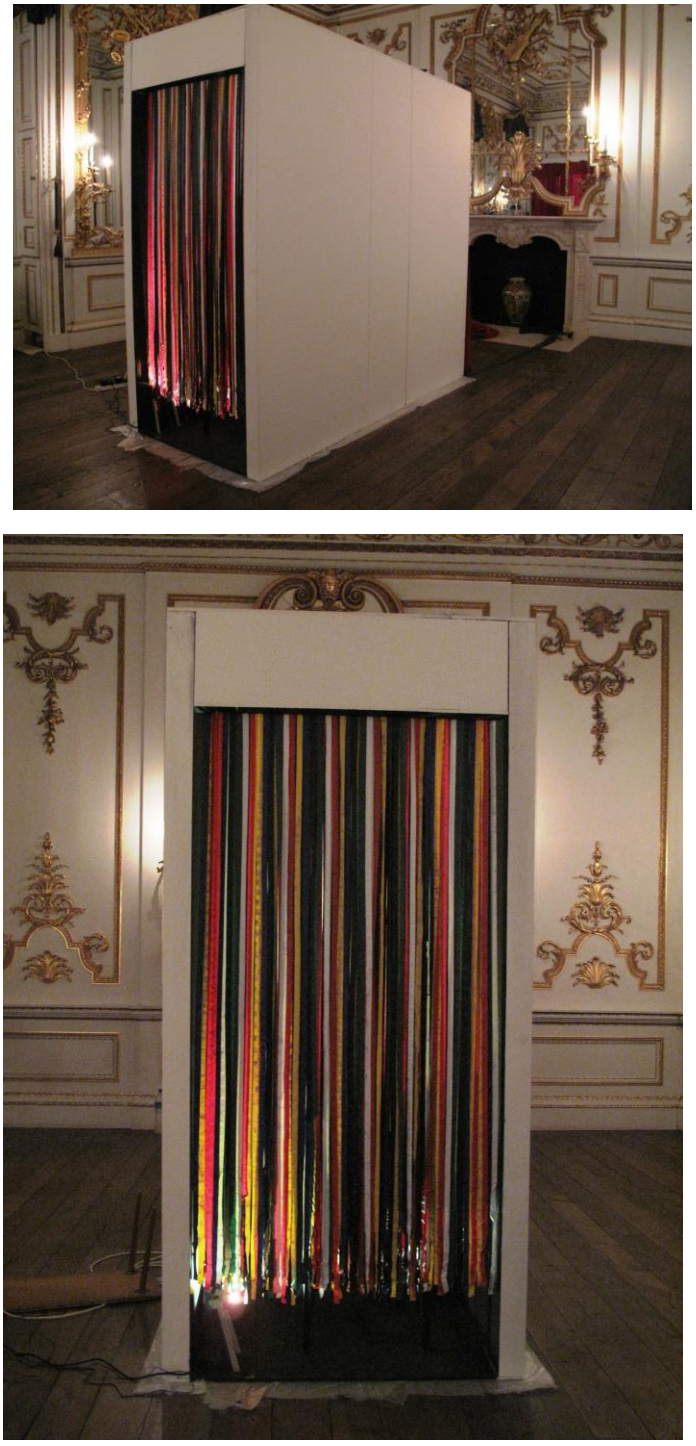

Figure 26: The installed booth for *Queer Courtesan* in the Norfolk House Music Room in the British Galleries at the V&A Museum in London, 2009.

Queer Courtesan can be described as an ephemeral live art intervention which was installed in the British galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in November 2009. It was programmed as part of '*Friday Late Making a Scene*'[107] an event curated with a focus on queer desire. 'A durational performance that served as a conceptual keystone for the evening as a whole'[108], it was essentially a piece about gestures, rhythms and notions of cultural transmission through sharing a minute-long 'nautch dance' through a two-way mirror (see Figure 24, 25 and 27). Body gestures and rhythms were derived from a memorious archive as if collected from a conscious and subconscious study, observation and transposition of the choreography of my transgender sex worker friends in Lahore; where the 'two-minute office' (a term used to describe a sexual encounter with a client) turned into my one-minute dance in a cubicle. I wanted to transpose this yearning for a civic reality by refashioning and reimagining past life-worlds and entering into temporary 'marriages'. In the photographic series, *They were already dead* (see Figure 4 to 9), we delve into archives of film costumes and apparel to create versions of Indo-Pak cinema heroines. While my apparel for *Queer Courtesan* was derived from the stimuli in The Victoria and Albert Museum collection of Mughal clothing, orientalist paintings and early photographs of nautch girls in North India.

Each participant was ushered through the assigned route by the museum staff into the quasi-domestic environment of the Norfolk House Music Room[109], a rescued complete historic interior installed into the British Galleries where one by one they would experience the queer courtesan for a minute. There within the aesthetic nuances of the room the participants entered a small white booth which had been assembled and further divided into two distinct halves. The section facing the viewer was aligned with colourful plastic strip curtains quintessentially associated with adult entertainment and

[107] For further details please refer to <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/friday-late>. Accessed 05 July 2019.
[108] Winchester, O., (2018). "Confessions of a museum curator", in Hushlak, M. A., & Pearl, M. (Eds.) *The Last Known Pose: Essays and Reflections on the Works of Qasim Riza Shaheen*. Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications.
[109] For historical details of the Norfolk House Music Room please refer to <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/galleries/level-2/room-52nh-norfolk-house-music-room/>. Accessed 01 July 2019.

sex shops in Soho in London. The other section was inaccessible to the public. Alongside this installation lay an old record player with synchronised, flashing, disco-light speakers and a selection of music from my father's vinyl collection scattered over a coffee table. The surface of this vintage coffee table made in England in the 1960's depicted a romantic painting of the Taj Mahal reminiscent of an Anglo-Asian lounge. The idea was that the participant would be encouraged to biographically engage with these items by introducing elements of familial memorabilia in order to personalise the illusion being presented.

Over a two-hour period, a total of fifty persons were individually guided by V&A gallery invigilators to the vinyl and record player to decide the soundtrack for their unique one-minute dance before entering the cubicle. As I danced for my own reflection, the participant viewed the performance (through a full-length two-way mirror) and was subjected to my attempts to lure and seduce through Oriental expressions, postures and gestures, derived from representations of the nautch girl. Oliver Winchester, curator of Contemporary Programmes at the Victoria and Albert Museum, observed that in dancing blind I was 'aware of and yet inured to the probing and unseen gaze of each successive visitor. In this way the work could be seen to engage with the primacy of the gaze as a regulatory form of power in the conventional Foucauldian sense.'[110] Jiva Parthipan, a performer and dancer describes his experience of the encounter in the following manner.

"Donned in her finest chaste jewellery and red bejewelled dress, a convincing man playing a woman being a man with a hint of hair on the arms added to the sensuality. The flirtatious yet refined expression, aptly reminding of the Mughal courts, with a touch of frivolity and beautiful dancing, this exotic bird seems to be focussed on a distant lover perhaps? Maybe this was no peep show. She is perhaps an exquisite object from the past trapped in her viewing box as a fossilised museum piece; a cheap unthinking metaphor for classical Indian dance."[111]

[110] Winchester, O., (2018). "Confessions of a museum curator", in Hushlak, M. A., & Pearl, M. (Eds.) *The Last Known Pose: Essays and Reflections on the Works of Qasim Riza Shaheen*. Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications.
[111] J. Parthipan, peer review, 2007.

Figure 27: Qasim Riza Shaheen, *Queer Courtesan*, Live one-on-one performance as part of Friday Late, V&A Museum, London, 2010.

Parthipan who also abides between the classicism of his dance training and the subversive nature of his queer performance identity recognises the vulnerability of this intersection. Here is a man playing a queer man playing a woman playing a courtesan playing to a mirror imagining the beloved through their own reflection imagining how that image would be received. Playing out acts of playfulness whilst being watched. Unaware of the gaze yet performing to the gaze; of both the confronting reflection and the fantasy of the beloved. And then just as the image is beginning to be fully registered by the performer and the participant, the light and sound abruptly turn off and the gestural language left incomplete and love, for the *nayika* (heroine) to perpetually journey through her repertoire, left unrequited. Building on what Said[112] has coined as 'Orientalism' i.e. the imperialist vision of the world beyond the West, Royona Mitra observes the adverse effect it had on 'classical' dance:

"The reconstruction of South Asian dance traditions as part of the anti-colonial and nationalist project ironically aligned these dance traditions with colonial and 'Orientalist' perceptions of Indian arts. The invention of tradition was played out upon the dancer's body, constructing it as a bearer of national and cultural heritage."[113]

Perhaps what unfolds in *Queer Courtesan* is not too dissimilar to Royona Mitra's study of "Weaving Paths by Sonia Sabri Dance Company" where a British heritage site confronted its own history through the re-contextualised use of Kathak. Mitra borrows Royo's term of 'agents of interpretation'[114] when she alludes to the creative potential that resides within such an exchange. In her study of Sabri's interventionist residency at Bantock House in Wolverhampton in 2007 she suggests that 'the former's diasporic identity was suitably placed to interrogate the latter's colonial power-dynamics of the past while embodying the post-colonial reality of present day migration and

[112] Said, E. W., (1978). *Orientalism.* New York: Pantheon Books.
[113] Mitra, R., (2012). "Performing cultural heritage in Weaving Paths by Sonia Sabri Dance Company." In: Jackson, A. & Kidd, J. (eds) *Performing Heritage: Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp:144–157.
[114] Lopez y Royo, A., (2012). *South Asian Dances in Museums: Culture, Education and Patronage in the Diaspora*. Roehampton University.

assimilation within contemporary Britain.'[115] Museum theatre often relies on 'dramatic re-enactments of the past'[116], self-righteously striving for a vision of 'living history'[117] embodied in museums, heritage sites and period rooms.

Mitra believes that the juxtaposition of a heritage site and a cultural present through such performance encounters could give rise to a semantic emerging from cultural and disciplinary exchange. Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert refer to this type of exchange as 'syncretic theatre'[118], which 'integrates performance elements of different cultures into a form that aims to retain cultural integrity of the specific materials used while forging new texts and theatre practices.'[119] Sonia Sabri Dance Company's residency at Bantock House on some levels proved to be successful because the company had responded to the space beyond merely technique and the craft of Kathak and had instead 'created a semiotic nexus that communicated beyond cultural specificity, through which the audience experienced the reconstituted history'[120] of this British Edwardian house.

In a similar fashion my endeavour to respond to the interior space of the Norfolk House Music Room through distilled elements of Kathak 'operated beyond the planes of history and tradition and instead created fiction through an interpretation, extension and embodiment of the space itself.'[121] However, the crucial difference between Sabri's and my intervention was that although I have classically trained in Kathak, the

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[115] Mitra, R., (2012). "Performing cultural heritage in Weaving Paths by Sonia Sabri Dance Company", in: Jackson, A, Kidd, J (eds) *Performing Heritage: Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp:144–157.
[116] ibid, p.145.
[117] Ibid, p.145.
[118] "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" Said, E.W., (2003). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin p.3.
[119] Mitra, R., (2012). "Performing cultural heritage in Weaving Paths by Sonia Sabri Dance Company", in Jackson, A. & Kidd, J. (eds) *Performing Heritage: Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.144–157.
[120] Lopez y Royo, A., (2012). *South Asian Dances in Museums: Culture, Education and Patronage in the Diaspora.* Roehampton University.
[121] Mitra, R., (2012). "Performing cultural heritage in Weaving Paths by Sonia Sabri Dance Company" in Jackson, A. & Kidd, J. (eds) *Performing Heritage: Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp:144–157.

performance encounter at the Victoria and Albert museum was far from an idealised vision of cultural syncretism. I had disrupted the expectation of 'South Asian' art from the outset by offering a minute of orientalist gestures and vernacular reinterpretations of what is deemed 'classical and Indian'. Moreover, I had queered the courtesan and exchanged her traditional musical repertoire to that of my father's eclectic record collection.

Alnoor Mitha, founding Artistic Director of Shisha suggests that 'like many artists of his generation Qasim is almost re-enacting a drama which is rich and complex, characterising a new persona, mirroring a mother's tongue, manipulating their expectant identity as do the transformative, provocative images of Cindy Sherman or Indian artist Pushpamala N.'[122]

At this point I would like to discuss Mitha's latter comparison a little further. In 2009 Indian visual artist Pushpamala N. conducted a workshop entitled *Archive of Indian Gestures* at the School of Arts and Aesthetics at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi. She invited students to explore gestures and the potential meanings that are generated through photography. Pushpamala N. suggests that:

'gestures are not created by the whims and fancies of an individual but draw from cultural memory and social exchanges. Gestures can range from ritual and formalised traditional gestures like the Namaste (greeting) to expressions picked up like slang from TV and cinema, or just invented movements which spread like wildfire because they are so apt.'[123]

The tawa'if-courtesan I present is in a queer form and arrested in a series of successive frames alluding to the tribhanga[124] or tri-bent posture through the rhythmic and choreographic structure of the piece and reminiscent of traditional Indian sculpture from the Gupta period[125] in its stance. The evolving figure also represents a shared and

[122] Shaheen, Q.R., (2007) *Khusra: stains & stencils.* Manchester: Shisha. p.7.
[123] Pushpamala N., (2009) *Archive of "Indian" Gestures*, workshop notes, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi.
[124] For details refer to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tribhanga>, accessed 09 July 2019.
[125]For further detail please refer to <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/g/gupta-style-of-the-buddha-and-its-influence-on-asia>. Accessed 09 July 2019.

transmitted cultural knowledge recreating the notion of community through what Diana Taylor has called (in her archive and repertoire distinction) a range of embodied cultural behaviours.[126] The gestures in rhythm go beyond language and mobilise other forms of cultural expression such as music and dance creating a multidimensionality in the participants' experience of the intervention. Moreover, the 'twice-behaved behaviour'[127] is carefully inserted into the performativity of the gestures within the frame of both the room and the booth. The question that resonates with both Pushpamala N.'s and my artistic practice is whether it is possible to explore different trajectories of colonial, orientalist and modern discourse via this specific focus on gestures.

Figure 28: Pushpamala N and Clare Arni: *The Ethnographic Series*, 2000-2004.

[126] Taylor, D., (2003). *The archive and the repertoire: performing cultural memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press
[127] Schechner, R., (1985) *Between Theatre and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

I would like to draw the reader's attention to a photographic series by Pushpamala N.[128] entitled *Navarasa* (see Figure 28) to begin discussing the concept of the navarasa[129]. According to the Natya Shastra the human being is composed of nine sentiments: love, humour, sadness, fury, heroism, disgust, wonderment, terror and peace. This concept, often in a performance context, is known as the navarasa (the nine flavours). Although there are nine distinct declarations being made in this series of work, to comment on all would go beyond the scope of this research but it is useful to offer Pallabi Chakraborty's definition of it as 'a bodily emotion in the public domain'[130]. The notion of navarasa is fundamental to South Asian performativity across the board and functions as a blueprint that has been handed down in classical treatise especially relating to the theoretical framework of theatricality and performance. The notion of the navarasa has arguably been understood within its elitist genealogy but what is crucial is to recognise how it has imbued consciously and subconsciously into vernacular forms of popular cultural expression.

It is in this terrain that Pushpamala N.'s play with her self-portraits begins to confuse and disrupt the otherwise recognisable prescribed expressivities[131]. In this series of staged theatrical self-portraits she titles each one by a specific emotion. However, the viewer is never entirely sure whether authenticity of terminology has been exchanged for a fabrication of hybrid fictionality. She seems to marry pre-colonial terminology and

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[128] From the project: *Native Women of South India (Manners & Customs)* Supported by an Arts Collaboration Grant from the India Foundation for the Arts by N. Pushpamala.

[129] According to the Natya Shastra the human being is composed of nine sentiments: love, humour, sadness, fury, heroism, disgust, wonderment, terror and peace. This concept, often in a performance context, is known as the nava rasa (the nine flavours). Although there are nine distinct declarations being made in this work, the act of love functions as a nucleus from which the remaining eight derivatives emerge. These collective emotions are variations of the principle rasa through their function as shades or hues of love. The nine emotion principle may be as complex or as simple as one would like to perceive it; nonetheless, it remains a timeless remark on the universal, human condition. Ideas pertaining to the navarasa were aimed at the performance artist and were non-specific in terms of the form it adapted. Thus one could argue that an exploration of these contemporary moments and acts further celebrates the ability of human sentiment to interchange.

[130] Chakraborty, P., (2006). International Kathak Conference, Yerba Buena Centre, San Francisco, seminar notes.

[131] Leela Samson, a Bharatanatyam dancer depicts her interpretation of the prescribed emotive gestures.

modes of thinking about gesture with the history of contemporary cinematic and theatrical interpretations. Her facial and hand gestures reflect yet defy the maintenance of puritanical navarasa theory of some of the classical dance styles of India. What is worth noting in this series of her self-portraits is her refusal to denote exact emotions in accordance with dance purists and a degeneration of precise meanings. Mimetic expressions and gestures remain recognisable yet lose their orthodoxy of meaning.

As a cultural producer I attempted to reposition the navarasa in a diametrically opposed manner and forefront the paradoxical nature of the work. Creating scenarios that went beyond the mimetic interpretations to allow the viewer to respond variably to each enactment. Amidst a quagmire of sexual mores, my menu of fantasies and countless narratives allowed these declarations of love to function as a nucleus from which the remaining eight derivatives emerge. These collective emotions are variations of the principal rasa through their function as shades or hues of love. The nine-emotion principle may be as complex or as simple as one would like to perceive it; nonetheless, it remains a timeless remark on the universal, human condition. Ideas pertaining to the navarasa were aimed at the performance artist and were non-specific in terms of the form it adapted. An exploration of these contemporary moments and acts further highlight the ability of human sentiments to be interchangeable. The queer courtesan's encounters exist in a collective, yet anonymous, space, and serve to demystify the nautch girl during the unspoken rules of my one-minute liaison.

During this performance a looped digital signboard was fixed above the mirror. Its rolling-repeated statement gave each of the eight versions at different venues a subtitle of sorts. The purpose of these statements was to add a meta-narrative to either juxtapose or compliment the embodied and visceral experience. Yet simultaneously this interrogated the function of textual language in my interpretations of each of the *Ashta Nayikas* and was left entirely to the viewer to decipher what that meant through the minute-long exchange. Cryptic and explicit statements at the Victoria and Albert Museum, '*a pound a fuck a penny a thought, you break my heart, for the sake of my*

beard', testified against crimes in the name of love and violation in everyday suburban life; both in and out of Hira Mandi.

As the participant watched a sensuous, solitary and intimate seduction on one side of the private booth the voyeur-viewer was screened live to those queuing. Not only did this device draw awareness to the participants' own reactions and body language, but the live relay also outside of the private booth served to heighten the expectations of the awaiting visitors. However, Rachel Lois Clapham's review in a n Magazine describes her reaction as fun but 'impossible to prepare for the experience by watching footage of other unaware audience members. Take it from me once you enter the space [...] no amount of preparation will suffice. You forget your reactions are on camera to the people waiting in line outside.'[132]

Winchester further describes this concurrent multilayering of the performance experience in the following excerpt:

"However, in a typical complicating gesture, the performance booth was rigged with a small camera trained on each nameless viewer, streaming live video footage of each successive loving and willed violation, each look of rapture, desire or discomfort provoked by this most powerful of unrequited moments. Shaheen made each spectator a participant in another gaze in a game that folded gaze in upon gaze, voyeur into viewed."[133]

Donal Foreman who had written an essay for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition of *Stains and Stencils* at Triskel Arts/Corona Cork Film Festival 2009 in Ireland also describes this work as a live continuation of the ethos of the work generated in Lahore and from a perspective of multiple subjectivities.

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[132] Clapham, R.L., (2007). "Feeling Queer: Qasim Riza Shaheen in Queer Courtesan", Review, *an Magazine* <http://www.a-n.co.uk/artists/article/422756/362344>, accessed 07 July 2019.
[133] Winchester, O., (2018). "Confessions of a museum curator", Hushlak, M. A., & Pearl, M. (Eds.) (2018). *The Last Known Pose: Essays and Reflections on the Works of Qasim Riza Shaheen.* Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications.

"This displacement plays with hierarchies of seeing and being seen in a way that disrupts and complicates them, rather than abolishing them. Instead of cutting through the complexity in favour of a more politically correct equality, Shaheen simply tries to facilitate spaces in which these subjectivities can freely intermingle and multiply."[134]

What each participant witnessed was an embodied history – histories that were not textual but circulated in and through the body of the queer courtesan. This circulation of history through the body, through representation, through recording and through technologies encouraged the participant to question their assumptions of the space and the connotations of the transient performance encounter.

The inclusion of my participants in the re-presentation of the documentation of the eight encounters creates a multiplicity of one-minute CCTV video narratives that function outside of the cubicle, thus displacing the interaction with a distinct sense of omnipresence. What emerges post-performance is an installation of an empty booth which alludes to the Victorian freakshow but contains a multitude of reactions of participating viewers on display. Within that particular context *Queer Courtesan* continues to remain a voyeuristic and somewhat forbidden act, clouded with the fear or thrill of fake realism and its surveillance even outside of its live context.

To conclude, I will reaffirm both the queer and postcolonial implications of the work I presented at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Robert Mills has theorised that queerness within a museum context is less a state-of-object than a position-as-subject, a 'relational concept that comes into view against the backdrop of the normal, the legitimate, the dominant, and the coherent – and it would be precisely the challenge that queer poses to the normative structures of the museum that constitutes its subversive potential'[135]. The participant in *Queer Courtesan* is thus implicated in the creation of alternative narratives in a model of active experiential participation.

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[134] Foreman, D., (2007). *Qasim Riza Shaheen's Stains & Stencils* http://donalforeman.com/writing/stainsandstencils.html. Accessed 11 July 2019.
[135] Mills, R., (2008). "Theorizing the Queer Museum", *Museums & Social Issues*, 3:1, 41-52, DOI: 10.1179/msi.2008.3.1.41

Adams in her reading of Mathur suggests and quotes the following:

'the incorporation of postcolonial theory into a critical museum studies is vital to produce a museum practice fit for purpose in a postcolonial world, and curators, thinkers, and cultural critics who are alert to the social processes of our time and able to critically engage with "the ideologies of globalization, the complexities of the nation-state, the unfinished careers of modernity and postmodernity, and the links between culture and power, to name only a few of the pressing themes that are relevant to an account of the museum".[136]

In light of the above *Queer Courtesan* interacts with and disrupts a history which is curated around artefacts which have been forcibly removed and looted from their cultural contexts. The nautch girl looks back in the guise of an artist-djinn and dances to their own tune in solidarity with activists and cultural practitioners of the times we live in.

On a closing note, *Queer Courtesan* is a reincarnated kitsch body and a self-referential parodic figure which constructs what Diana Taylor would call a 'scenario'[137] in a transcendental love affair with a medieval saint narrating embodied stories in an English period room. In an article I wrote for the *Journal of Popular South Asian Culture* I described the previous incarnations of this work in the following manner:

"...the peep show is the medium; the two-way mirror the frame; the queer courtesan – perhaps a personification of one of the subcontinent's most devoured saint's Hazrat Babha Bulleh Shah's desire 'to dance to win the favours of his beloved even if it meant becoming a whore'[138]. Albeit centuries and continents away, perhaps I am honouring

[136] Adams, R., (2010). "The V&A: empire to multiculturalism?". *Museum and Society*. 8. 63-79.
[137] Taylor, D., (2003). *The archive and the repertoire: performing cultural memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press
[138] This saying often sung in Sufi devotional songs known as *qawwalis* is attributed to the mystic thinker Bulleh Shah of Kasur.

and reclaiming the flavour or rasa of the Chishtiya order of Sufism[139] and paying homage to saints and poets, whom I believe to be my intellectual parents."[140]

Indeed for the V&A version too, I quoted Bulleh Shah in my brief text that accompanied the performance, 'repeating the name of the beloved I have become the beloved myself. Whom shall I call the beloved now?[141]

What led me further from this work into the new work I produced was this very question. Once the beloved morphs into one's own being, whom does one continue to discover and explore oneself on? How does one expand the self-portrait - extend it further onto bodies which are strangely familiar, not in their physical manifestation but rather in intangible, unseen ways?

I longed for a day of wedlock, a washing away of stains and stencils and the resurrection of multiple queer courtesans. *The day after the day before I sinned* became the scenography of an imaginary union. The symbols and signifiers of marriage derived from all that I learnt and observed about love through Sufi tales, archived histories and Bombay cinema. A wedding where I was no longer a performer, and a groom nowhere to be seen.

[139] For a further insight into the Chisthi order of Sufism refer to <http://www.chishti.org/sufism.htm>, accessed 07 July 2019.
[140] Shaheen, Q.R., (2009). "Queer courtesan (sixteen processes of beautification)", *South Asian Popular Culture*, 7:3, 211-215, DOI: 10.1080/14746680903125549
[141] This saying often sung in Sufi devotional songs known as *qawwalis* is attributed to the mystic thinker Bulleh Shah of Kasur.

Chapter five: *The day after the day before I sinned*

"This faceless one, this nameless one - why do we forever yearn for such a being?"

(Ahlaq Mohammed Khan alias Shahryar for Muzaffar Ali's Umrao Jaan, 1981)

Possessed by a queer djinn, dreaming of resurrected tawa'if-courtesans and with the spirit of Bulleh Shah I researched, developed and created a work especially in search for what Shahryar refers to as this faceless, nameless being/beloved.

In 2016, I became Associate Artist at HOME Manchester, a hub for international theatre, art and film. I simultaneously embarked on this PhD through Professional Practice at Manchester School of Art. This association with HOME enabled me to research and develop my interest in mimetics of love in Indo-Pak cinema. I conducted a workshop on lip-syncing and gestures with local artists from Manchester in 2018 (see Figure 29).

HOME

Home > Performance Workshop: Mimetics of Love

Performance Workshop: Mimetics of Love

Deadline Mon 25 Jun 2018

Open call

Qasim Riza Shaheen is a Manchester-based visual artist and writer who works across performance, installation, film, photography, and with audience as participants. His work explores various ways of sharing memories and enters the fragile architecture of the space between people.

As part of the research process for a forthcoming new commission for Asia Triennial Manchester 2018, Qasim wishes to invite those comfortable with live performance to join him in a one-day devised workshop. The purpose will be to perform and explore memories of love through staging selfies and lip-syncing with music and spoken word, both solo and in collaboration with other group members.

Figure 29: Performance Workshop: Mimetics of Love, conducted by Qasim Riza Shaheen, HOME Manchester, 2018.

I will describe and discuss this work, *The day after the day before I sinned*, a durational performance intervention as the opening event for Asia Triennial Manchester 2018: *Who do you think you are?* (see Figure 30) at HOME. Six performers, all adorned and costumed, wait in anticipation for their beloved. Using live and audio soundtracks, the tawa'if-courtesans lip sync and gesture through archetypes and the politics and poetics of longing and desire.

HOME

Home > Asia Triennial Manchester 2018 Opening Night

Asia Triennial Manchester 2018 Opening Night

Part of: Asia Triennial Manchester 2018

Join us for the opening night of Asia Triennial Manchester 2018, Europe's only Triennial dedicated to contemporary visual art on the theme of Asia. To launch this city-wide exhibition, here at HOME we will host performances from two artists:

Qasim Riza Shaheen: *The day after the day before I sinned*

19:15, Room 1

Poignantly adorned and costumed, five brides wait, in anticipation, for rites of passage, which in this work, shifts our attention from the actual beloved to an imagined one. Using live and audio soundtracks, the five brides-in-waiting lip sync and gesture through archetypes of longing and desire.

Figure 30: Qasim Riza Shaheen, *The day after the day before I sinned*, Asia Triennial Manchester, HOME, 2018

The impetus of the live work produced is led by the imaginaries and the depictions of tawa'if-courtesans in nineteenth century colonial paintings, archival photographs, and in twentieth century Bombay cinema. These figures metaphorically, along with myself, are seeking the nameless, faceless beloved through the aesthetic and thematic frame of the artwork produced. I will discuss the imagery, soundscapes and provide a historical overview of tawa'if-courtesans and their resurrection in my live work. My introduction to Bombay cinema, especially as a child and young adult, was through television, VHS, music, film magazines as well as iconography found in British museum collections and archives. I will explore and excavate memories of Indian popular cinema in Britain during the 1970s-90s and how it informs my current practice.

In researching and developing this work I made a series of Snapchat recordings as *Qasim Filmwallah* in which I engaged with the act of embodying the songs of playback singers and the mimetics of the actor in South Asian film cultures, namely, the subconscious imitating of others, including extending that to the realm of desire. I called the work *Qasim Filmwallah* as though I belonged to a hereditary community of cinema goers; wallah, a Hindi/Urdu word indicative of familial, geographic or professional association or lineage. In these short clips I play dress up and enter the frame of film protagonists through the voices of playback singers. Appropriating the 'wallah' lineage and using the frame of social media applications I queered and questioned modes of representing power, love and desire. By lip-syncing recognisable songs, I de-familiarise them, thereby subverting expectations. In *Qasim Filmwallah* viewers of my social media experienced temporal works, as the snapchat stories disappeared from public view after 24 hours while, at the same time, being archived in my device.

Link to Qasim Riza Shaheen, *Qasim Filmwallah,* Asia Triennial Manchester 18 Symposium.

Figure 31: Qasim Riza Shaheen, video stills, *Qasim Filmwallah,* 2019.

Although this work was a way for me to explore what I wanted to make for the practice component of this PhD it became a separate work in its own right being featured at the ATM18 '*Who Do You Think You Are?*' An international interdisciplinary symposium on the boundaries of Asian identities and then as part of a group show called *Liquid Existences* at the GAD district during the Venice Biennale in 2018.

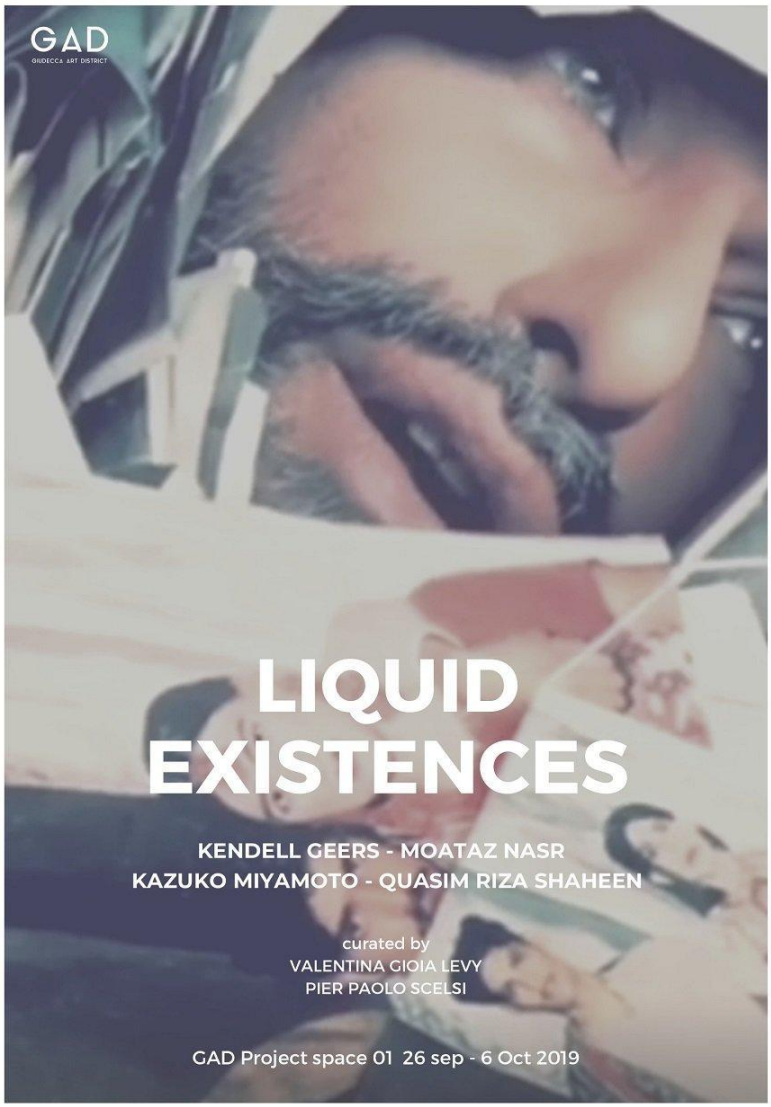

Figure 32: Qasim Riza Shaheen, *Qasim Filmwallah, Liquid Existences*, GAD, Venice, 2019.

In researching and developing this new work I wanted to create moments of authenticity which were not weighed down by history and information but instead consumed with image-making, body memory and corporeal stories. From these narratives I wished to create a performance which showcased harmony rather than resolve. The choreography and split scene devices at play to create stories which would explore the potentiality of forgotten lives.

Indian cinema had its own methodology of telling stories and I recall how disappointed I was as a child when the BBC had aired a Hindi film but edited out most of the songs, deeming them unfit for British sensibility and audience. There was very little understanding of popular Indian cinema in late 1970s/early 1980s Britain. Off peak times or full day tickets in sparse cinemas would screen Hindi films where first-generation British Asians could escape to evoke memories of the motherland they had left behind. A single ticket would allow you to stay in the cinema for the whole day and watch matinee screenings. It felt no less than an addiction to culture. Channel 4 splashed into a Thatcher government and the Royal Wedding marred my mind.

Over a decade later, In the mid-1990s a relatively new venue in Birmingham, conceived as a black arts centre, called Drum, celebrated one hundred years of Indian cinema by screening *Pakeezah* in Cannon Hill Park on the weekend of the anniversary. It attracted almost 2000 people to watch an open-air screening of the film with a huge sound system. Families had brought along blankets as the English Summer sunset was around 10pm. These memories of socially experiencing this film from a park to visual projections at underground raves and clubs gave new meanings and a second generation diasporic vision to films our parents watched.

The frame through which I made *The day after the day before I sinned* is a response to the sceneographies of *Pakeezah*; often translated as *Pure of Heart*. Bhaskar and Allen[142] refer to this film as part of a genre of Islamicate Bombay films. By revisiting the film's soundtrack, dance sequences and lyrics, I will offer an alternative reading and lens through which to view my work and point to the intertextuality of its visual content. I will

[142] Bhaskar, I., & Allen, R., (2009). *Islamicate cultures of Bombay cinema*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.

reflect on the life-worlds of tawa'if-courtesans; resurrected through chronicles and celluloid.

I reimagine *Pakeezah*'s protagonists Nargis and Sahib jaan, the latter perhaps one of the most referenced and revered celluloid-tawaif-courtesan of contemporary South Asian popular culture. This film establishes an aesthetic, constructs a Muslim social culture and upholds a poetic play between a tawa'if-courtesan, her onlookers and an imagined beloved. Moreover, it becomes the basis of a reconfiguration within the framework of my live work. This section is a lyrical longing to those scenes of desire especially through the lens of Nargis, a key figure in *Pakeezah*. This ghost and resurrected tawa'if-courtesan abides in my work as a djinn-like form, time travelling with me from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. I will explore just how she moves through time and medium into my work, my life and my being. Written as a multiform, textual and photographic sharing this section provides an insight into my current thinking and stimuli.

Fundamental to this durational performance developed over two years was the yearning for and union with the beloved. 'Is it only, mostly or partly about the costuming of a ceremony? Or the sounds and gestures in what is essentially a private declaration? Two love letters, '*Undeliverable Mail*' and '*Someone for (Qasim)*', are at the heart of this live work'.[143] At the very end of this commentary I wish to share those with you and would like to request you to read aloud the two letters and a postscript, as an imaginary epistolary between a djinn and yourself. This slippage of multiple realities into the form of these letters are the basis of the work produced during this PhD and function as the core narrative of *The day after the day before I sinned*.

***Satsang*: Gathering of the like-minded**

Thus far, this commentary has focused on the autoethnographic and museological concerns of working with the third gender communities in Shahi Mohalla in Lahore and the dilemmas of representation. By 'becoming' the other transiently and meaningfully, I

[143] Excerpt from the programme notes for *The day after the day before I sinned* ATM18 HOME.

begin to pose the question 'Who am I when I am you?' to both myself and to those I become a reflector for, a wordplay on Bulleh Shah's notion of 'Who am I to know who I am!' The frame and scope of the previous sections was to also respond to the critiques of the two works, *Stains & Stencils* and *Queer Courtesan*, by academics, curators and participants. Although I was there in a physical sense I was partaking in countless imagined scenarios (and desirous connections) which were far removed from the cities of Lahore and London respectively.

During my research it became evident early on that I was less interested in mapping out textual histories of tawa'if-courtesans and had begun questioning the importance given to written histories. Dance is articulated through the body and responds to oral traditions; movement vocabularies are preserved in the dancer's body in the shadow of their *gurus*. I wished to delve deeper into corporeal archives and how tawa'if-courtesan culture was sedimented into the body. I gravitated towards how stories are remembered and which aspects are retold. I wanted to think about these lives, the performance practices without the need to be validated through the origins and evolution narrative. Rather I considered where it was pointing me towards; along with looking at textual histories and taxonomies, I desired an approach allowing space for magic realism where my djinn could enter my frame. Where my Sufi mystic could become my benefactor; an elder who takes me across time and space; where I could enter the imagined architecture of his resting place which echoes with stories and re-enactments. After all that is said and done, there are questions that *Stains & Stencils* left me pondering about; why was my reality more noteworthy than anyone else's in those quarters? Was I a witness or a different kind of memory collector? If so, how could these body memories be archived and reconfigured in *The day after the day before I sinned*?

The epigraph this section began with depicts the act of yearning for the unknown, awaiting a nameless, faceless entity. In some ways this lyric illustrates what binds me (a disciple) to my dance guru Nahid Siddiqui, the anticipation for a client in Hira Mandi (as sex-worker), the breath of an unseen existence that breathes on me as I lay still (possessed by a djinn) and the courtesan who pines for her beloved (Nargis). In *The day after the day before I sinned*, we all metaphorically wait together hand in hand as

figures on a timeline of parallel histories. Intersecting through one single person, and then refracting out testimonies of interchangeable truths. In this work, I publicly disclose a personal voice as I attempt to redraw the ethical boundaries between my own private and public spaces, between the actual and the imagined, and between you and me.

A historical overview of the resurrected tawa'if courtesan

There are two possible etymological origins and connotations to the word *tawa'if*, both in Arabic. The first word *taifa* means to gather or group and the second word *tawaf* means to encircle. Both can be understood in terms of the coming together of patron-spectators or the dancer as a whirling dervish in the guise of a courtesan. Bringing into the equation both the spiritual and the physical realms of desire at play. It could also be understood spatially in terms of movement patterns and her relationship as performer to the encircled audience; the witness to her craft.

Tawa'if is usually used as a generic term associated with various types of female, often hereditary, performers who evolved within a courtly milieu to an emergent nation-space over the duree of the 1720s to 1920s in pre-colonial India. A variety of names, such as *tawa'if, ganika, devadasi, vesya,* and *randi* were given to performers, depending on the intersections of region, religion and caste which denoted levels of cultural significance, roles, and agency these women had. The taxonomies of the performers were thus varied and extensive both in terms of repertoire and social backgrounds. The tawa'if-courtesan became a subject of colonial ethnographies, census reports and legal surveillance. Throughout the colonial period this complex identity and its groupings were amalgamated into the catch-all derogatory term of 'the nautch girl'. This eighteenth century term was appropriated from the word *nach*; and became an anglicised form of the Urdu-Hindi word "*nachna*" which means "to dance". This degradation of tawa'if-courtesans from important cultural figures into a monolithic group negatively impacted their cultural, political, and financial agency and power within colonial society.

Nautch-girl was a term employed specifically by the British to denote an array of female performers. This commentary utilises the term nautch-girl interchangeably with tawa'if-courtesan. Though the term 'courtesan' has some negative connotations of the erotic and exotic, for consistency the term tawa'if-courtesan is used in order to reestablish the cultural and political importance of these female performers, while nautch-girl is used to illustrate the singular-visioned degradation suffered by these communities throughout the colonial project. The stigma around these performers continued into the subsequent post-independence search for Indian national identity, social reform movements, Brahminicalism, and the rise of the Indian middle class. Tawa'if-courtesans continued to be viewed through the lens of Victorian prudery and despised because of their association with what was understood as prostitution.

The figure of the tawa'if-courtesan in this commentary is close to Hickman's understanding where he draws from the Italian cortegiano or courtier.[144] The English term courtesan meant a woman who excelled in courtly manners, elegant conversation, and etiquette and was proficient in the arts. The tawa'if-courtesans were renowned for their *tehzeeb* (etiquettes), *akhlaq* (ethical conduct) and *libaas* (well fashioned attire). These women were highly skilled performers of dance, music and song and known for their wit and satire. They were consorts and often entered into contractual conjugal relations (for *shi'te* muslims, framed within a time-specific marriage known as the *mut'ah*). They were sought after companions who abided in *kothas* (salons), under the tutelage and watchful eye of the *chaudharain* (the chief matriarch). She offered services of her daughter-figures to the highest bidding patrons to form relations with these literate women who were active transmitters of poetry and verse. Patrons were also drawn to these tawa'if-courtesans as they were engaged in the political, social and cultural spheres of their life-worlds.

These public women possessed an authority and voice in a period where there was little female autonomy and legal rights. They were able to intermingle and navigate their relationships into financially viable unions. Their matrilineal setup granted them social

[144] Hickman, K., (2003). *Courtesans: Money, sex, and fame in the nineteenth century*. New York: Morrow.

status, wealth, property, and they were able to enjoy freedom in a manner which private women were largely denied. Tawa'if-courtesans inhabited the duality of pleasure and leisure and held a position that was simultaneously powerful and marginal.

In the early twentieth century the tawa'if-courtesans had established themselves as celebrity entertainers in the emerging nation-space despite the emergence of new music and dance reformers. My own art practice, and specifically the live works discussed in this commentary reimagines the tawa'if-courtesan life-worlds from pre-independence orientalist sources and cinematic constructions of post-independence India. Rather than seeing them as part of a biological lineage, I propose considering the tawa'if-courtesan as an 'artistic' descendant of varied performers who shared techniques of image-making which continue to inform art practices and dance vocabulary today.

History is enshrouded by patriarchal readings and male ventriloquism of these women's craft and legacy. During my scholarly research I was struck by the lack of primary sources of these tawa'if-courtesan voices. Although it is evident that they were highly influential it is difficult locating these women's agency within male-dominated sources within the colonial narrative. Colonised women "were scarcely visible" in these sources as Felicity A. Nussbaum[145] points out. I began feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the origins narrative alone and a methodology of referring to textual 'sources' for truth. Thus, this commentary also gives equal importance to hagiographies, biographies and film archives in order to holistically illustrate the resurrected tawa'if-courtesan in my art practice. *The day after the day before I sinned* is my response to colonial travel narratives, letters, diaries, paintings, early photographs and twentieth century Bombay cinema which illustrate the nautch girl through the lens of empire, class, ethnicity, and gender.

[145] Nussbaum, F. A., (1995). *Torrid zones: Maternity, sexuality, and empire in eighteenth-century English narratives.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

In response to these lost voices, this commentary attempts to offer a nuanced understanding of tawa'if-courtesans by focussing on the corporeal and mythopoeic aspects of her performance. Although all sources are important and invaluable, I lay an emphasis on arenas of image-making and self-fashioning in order to discuss the live work. Building on Stephen Greenblatt's theoretical concept of self-fashioning[146], I posit my resurrected tawa'if-courtesan as an agent of their own identity-making and as historical actors in a world of image-making. Tawa'if-courtesan life-worlds exist "partly in the uncertainty of anecdotal memory, partly in its audible traces and partly in ideologized discourses."[147]

The tawa'if-courtesan reinvented herself throughout history from courts to salons, from Parsi theatre to Bombay cinema. All India Radio post-independence did not broadcast songs by unmarried women of tawa'if-courtesan descent. A separate entrance had been assigned for them and this stigma continued throughout the twentieth century. Bombay cinema demeaned these identities further and created a faction genre from these lives and the last remaining tawa'if-courtesans of that period who turned to the film industry became content generators themselves for this partially fabricated celluloid-antagonist. Perhaps the tawa'if-courtesan did not wish to be represented in cinema in her degenerated state. Names celebrating lineage and prestige were exchanged for Anglo-Indian pseudonyms such as Miss Rosy and Miss Sheila. Disappearing further into the background as backing dancers and extras in feature films.

The day after the day before I sinned subverts the British colonial perspective of nautch girls as an exotic-erotic construction, recognising that it was produced within a framework that continuously silenced and objectified these women. This resurrection of Nargis and other photographic and celluloid tawa'if-courtesans foreground and symbolise those erased stories and subvert performance expectations. These twenty-first century nautch girls at HOME Manchester dance back at the viewer, reclaiming *naach*, and posing the polemic of ATM18 "*who do you think you are?*". The following

[146] Greenblatt, S., (2005). *Renaissance self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
[147] ibid.

images were taken during the live performance and will be discussed later in the chapter.

Figure 33: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 34: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 35: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance *stills, The day after the day before I sinned, Asia Triennial Manchester: Who* do you think you are, HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 36: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 37: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 38: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 39: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 40: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 41: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 42: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 43: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 44: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 45: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 46: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 47: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are,* HOME Manchester, 2018.

Figure 48: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performance stills, *The day after the day before I sinned,* Asia Triennial Manchester: *Who do you think you are*, HOME Manchester, 2018.

Letter to Nahid VI

Dear Nahid

In the Spring of 1993 my wedding photographer at the dinner reception was struck by my bride's side profile and asked if he could arrange a studio session with her in order to recreate the cover of Vikram Seth's new novel A Suitable Boy. Little did I know that I would struggle to get through this novel which I often flung away or placed on neglected shelves of my house, gathering dust and coaster-like coffee stains. It lives in my study to date bookmarked with a polaroid of my suitable girl marking its very own epic journey as an unfinished book and a reminder of unrequited love.

I remember the protagonist Lata as a personification of a new independent India caught up in three distinct choices of direction. As she ponders on whom she marries we are offered a selection of suitors; a Muslim she has an uneasy 'never-the-two-shall-meet' tumultuous passion for; a shoemaker (who wishes for nothing more than to be the hand beneath the bare-foot Indians the British were leaving behind) and an Anglo-Indian poet who makes her a muse and the object of his affection.

India, like Lata, wished to whitewash the trajectory of its past and opt for a future of a new nationalism with a colour-blind brogue shoemaker. Lata implies that she was sexually abused as a child by a family patriarch who referred to her as 'a lipstick girl' adding further complexities to her unimpressive choices; at least for me. In fact, the only reason I stayed with this saga for as long as I did was for the tawa'if-courtesan Saeeda Bai Firozabadi who embodied a messy history of struggle, secrets and intrigue. She was the keeper and transmitter of knowledge, poetry and a voice for the marginalised.

The poets of Delhi whom we celebrate with great pride, perhaps, would not have earned their repute as much if it weren't for the dance repertoires and musical recitals of such courtesans. They were the

voices of many acclaimed beloveds; an endorsement of their cultural politics, the adornment of their poetics and bearer of their illegitimate progeny. Yet ironically these women, their skills and sacrifices are seldom mentioned alongside esteemed names.

The way I remember, at times, goes against logic and rationale. Nahid, I meet Bulleh Shah in travelling stations, mobile shrines and moving spaces. I dance to the voices and melodies of tawa'if-courtesans I have never met yet am in sync with their repertoire. I am illicitly married to my djinn who hovers around me, not manifesting itself fully.

My qareen is a shape-shifting courtesan, fleeting through recent histographies and finding an abode in my penned letters or visual narratives. Through my embodiment of human life s/he invokes a latent body memory in me as though the period from which s/he arises is rife with lust, betrayal and melancholy. Hira Mandi is a dialogue between the profound & the profane. In order to feel pride, do we need to transport an element of shame into landscapes where gender and spectrums of love were vast and fluid?

I was born into the year Pakeezah was released. I recently acquired a rare typewritten script of the film and noticed how the actors had added their own hue to the dialogues. It felt special entering the film through this bound piece of history.

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In memory of Nargis

Figure 49: The figure of Nargis in the opening sequence of Amrohi's *Pakeezah*, 1972.

The day after the day before I sinned was a memorial performance for the character of Nargis (see Figure 49). It was a homage to a fleeting figure in *Pakeezah* who was literally done and dusted within the first twenty minutes of the film. The film opens with this dancing tawa'if-courtesan amidst a circle of admirers. Within this repertoire and a soundscape consisting of syllables of kathak dance, she is seen anticipating her beloved. A heroic figure who promises to rescue her from a life, we are made to believe, she wishes to abandon.

Curiously, in the film's opening scene Nargis is not only introduced as a figure pining for her beloved but also as the younger sister of a certain 'Nawabjaan'. It is assumed that the audience will understand that Nawabjaan is a tawa'if-courtesan and in the same vein, I would argue that the presented relationship between the two as sisters could also be a coded term for a mother-daughter relationship. It is not uncommon in tawa'if-courtesan histories that mothers would often bring up their daughters as younger siblings. Nawabjaan may well have been the consort of a British official and given birth to an interracial child. Throughout the film, Nawaabjaan remains the key matriarchal figure.

Bhasker and Allen observe how Amrohi "distills the idiom of the Courtesan genre and frames the terms within which the courtesan will be portrayed"[148] from the very outset of the film narrative. Nargis's beloved appears into the frame and fulfils his promise of *'coming one night and taking her away from this hell.'* They elope, marry and reluctantly head home to seek approval, only to be rejected by the patriarch of the family. He is appalled by his son's defiance and he reacts to the audacity of his son bringing a public woman into the sacred space of the private family home.

The father refers to Nargis as his son's sin, despite her being dressed as a newlywed bride rather than a tawa'if-courtesan. It is not further elucidated as to why there is such anger and rejection from him other than her social status. I assert another plausible reading of the objection by the patriarch; one linked to the angst against the British raj. Courtesans were also linked to the struggle for freedom, and had harboured and funded revolutionaries. They were also revered as keepers of knowledge and cultural agents in so far as children of the aristocracy were kept under their tutelage. His son in the film had after all 'washed away her sins' through wedlock and had officially given her the status of his wife - a begum. From this it seems more likely that the anger was to do with miscegenation and illegitimacy, especially as the film is set in pre-independence India, around the 1930s. The implicit iconography of her being mixed race will be discussed later on.

Nargis, devastated, runs away from the scene. She is clear about her fate and unfaltering in her decision to leave and never return to her beloved in this worldly dimension. She instructs a passing palanquin to take her to any graveyard, where she lives the rest of her life, gives birth to a baby girl, and dies shortly after. The child Nargis bore is then raised and groomed by her aunt Nawabjaan and is named Sahibjaan. Like Nargis, in *The day after the day before I sinned* (see Figures 33 to 48), five performers play courtesans dressed as bride-like figures waiting for the beloved. These performers are collectively lip syncing two Anglo-Indian songs playing on their concealed head-sets. Accompanying them is a live singer who renders the same songs as if bearing

[148] Bhaskar, I., & Allen, R., (2009). *Islamicate cultures of Bombay cinema.* New Delhi: Tulika Books.

witness and echoing these reimagined lives (and out of synchronicity). Song lyrics are the mode of expressing love in South Asian cultures and lip-syncing is a part of our cinema reality.

Link to film track 1.

The first song being played on headsets is entitled '*My heart is beating*' from the controversial 1975 Hindi film *Julie* directed by K.S. Sethumadhavan which centres around a young Indian Christian girl becoming pregnant out of wedlock with her Hindu boyfriend's child.

Link to film track 2.

The second song '*I'm falling in love with a stranger*' from Yash Chopra's 1975 film *Deewar* is a song being played in the background where the main protagonist and a prostitute dressed in Western apparel are having a conversation in a bar.

Deewar positions its female characters in polar opposites and declares the status of the Indian mother and motherhood as central to the plot and definition of Indian women. An example of the peculiar role that English language plays in Bombay cinema is demonstrated in how both these Hindi film songs are sung in English. They represent particular shards of a postcolonial Englishness being offered as a form of both progressive and transgressive Indian modernity.

One of the six performers, vocalist Kalpana Param sang these Anglo-Indian songs live with sentiments transmitting sounds of Hindustani raga variations to a predominantly white 'non-native South Asian' audience. The term non-native, although subverted in

my performance context, is still applied to speakers of English from former British colonies, often delegitimising their authority and command over the English language. These renderings by Param are reflective of a seventeenth century Telegu-English Javali called 'oh my lovely Lalana' composed and performed especially for English patrons. These compositions are referred to as East India Company/English Javalis. This highlights the adaptability of tawa'if-courtesan repertoires and their relationship to their hereditary craft, its presentation to the crown and the power of their mimesis.

Due to the arduous journey of crossing the African continent to arrive in India[149], the British empire initially consisted mostly of men, as British women did not make such journeys at first. This meant that the East India Company encouraged British men to maintain conjugal relationships with tawa'if-courtesans as they were the main cohort of Indian women accessible to the British. According to Oldenburg's[150] findings, "It became official policy to select the healthy and beautiful "specimens" from among the *kotha* [salon] women and arbitrarily relocate them in the cantonment for the convenience of the European soldiers."

However, this took a sharp turn by the late eighteenth century as British 'memsahibs' had arrived in India to 'save their men' and stigmatise the tawa'if-courtesans. Memsahib Elizabeth Fenton (d.1875), had decided that the nautch-girl she saw was "a mad woman," whose performance had "little to see that could please a European eye".[151] British officials were now discouraged from these kept Indian women referred to as *bibis*. The constructions of courtesans and memsahibs were relative and dependent on one another. The pseudo-scientific fears of miscegenation and ethnic degeneration became cause for concern amongst British officials, the memsahibs and the crown.

This led to a perpetuation of control and social distance between the British and the Indians in the early nineteenth century. It was now deemed necessary to maintain the

[149] The voyage from England to India via the Cape of Good Hope took six months at least. Before 1830 passengers bound for the East had no alternative to circumnavigating Africa. In 1837, the East India Company introduced Steamers from Suez to Bombay, which made travel easier. Marshall, I., & Maxtone-Graham, J., (1998). *Passage East*. Charlottesville: Howell Press.
[150] Oldenburg, V. T., (1984). *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856-1877*. Princeton University Press.
[151] Fenton, E., (1837). *The journal of Mrs. Fenton 1826-1830.* London: Edward Arnold.

crown's political authority in the subcontinent, as well as their own ethnic and sexual prowess. Bhattacharya observes that tawa'if-courtesans who crossed the realms of gender, ethnicity and class were viewed as a threat to the imperial project.[152] Perhaps what Amrohi was alluding to through the physical portrayal of Nargis was that very fear the British had of miscegenation and ethnic degeneration.

This orientalist construction of Eastern women as inherently promiscuous, lascivious and hypersexual was predominantly created through British men's interaction with tawa'if-courtesans and *bibis*. Further to the dismantling of courtesan salons by the British, tawa'if-courtesans were stripped of their associations to the annexed dignitaries and of their wealth and fortune. They were reduced to common prostitution and left for the pleasure of British soldiers. In fact, these men had been responsible for bringing venereal diseases through their sexual relations with courtesans. Oldenburg suggests that "this not only dehumanised the profession, stripping it off its cultural function, but it also made sex cheap and easy for the men and exposed the women to venereal infection from the soldiers."[153]

I wondered whilst watching *Pakeezah* why Nargis had died at the graveyard and what the reasons behind her sickness were. Could this instruction to be taken to the graveyard be symbolic of the British leaving India? Could the anger of the patriarch be connected in some way to the angst of British rule? Did Nargis become a symbol of both the public woman and the illegitimate child of the British?

[152] Bhattacharya, N., (1998). *Reading the splendid body: Gender and consumerism in eighteenth-century British writing on India*. London: Associated University Presses.
[153] Oldenburg, V. T., (1990). "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India." *Feminist Studies*, 16(2), 259–287.

Figure 50: Meena Kumari as Nargis in Amrohi's *Pakeezah,* 1972.

To the best of my knowledge there has been no reference made to Nargis's anglicised appearance in any commentary I have read on the film. She is depicted as having strikingly light-coloured eyes and distinct golden hair. Her older sister Nawabjaan has neither of these distinctive physical traits. When in the film Nawabjaan discovers that her sister is still alive she asks the informant whether that 'ill-fortuned one happens to have golden hair'. Perhaps Nargis was one such illegitimate offspring that Amrohi implicates in the film. As discussed earlier, courtesan culture and their salons were dismantled by British political action and propaganda during the late nineteenth century. This propaganda fed into the Christian missionary rhetoric of women's roles as well as pre independence notions of the motherland viewed through a Nehruvian and brahaminical lens; where women were either virtuous or profane.

Figure 51: Manoj Kumar, *Purab aur Pachhim*, 1970.

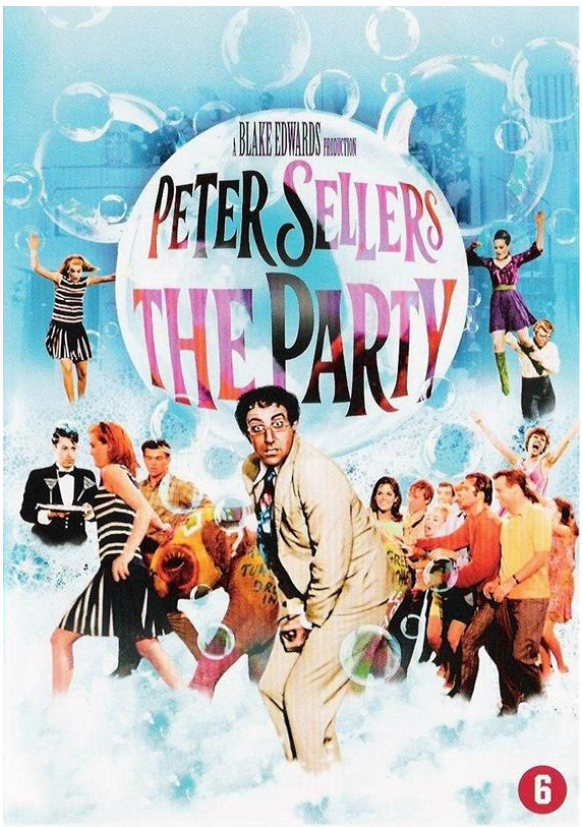

Figure 52: Blake Edward's *The Party*, 1968.

The pale makeup along with Nargis's coloured contact lenses and golden wig (see Figure 50) are almost a reminder of the portrayal of native Indians caricatured by white actors in earlier Hollywood films, for example, Blake Edward's 1968 film *The Party* (see Figure 52). Similar depictions of cabaret dancers during the same period in Bombay cinema construct the 'Western Woman' and the 'African Slave' in a very similar fashion most visible in the song *Aa Jaane Jaan* from R.K Nayyar's 1968 film *Intaqam* (see Figure 53). *Purab aur Paschim (East and West)*, Manoj Kumar's 1970 film (see Figure 51) is warning its viewers of the dangers of losing Indian culture in interracial relationships. Its progeny is shown to be compromising its virtues, morals and 'Indian values' being brought up and influenced in the West. Amrohi himself continued to portray racial difference in his later film *Razia Sultan* (1983) where an Indian actor Dharmender, playing Jamaluddin Yaqut had been made to look like an Abyssinian slave through similar visual signifiers such as darkened skin and hair/wig texture.

Figure 53: Helen as 'Western' cabaret dancer with backing dancers as 'African slaves' in Nayyar's *Intaqam,* 1968.

The two specific songs being lip-synced in *The day after the day before I sinned* also reframe the parody around cultural appropriation and caricaturing 'the other'. Although it is not explicitly narrated in *Pakeezah*, Nargis represents the bastardisation of tawa'if-courtesan culture especially in the early twentieth century. She abides in a pre-independence India during civil disobedience, the struggle for freedom and Indian industrialisation. She portrays a remorseful figure that has lost both her purpose of becoming a respected begum and her place in the patriarchal scheme of marriage

and the extended family. Shweta Sachdeva Jha[154] in her essay discussing frames of cinematic history observes how *Pakeezah* has 'a complex relationship with the historical past and its conceptualization of modernization in postcolonial India, the film participates in the Nehruvian vision of visualizing a shared cultural and historical past that subsumes regional and religious identities as part of an emergent nationalism.'

Sahibjaan's unseen beloved is represented as a train and her attraction for the first half of the film is to the whistling sounds of new forms of travel, technological change and modernity. Central to this commentary, *Pakeezah*'s film narrative and the live work, *The day after the day before I sinned* is the idea of an epistolary performance. In *Pakeezah* a letter is left at the feet of a sleeping Sahibjaan in a train compartment by a male stranger who mistakenly enters the female compartment. It reads as follows:

Pardon me for entering into your train compartment. I noticed your feet. They are exquisite. Do not place them on the ground lest they become soiled.

Another fellow traveller.

As the train comes to a halt, Sahibjaan awakes at a station called Suhagpur. It is worth noting the ironic commentary in Amrohi's choice of the train station where Sahibjaan has this realisation. It translates as 'a place of marriage'. Allen and Bhasker also note that the name of the station becomes a 'subtle articulation of Sahibjan's desire, like the sound of the *shehnai*[155] in the earlier sequence with Shahabuddin and Nargis'.[156]

The words are ironic as a friend points out later *'this is a message but appears to have been misplaced'*. The very sentiments of the letter are being questioned by the friend because she insists that the writer was unaware of the social status of the recipient. The letter suggests not placing those feet on the ground in case they should get soiled. The friend reminds her that the courtesan profession rests on those very tainted feet the writer refers to in the letter.

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[154] Jha, S.S., (2009) "Frames of Cinematic History: The Tawa'if in Umrao Jan and Pakeezah", 167–192, in Jain, M. *Narratives of Indian Cinema.* New Dehli: Primus Books.
[155] A South Asian musical instrument traditionally played at weddings.
[156] Bhaskar, I., & Allen, R., (2009). *Islamicate cultures of Bombay cinema*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.

The omniscient voice of the letter reader in *Pakeezah* becomes larger than the beloved himself. The letter becomes a testimony of love as well as a witness navigating the courtesan through the trials and tribulations of unrequited love. The voice of the letter remains faithful even when challenged as in the scene discussed above and becomes holy in the way that it is preserved in an amulet.

The two letters and a postscript recited by one of the performers in *The day after the day before I sinned* (see Figure 38, 40, 46 and 48) is reminiscent of the beloved's voice in *Pakeezah*. As she navigates through the audience, in a bridal ensemble, she whispers elements of the letters to bystanders and observers. These letters of love function in a similar way investing in an unseen beloved and performing desires through mimesis.

Figure 54: Emily Eden, *Boys dressed as nautch girls,* India, 1836-1842.

Figure 55: Qasim Riza Shaheen, performers dressed as nautch girls, England, 2018.

The sanctity of Sahibjaan's feet can also be read as placing oneself at a grassroot level symbolising the harsh realities of journeying through the trials and tribulations of life. Sahibjaan's feet thus become a symbol for travel across generations and geographies, both internal and external. The performers in *The day after the day before I sinned* etch different stages of celluloid tawa'if-courtesan lives in *Pakeezah* and Bombay cinema at large. The performance intervention included enactments of playful twin dance accompanists, the aging courtesan, the sought-after courtesan, same-sex lovers, female impersonators and the pining figure who reads letters to the unseen beloved. The performers, consumed with the narratives of the two songs on a loop, silently lip-syncing. With a gestural choreography of audacious assertiveness and humble submission; an Anglo-Indian soundscape offering mimetics, roles and routes through the space to the implicated audience.

The live work abides in a space between intention and presentation where all windows and doors are left wide open, yet walls remain erect and intact. Invisible architecture echoing unrequited voices of the past which continue to yearn and long for a union

with a beloved. Bulleh Shah says in poetic form, 'I was left as I was; something he took to his heart, say the bridal robes in gloom, I long for my groom. I long for my groom'. It is our inability to finish our life stories which amplify the very heartbeat on which the tempo of this work is set.

The day after the day before I sinned evoked a gathering inspired by tawa'if-courtesan life-worlds. This intimate performance recital reimagined the interior and exterior spaces of tawa'if-courtesan lives. As the event itself was taking place on a Friday and what was particularly of interest to me whilst devising the work was the context of the gathering. *Jummeh ki baithak* translated as Friday congregation was a gathering of maestros and their principal students during the mid-twentieth century in Bombay. This included not only tawa'if-courtesans but also their accompanying musicians and their apprentices. It was a space reserved for inter-lineage dialogue and friendly competition and demonstration of skill and expertise. Another type of public performance at a gathering was known as *khari mehfil* (upright performance gathering) where the dancers and the musicians performed standing up and moving around the audience. From the iconography found within travel writings one can establish that these performance troops were composed of a main dancer/singer with two accompanist dancers and musicians. These musicians would tie the instruments to their shawls and move around with the dancers as they danced. There was an interchangeable punctuation between singing, dancing and gesturing. With the revival came the proscenium stage and the distinction of the audience and the performers as separate. The distance between them meant that minute memetics and gestures were lost as was the immediacy of the happening.

Bhaitki mehfil (seated gathering) was reserved more for *bhav batana* where a dancer would sit, emote and render a particular poetic phrase in multiple mimetic interpretations. A *mujra mehfil* (song-dance gathering) was a synthesis of poetry, music and gestures where a tawa'if-courtesan displayed her virtuosity and technical expertise of her dance-art dressed in her finest apparel and was open to patrons and guests.
I wanted to evoke the sentiments of *Mehfil-e-sama*, a musical commemoration during the death anniversaries of saints and mystics belonging to particular orders of Sufism.

This ritual (called *urs*) continues to happen in the present day and is usually accompanied with ecstatic dance and acts of devotion in remembrance at the shrine itself. The performance environment I wished to create was that of the *akhara*, an entertainment held at night by nobility and patrons. Others were employed to sing, while other members of the troupe accompanied them with instruments; two women holding lamps stood near the circle of performers. Because the performance at HOME was devised using split scenes in the main gallery space it afforded me the possibility of shifting through all the aforementioned socio-spatial performance modes and contexts. Retaining the spirit of grandiose salons yet exchanging chandeliers to single source hanging light bulbs reminiscent of *Queer Courtesan* and the peep show aesthetic. The performance relationship between the tawa'if-courtesans in *The day after the day before I sinned* highlighted the modalities of visibility as ways of self-representation.

Nautch girls were written about in colonial travel narratives with particular details of costumes and jewelry. Emma Roberts, a memsahib who travelled India in early nineteenth century viewed nautch girls as:

very picturesque figures, though somewhat encumbered by the voluminous folds of their drapery. Their attire consists of a pair of gray-coloured silk trowsers, edged and embroidered with silver, so long as only to afford occasional glimpses of the rich anclets…Over the trowsers a petticoat of some rich stuff appears…having broad silver orgold borders, finished with deep fringes of the same. The coortee, or vest, is of the usual dimensions, but it is almost hidden by an immense veil, which crosses the bosom several times."[157]

As illustrated in figure 54, Emily Eden's fascination with the subjects she was painting seemed to go beyond the cultural codes of a performance and into the realm of her orientalist fantasy of these performers, whom she paints with a lowered gaze and subservient to the viewer. *The day after the day before I sinned* allowed for Eden's dancing boys to stand tall and gaze back at the audience-memsahibs as seen in Figure 55. British memsahibs' primary interest in nautch performances was in relation to

[157] Roberts, E.,(1825). *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan*, p. 189.

the decadence of their clothing. Upholding notions of difference based on the East as luxurious and opulent. Roberts also observed the plethora of jewellery worn by nautch girls during their performances as "*The hands, arms, and neck, are covered with jewels, sometimes of great value, and the hair is braided with silver ribands…the diameter of the nose-ring is as large as that of a crown-piece; it is of gold wire, and very thin; a pearl and two other precious gems are strung upon it, dangling over the mouth.*"

This added to the British understanding of nautch girls as individually wealthy based on the splendour of their apparel. Courtesans were mostly modest in their clothing revealing only their face, hands, and feet.[158] Another memsahib Anne Katherine Elwood recounted that nautch performances were perfectly acceptable for polite society as "*the most fastidious prude might have witnessed [them], without running the risk of any offence to her modesty.*"[159] These excerpts of travel narratives demonstrate the modesty of the tawa'if-courtesan and the fascination and curiosity with which British memsahibs recounted their performances.

However, in the early nineteenth century, Herber and Elwood observe how the view of courtesans was replaced from early ideas of modesty to vulgarity. The British began to represent tawa'if-courtesans as immoral and hypersexual women categorising them as commercial sex workers. The British understanding of sex workers as 'fallen women' was the dominant trend in Britain at the time and was ascribed to the tawa'if-courtesans. The nautch girls endangered the political and cultural authority of the colonial project. This shift in representation of nautch girls was a consequence of the rise of Victorian gender ideals and the racist rhetoric of ethnic superiority along with a growing fear of miscegenation. In order to uphold the chastity of the British memsahib a dichotomy had to be maintained. The 'sanctity' of British women's sexuality was seen as pious and the tawa'if-courtesan became a figure of lust and lure; an erotic sensuality which the memsahibs found threatening to Victorian family values.

[158] Amelia Herber, the wife of a minister, believed the clothing of the nautch-girls "*was modesty itself, nothing but their faces, feet, and hands being exposed to view.*"
[159] Elwood, A.K., (1930). *Narrative of a Journey Overland from England*, vol. II, p. 81

Cross gender people and cross dressers are very much a part of the social heritage of Indian dance forms. Male-female binary is a colonial divide where other categories were delegitimised. Gender was far more nuanced, interchangeable and exchangeable in public and private performances. Gender binaries were more fluid allowing for *mardana* tawa'if-courtesans, these were men dressed as women and are prevalent in visual iconography and travel journals.[160] Emily Eden's water colour impressions (see Figure 54) dialogue with the male-female-transgender-queer figures of my performers. The last nawab of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah himself was known to have written and performed in his own dance drama called *Indra Sabah* questioning the male and female principles of *tandav* and *lasya*. He contributed towards dance and music by establishing an institute for girls called *parikhana* (fairy-house).[161]

During the sequence of the most iconic song from *Pakeezah 'Inhi logon ne'*, the *Zan numa mard* or the mollycoddled man is pushed aside by an angry patron or pimp. He is a flamboyantly dressed flower seller at the entrance of the salon. He subsequently squats at the side and gazes at Sahibjaan with attentive affiliation as though his gender atypical voice and body is in the form of the dancing courtesan. That replacement he experiences creates a greater affiliation with her plight and the tale she laments over. It is as if she is also singing his song. This female centric paradigm is formed in such a way that I see myself longing for representation and a way into the silver screen through the flower seller's affiliation. I was not taught about love - *Pakeezah* taught me how to fall in love. This film has created a space for queerness in a way which is not necessarily inherent to the actual film plot. *Pakeezah* is narratively cohesive rather than realistic yet is embedded with codes which complicates and opens up the layers of meaning and interpretation. I ask myself, how does the gaze of the flower seller differ from the gaze of the patron-clients in the courtesan salon? Does he wish to be consumed by the dancing figure in order to become the courtesan? Whilst the others desire to consume the dancing figure as the lyrics suggest?

[160] Morcom, A., (2014). *Illicit worlds of Indian dance: Cultures of exclusion*.
[161] Nevile, P., (1996). *Nautch Girls of India: Dancers, Singers and Playmates*. Paris: Ravi Kumar.

In this song from *Pakeezah*, Sahibjaan wears the colour pink as brides often do - which symbolises marital union and consummation. For *The day after the day before I sinned* I had all the elaborate pink & red bridal outfits dyed in hues of black and brown. Muting and staining the marriage apparel. Some garments took on the dye, others were resilient to it. The performers were dressed in carefully deconstructed 'nautch girl' outfits. Flared skirts embellished with elaborate gold embroidery and applique with layers of large chiffon drapery were dyed into darker hues and all damages in the process were fully embraced. My resurrected tawa'if-courtesans were bejewelled head to toe in period inspired costume jewellery made of gold, multicoloured stones and strings of pearls (see Figure 56). This ensemble was juxtaposed with items of apparel not usually worn with such costumes. Items such as sunglasses, garish animal print scarves, bright socks and fitted vintage shirts matching the same era as the songs being played. This act of reclaiming and reassertion of the adaptability of the tawa'if courtesan symbolises the grandeur and authority of their life-worlds. This gesture was carefully curated into the apparel so as to subvert yet still celebrate the tawa'if-courtesan aesthetic. Symbols and rituals of Victorian weddings such as the backward throwing of a bouquet of flowers were fused with the throwing of rose petals; both synthetic and artificial yet evoking the British colonial dichotomy of the memsahib-nautch girl.

Figure 56: Qasim Riza Shaheen, costume details, *The day after the day before I sinned*, 2018.

Looking forward through backward glances

Through dancing back at the viewer to their own tune and reappropriating nautch, my resurrected tawa'if-courtesans were subverting the orientalist lure of exotic dance by enacting their lost and silenced voices. I wished to leave questions with a present-day British audience by asking them how the gaze has changed in this instance. Who are we, as BAME[162] performers, dancing for today? Who is the Asia Triennial Manchester telling our stories to? And how is South Asian dance being programmed in the UK today?

In pursuit of the origins narrative of kathak & the tawa'if-courtesan culture one is in danger of missing parts of a story which do not get written into official historical narratives and archives. These erased stories only exist in the realm of memory and around the living forms and cultures in question. The question of authenticity, legitimacy and respectability of kathak dance still resonates with the stigma of prostitution; associated with the dismantling of courtesan culture during the colonial project. Another identity which gets marginalised and silenced is that of the Indian Muslim and their contribution to these life-worlds. This stigma runs deep as the colonial project delegitimised the Muslims through the Mughal annexation and continued into the nationalist Nehruvian/Brahminical rewriting of Indian history. This is not just a thing of the past, but a prejudice faced by contemporary Muslim practitioners in the politics of programming Indian dance. The remnants of these biases are still very much within the contemporary showcasing and programming of South Asian Dance in the UK.

[162] Black Asian and Minority Ethnic

Chapter Six: Conclusion

It has been twenty-three years since I found myself on the front cover of a London magazine which covered fashion, lifestyle, music and second generation British Asian cultural politics. The question beneath my pensive portrait still lingers in the air a generation later; after all that is said and done 'who am I?' or rather 'who was I?'. Like Bulleh Shah I too can only repose that question with his notion of, 'who am I, to know who I am?'. Having said that, one must recognise that looking back into the past has its own misplacements and misjudgments.

Figure 57: Amrohi, film stills, *Pakeezah*, 1972.

The most tragic scene in *Pakeezah* goes unnoticed by commentators, critics and perhaps by most viewers. Sixteen years on, when Shahabuddin receives Nargis's last letter, he makes his way to her final resting place. There he is met by the same graveyard attendant who had witnessed Nargis's anguish and had informed Nawabjaan of her whereabouts (see bottom Figure 57). Yet again she brings Shahabuddin to the grave of his beloved. However, it is evident that she has misdirected him to a grave some meters away from Nargis's, as shown in an earlier scene where she is laid to rest under the shade of a noticeably large tree (see top Figure 57). Thus, there is no union for Nargis with her beloved, only a closure for Shahabuddin. The viewer watches him walk away as the camera leads us out of the frame.

I think of my time in Lahore in Hira Mandi and wonder how many times I walked out of the frame missing the tragedy that was occurring just a few metres away; behind curtains and closed doors. Untold stories, unrequited love and silent surveillance from those not involved in my time-based transitional life-world. No matter how much I assimilated or how much I surrendered I was not a 'whore', I became one. As Bulleh Shah says 'I will dance to win the favours of my beloved even if it means becoming a whore'. And it is within that word 'becoming' that the khwajasera, tawaif-courtesan and the sufi mystic's identity remains poignantly in flux and ever-evolving. I became those I observed using my own body and time to embrace multiple realities, within which I found a blurring, a messiness of intention and truths.

Perhaps that exorcist my aunt took me to as a child was right. Perhaps I am part of a connecting narrative for my qareen-jinn from across time who abides in me, as it once did in a Sufi mystic, a tawa'if-courtesan or a khwajasera. Maybe I was not the only one revisiting and replaying lives. What this PhD research has taught me is that there are other ways of understanding the past which are not in the written word but deeply sedimented into the body, our apparel and our inclinations. It is my body memory after all, which then upon my return, created a work at the Victoria and Albert Museum. A queer courtesan found her way back from the days of the crown and presented a

succession of one-minute nautch dances for a British audience, ironically again, at a Friday Late event or *Jummeh ki baitak*.

In the early part of the twentieth century 'the new dance of India' brought a very particular orientalist approach (Euro-American dancers such as Ruth Saint Dennis, François Delsarte, Anna Pavlova, La Marie, Raghini Devi were going to India to bring 'Indian dance' to the Western proscenium stage). This was known as the early revival and marked the reinvention of a national identity in India. Madame Meneka brahmanised and gentrified dance to a new social status. Uday Shankar and Anna Pavlova created Orientalist dance or the "Hindoo Dance" for western European audiences. Ruth St Dennis through the frame of Orientalism was on a spiritual quest for the Modern American Dancer. As such hereditary dance practices get rewritten and appropriated as Orientalist choreography. The tawa'if-courtesan of the period who had already been dismantled through the Anti-nautch movement becomes further erased as does her dance. Do I in *Queer Courtesan* perform the nautch girl in a similar Orientalist manner to Uday Shankar in 1930's Paris? (see Figure 23) Is this bejewelled exotically draped zombie-nautch girl (see Figure 27) still a site of intrigue and fascination by both the producer and the consumer? Who was this queer courtesan performing for this time? Descendants of *sahibs* and *memsahibs*? Was she now in a better place having migrated from her 'degenerate and barbaric culture'[163]? Is she still being lured by the promise of safety, welfare, artistic validation and a civilised life-world?

British-Bangladeshi kathak dancer Amina Khayyam's live rendition of *Pakeezah's* song '*Inhi logon ne*' ('these people') further subverts the playful spirit and the underlying tragedy of the song. The lyrics are as follows:

These people, these people

These people have taken away my veil of modesty.

[163] Chatterjee, P., (1989). "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India". *American Ethnologist, 16*(4), 622-633. Retrieved August 24, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/645113

If you don't accept my word, oh beloved, ask the cloth merchant

who sold me a yard of its fabric for a gold coin.

If you don't accept my word, oh beloved, ask the cloth dyer

who gave my veil its pink colour.

If you don't accept my word, oh beloved, ask the sepoy

who stripped away my veil at the market.

These people have taken away my veil of modesty.

Figure 58: Amrohi, film still, *Pakeezah,* 1972.

Sahibjaan, whilst addressing her beloved (present in absentee), laments how men around her (not the patrons) have compromised her modesty and tainted her innocence (symbolised by the pulling of her veil/*dupatta*). She implores him to question three characters; the cloth dyer, the cloth merchant and the sepoy who are all witnesses and participants in her exploitation. At an event marking thirty years of Southhall Black Sisters; a London-based organisation that provides support to women in need, Khayyam's Sahibjaan is wearing a sheer fuchsia pink kathak dance costume; familiar yet shockingly naked in the absence of the bottom half of the apparel.

Figure 59: Amina Khayyam Dance Company, *A Thousand Faces,* Southhall Black Sisters, 2019.

Amina Khayyam Dance Company vociferates for victims of domestic violence, and highlights the issue of acid attacks on women in Bangladesh. What is the purpose of performing such narratives in Britain about those distant communities? I am certainly not suggesting that these issues do not exist in Britain but the language in the programme notes and cultural codes of the dance form transport the audience to a land where she claims 'it is a heresy to burn a book, but acceptable to burn a woman'. Sahibjaan is lamenting about the abuse she faces to the very communities and social heritage she is part of. What do such dance narratives performed in Britain do for those

victims and the communities at stake? By performing the atrocities of the subcontinent to British audiences do we play a part in upholding orientalist perceptions of the 'barbaric' East? Can the mediation of funding bodies, grants, bursaries, commissioning bodies and the audience dictate the manner and politics of our presentation of the subcontinent?

South Asian dance is still being programmed in the UK for a British audience. In a similar vein, as discussed earlier, songs were removed from Hindi films when broadcasted for British television when I was growing up in the 1980s. Sadler's Wells Darbar Festival acknowledges the difference in expectations between audiences in India and Britain yet still fall into presenting dance repertoires adjusted to British taste, time frame and endurance of the exotic. When language and meaning is lost on the majority of the audience, it becomes dependent on gesture and mimesis as well as on the craft of stage presentation, lighting and set design. Inevitably the sentiment of the repertoire is either lost or is shifted to new contexts. Those East India Javalis were responding to their British patrons through similar linguistic modifications. Do we need to radically change the way we make, programme and receive work which reenact cultural histories or do we continue to dance to the same old tunes? The tawa'if courtesan at best was a mediator between conflicting cultural and religious identities, both in precolonial India and in the post-colonial imaginary of Bombay cinema. She is the symbiotic culmination of Hindu-Muslim aesthetics, politics and poetics, and perhaps most importantly a reminder of the syncretic nature of South Asian histories.

Letter to Nahid VII

Dear Nahid

It is the 24th of November of 2019. I've taken my seat on Row F Seat number 5 even though I was allocated seat number 4. Perspective matters and if one can, one should allow oneself to see things from where they feel most connected. It was just one seat closer to the centre but it made a difference. I have been shadowing you this whole week watching you both, compose and choreograph your presentation. I say compose because you are so led by melody rather than percussion as

if you had after a lifetime of existing in a time cycle somehow made every beat your sum[164] and magically made the formation disappear. Delighted that you were invited by Darbar Festival of Indian Dance curated by Akram Khan for Sadler's Wells to showcase what has been programmed as Stories of Thumris. After assisting you in making this piece that you will present in 14 minutes, I re-read the program notes I had written, under my breath, reassuring myself. I hope I have articulated what you wish the audience to know, beforehand and in retrospect.

I wrote:

"Renowned kathak artist Nahid Siddiqui presents an evening of Thumris. Through her emotive expressions and exquisite gestural language, she depicts their narratives.

Central to what she refers to as 'gayeki ang gharana'[165] is the notion of sangat (harmonious music), riaz (practice), pace and alignment. At the same time, her abhinaya or facial gestures create a nuanced and refined study of sentiment and emotion; a rare and celebrated dance purist in pursuit of choreographies of serenity.

Siddiqui chooses improvisation over fixed repertoires, allowing her the freedom to paint, as she puts it, 'on the canvas of space'. Once a form is registered in the body, she believes that a dancer must not become slave to its material but, instead, allow the form to aestheticise the body and evoke its memories.

Siddiqui merges with the beat and pulse of her audience. Her abhinaya is more than mimetics and literal meanings of poetic renditions. Rather, it serves to heighten our awareness of even mere tinkering or sounds of silence that breathe life into her form and repertoire.

For Siddiqui, this is in line with the ethos of subcontinental Sufism, and to quote Siddiqui, 'one communicates with one's higher

[164] The sum (in Kathak) is the first beat of the time measure (Massey, 1999).
[165] An approach to dance movement based on melody rather than percussion.

self because Radha-Krishna, Heer-Ranjha are within us and when we address them, they appear'.

This evening she performs in a manner where her experience allows for such intuitive improvisation that shifts from nowhere into a meditative nothingness; a place where we can collectively reflect on shared truths and stories."

Qasim Riza Shaheen in dialogue with Nahid Siddiqui, November 2019.

The lights dim and Mavin Khoo introduces Nahid Siddiqui.

Kathak, the word itself, means storyteller and is deemed as one of the many dance styles India considers as a symbol of both classicism and nationalism. Yet it symbolises the fragmented and syncretic nature of South Asian histories. It can be a form free of narrative and boundless in its repertoire yet is often caught up in being defined in terms of style, technique and its association with hereditary preservation. Nahid Siddiqui's kathak, as I understand it, is porous and morphic in its approach, manifestation and technique. The kathak I was becoming was on the one hand upholding the teachings and aesthetics of their ustad-guru, yet on the other hand engaged in subversive and deconstructive live art.

In hindsight, my years of exploration in the name of body-based art and socially-engaged activism has left me scarred and stained. It has displaced my body from my self-image and compartmentalised it even further. Code switching was integral to my British Asian identity where mainstream and familial cultures were at odds with one another at a time when I was growing up. Then, there was the code switching between the queerness of my art practice and the heteronormativity at play around me. My art practice added further complexities as a self-aware practicing Muslim. I was in a monogamous marriage with a woman based in the UK throughout my lived experience in Hira Mandi. My decision to undertake this journey to Lahore at all costs left the relationship questionable in the eyes of others. The time spent living through, responding and mediating *Stains & Stencils* left me deeply traumatised and impacted my sense of self as I continued to make more work. The eight acts of *Queer Courtesan* performed

over the following three years allowed for introspection and reflection of my time in Lahore.

Even when asked on how Hira Mandi affected me, I seldom disclose the impact it had left on my mental health. I often found that there was an assumption of hypersexuality if one was a sex worker by both the clients and those trying to understand the artwork. I found the entire experience devoid of sexual pleasure and annihilating. I was in survival mode and had found strength and endurance I did not think I was capable of. It felt as though something else was at play; toying with my body for its own resolve. In hindsight I cannot fully reconcile that role-play with the life I live now. Although there is a danger that Mark and Briski's work with source communities could be read as inequitable, based on their access to resources and personal economy, it is important to remember that class difference, poverty and social stigma also exist in more developed countries.

American Academic Suvir Kaul in his essay[166] on my work in Pakistan wonders if I was aware of my class privilege and whether I took responsibility for bringing pieces of the subcontinent back to the UK. What Kaul fails to recognise is that I grew up on a council estate in Ardwick Green in Manchester. And that as a family we struggled to find a place in this country, that we held on to everything associated with 'home' and that in preserving some sense of it we became further and further displaced from it. I went to Pakistan funded with travel bursaries which supported marginalised minorities. The only privilege I had was the ability to recognise how it felt being a minority as I navigated through the class and economic divisions of the communities I shared lived experiences with in Lahore. My work allowed me to disappear and presented opportunities to embody different realities. Kaul does not question his own class privilege in the essay as someone of South Asian descent holding the position of A. M. Rosenthal Professor of English at University of Pennsylvania. Nor does he question the implications of a commercial gallery specialising in South Asian arts, in Philadelphia, within which the work was being exhibited. Selectively prompting the artist and the viewer to question

[166] Kaul, S., (2018). "Performing Shaheen: What You See is What You Get", in Hushlak, M. A., & Pearl, M. (Eds.) *The Last Known Pose: Essays and Reflections on the Works of Qasim Riza Shaheen*. Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications.

the assumed privileges of the work in the exhibition catalogue yet not reflecting on the position of the diasporic academic and a commercial gallery is somewhat myopic.

Throughout the journey starting from *Stains & Stencils* through to *Queer Courtesan* and then finally *The day after the day before I sinned*, the artist per se is gradually removed from their own self portrait allowing space for other protagonists to wear the materiality of the apparel and the shards left behind. The absence of the artist in his own self-portrait is compensated through the two letters and a postscript. Just as I have aged the costumes have aged creating their own narrative and stains & stencils. The drawing with which I began this commentary is attributed to me at age five and was assumed by my family to be a portrait of my dear mother. I don't believe it is, as my mother never wore such jewellery during my formative years. It is an unknown, unseen figure perhaps of my djinn revealing to me what was to come later in life as I explored and embodied the bejewelled figure in my art practice and life.

Perhaps, my mother is present as the voice who would lovingly sing the songs of *Pakeezah* to me as I fell asleep in her arms; '*chalte chalte yun hi koi mil gaya tha sare raah chalte chalte'* translating something to the effect of '*whilst walking along, without reason someone just happened to appear and we met, whilst on my path, whilst walking'*. All the friends I made in Hira Mandi, the clients and the bystanders all just happened to appear as I walked this path. The five hundred one-on-one encounters through a two-way mirror during all eight renditions of *Queer Courtesan* were also just transient encounters. In *The day after the day before I sinned* each of my resurrected tawaif-courtesans, after posing as though for an ethnographic photograph, abruptly ran or slipped out of the frame. The notion of the audience entering this performance frame or portrait is articulated by art critic and theorist Diana Damian Martin in response to an earlier work of mine presented at SPILL Festival of Performance in London in 2013:

'As with much of Shaheen's work, identity here is that which is embodied, shifting, transcultural, uncertain. I am both character and outsider in this extended encounter,

and as a result, my body becomes someone else's; desire, history and memory compose this portrait which I have now inhabited.'[167]

Our family abode was akin to a house museum and its second generation as living artefacts. The trauma of migration was recounted at family gatherings and past voices were preserved through bedtime stories and lullabies. My art practice thus lends itself to this mode of understanding memory and experience as registers of archival inhabitations.

This research has led me to the next phase of understanding and articulating my work through the following distinction. In the past my work had come to me quite intuitively and my focus was on 'living' the work and arriving at the nub of what was to be shared. This next phase has not only been about intuition alone but a deeper digging into the meaning and methodology of how I excavate material from my imagination and from stories which surround me. Because there was a pre-existing collection of critical writing about my work, the process of writing the literature review itself brought me to a juncture where I needed to sift out what mattered to me now. What I responded to and what I left out determined the strands through which the live work emerged and (re)formulated.

By removing myself physically from the work and extending the self-portraiture onto different bodies I was able to observe from the vantage point of the audience. I was fascinated with how the viewers projected something of their own self into the work by staying with the pace of my performers. The manner in which I slowed things down, as I have done in parts of the documentation footage, allows the viewer to operate at the same speed, thus opening up a reflective territory.

What I also observed during the performance was how the audience engaged with the letters. The narratives had navigated a choreography between the audience and the performers. My performers had assumed by way of convention that the textual landscape of the interior and exterior, along with physical proximity would be upheld and maintained. A performer expressed how they had 'expected people to stand

[167] Martin, D.D., (2013) Spill Writing, *Spill Festival of Performance 2013*, London. https://www.spillfestival.com/ Accessed April 2013.

back and watch, but they came right up to my face'. Looking back, I ask myself how my friends from Hira Mandi had seen me. What aspect of their self were they connecting to? The self of them or the self of me? Who were they relating to in this performance continuum?

In closing, and fully embracing the evolving frame and its inhabitants, I am left with many questions as an artist and writer which go beyond the scope of this PhD commentary through the route of Professional Practice. During the Sexuality Summer School held at The University of Manchester in 2019 I attended a lecture by Madhavi Menon. She talked about her book *A History of Desire in India,* I mentioned earlier in the commentary. She stood tall, sari clad and unapologetic about her cultural intertexts and references, and spoke without the need to explain everything in italics. I have never felt more at home with the intersection between art and theory than during that lecture. It felt as though my entire trajectory of art practice was validated in that one hour. I laughed out loud, at times the only one, at references I felt only I understood. It gave me permission to archive the ephemeral yet revisit the past, both distant and recent, as a decolonial gesture.

The works discussed and made during this PhD strive to decolonise the ways in which queerness can be articulated through a more fluid, less rigid frame of reference. *Stains & Stencils*, *Queer Courtesan* and *The day after the day before I sinned* were born out of reflexivity, community spirit and performance. These mythopoeic figures of the Sufi mystic, the khwajasera and the tawa'if-courtesan, populate my work. They travel with me and through me vis-à-vis my qareen-djinn; manifesting itself through the gender atypicality of my sex worker khwajasera friends, the delegitimisation of tawa'if-courtesans into celluloid reinventions of her in Bombay cinema and the distribution of individual memories into a collective conscience. How imagination is staged has been the principal driver for the work, to the extent that I wonder whether the djinn is a figure which binds my diasporic South Asian Muslim British identity to a displaced cultural past.

These articulations of creative exchanges point to another potential project. One which could further look at how art practices, such as mine, become a pedagogical tool to not only fill but rather to overflow the frame of source community representations in art

museums and galleries. The most pertinent questions I am left with are whether we continue to invest in textual histories, or can we begin to reenact and restage memories of tawa'if-courtesans and conjure Sufis through the corporeal archive? How do we bring these silent stories and pleas into an art museum and gallery? And has the process of querying Qasim queered, or at least queried the lens through which the life-world of Sufi saints, tawa'if-courtesans and khwajaseras can be imagined? For now, you tell me.

***

Link to letter recitation.

Two letters and a postscript

Someone (for Qasim)

I hardly know you but must confess that it feels like I'm falling in love with a familiar stranger. There are others who know you much better than I do but I wanted to tell you that you have left quite an impression on me. You are both confident and coquettish, both 40 and 14, both woman and man, both worldly and weirdly celestial - I'm ecstatic you said yes. I can't believe I actually proposed to you and that in the nick of time. Your love is like a constant toothache. It's not quite the wedding that I had imagined but it's what it is - you, me, devotees and (y)our 9 vows.

So, here we are in Kasur in Pakistan on a Thursday night at the shrine of your beloved saint (& on the eve of your 40th birthday). You look tiny and luminous in your white tunic and skinny pants. I swear your beard looks adorning and your hair looks alive. As I write this note to you I watch you gently pull out the entangled strands from beneath the garland of Marigolds you wear around your neck. You have this way of moving that looks like a continuous series of stills – perfected postures as if studied to the degree of becoming second nature. No coloured lenses today, only those morning eyes that look at me filled with kohl (and regretfully without your Viktor & Rolf glasses which I lost along the way!).

I can hear you tie your ankle bells as you prepare to dance your teacher's courtly repertoire in a twelve-beat cycle. I have never seen you do this so I'm especially excited because I know just how much kathak means to you and that this would be one of your rare recitals

before taking each other's name. As folk gather around you, you seem to be divorced from the tension in the air. In fact you seem oblivious to the chaos around you. The anticipation is killing me as I watch you intently in preparation.

You always seem to be in deep thought. I notice the way you tighten the skin around your eyes, raise the outermost tips of your eyebrows and subtly pout with a frown before biting the inside of your bottom lip - as if to punctuate the breaking of a chain of thought. I want to kiss that face.

This morning as we woke you told me that you had dreamt of your ex's partner again but this time you had actually hugged and smiled at him rather than fight him - asking him instead to look after the love of your life. I'm glad you raised the white flag for my sake and that you can now start dreaming up new visions of us. I am delightfully dismayed at the prospect of marrying you at such short notice. This is unlawfully preposterous, but I do. I do. I do.

You're nothing like anything I've ever known. Happy birthday my long-haired cynical love.

See you on the other side,

X

P.S. And somewhere along the line we merged. In the course of these memoirs there were intersections that were mine just as much as yours. Meet me there someday.

***

Link to letter recitation.

Undeliverable Mail

You baked me a sweet birthday cake and drove with it through riots in Lahore. Thus, giving me another reason to be eagerly desirous for it. When in Chicago I imagined you would wait for me fleetingly for no reason whatsoever. At times you stood amidst a crowd outside Chicago Theatre on North State Street wearing a red sweater I think or perhaps it was a Periwinkle blue.

I had promised you that I would turn up and you probably forgot that I had not kept the promise. But I think you kept waiting for at least a few weeks on consecutive Saturday nights from sharp 8.33pm till 8.42pm. I imagine that scenario just in case I believe your lie (that is if you decide to tell me one) about your time in Chicago and how I didn't turn up as promised.

You have these sandals that you wear repeatedly at functions. They make you look older and married even at a time when you were neither. I liked you in them but preferred you in your polka dots. You baked bread and made an entire home with it where I hoped we could dwell in bliss. In actual fact you started to do that but changed your mind halfway through the build. You preferred that the remaining architecture demolished in your head. I settled for half a fruitfully rotting house at the end of a trail of sweetmeats. You also liked dismantling yourself there the most. I stood outside choking on a handful of sugar.

If the truth be told I rather wanted to charm you into keeping me in some way perhaps as a gingerbread man of sort. Preserved and iced monumentally beneath a glass panel that read a cryptic message like my

parents wouldn’t happily approve of you ever after. I know, but I still liked you enough to imagine my rejection on a bold black vinyl Verdana font. You held me once in a picture as though I were dead. I could feel you breathe against my neck as I noticed a droplet of sweat glide down the side of your face before it hit me and mixed with mine.

Somehow, I don’t think we will ever meet quite in that way again or perhaps we will little Gretel on a school night at Gloria Jeans in Phase V where we will drink American coffee and smile.

Warmly,

Qasim

***

Postscript

Out of the blue my twice born inverted me and claimed me as his. Only when we stood face to face was I able to make sense of who the other was to me. He who giants over me in his absence is younger yet wiser and boldly audacious. A bittersweet aftertaste and unbelievable. Amidst verses and vows I was lost and found again in another new morrow. A full cycle and back to the same question: what fresh hell is this? Nowadays I meet me in his gaze with a pearl clutched in one hand as my other palm soaks him in.

With a drop of attar,

X

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