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Escaping the Prison of Prose:
Aesthetics of Mourning and the Story of Hind

In this essay, I explore one Urdu text: *Qaid khāne meñ talātum hai keh hiñd ātī hai*—its genealogy, its distinctive features, its production, and its reception. This text is unique for the manner in which it struggles to engage the ideas of history, violence, survival, religion, and representation. It turns on the central concern of language—language as constituted by technology, genre, metaphor, and translation. The canon-bending text also suggests ways in which poetry may counter prose and thereby challenge our understanding of violence as phenomena located outside ourselves. The aesthetics that inform this work, especially the poetry that graces it, make it evident that mourning and commiseration count when telling stories of violence in history, not simply as cathartic but also as a means to build alternative solidarities across suffering. Mourning and commiseration, especially in a gendered language, also emerge from the text and its context as defiant gestures of pride. The main challenge of deploying segments of this text in English or in (over/under) analysing them concerns the ambiguity of its Urdu language: much of the language conforms to poetic conventions that generate a range of meanings through calculated ambiguity. That this ambiguity is obscured in prose translation and in discretionary annotation should not be lost on the reader. In the spirit of solidarity with Hyder, I deliberately evoke a few cultural theorists located in the West as foreshadowed by the Urdu narrative’s style and substance.

My concerns for civilization values about which I continue writing may sound naïve, wooly-headed and simplistic. But then, perhaps, I am like that little bird which foolishly puts up its claws, hoping that it will stop the sky from falling.¹

On 8 November 1983, Qurratulain Hyder wrote a letter from Aligarh (India) to Khalid Hasan, her writer-journalist friend residing in London. In it, she suggested that he read her '*ālam āshob*, *Qaid khāne meñ talātum hai keh hiñd ātī hai*.'²

Even though Hyder used the term '*ālam āshob*' as a designation for a genre, her readers and her interpretive community struggled to come to terms with this label. For instance, Shahzad Manzar, a literary critic, asked her about this piece of writing:

Manzar: I would like to speak to you a bit about that *afsānah* [tale, fiction, story, romance].³ This *afsānah* is different from your other *afsānahs*.

Hyder responded: 'It is not an *afsānah*. It is '*ālam āshob*.'

Manzar pressed her a bit more: 'It is '*ālam āshob*, but what genre would you place it in?'

Hyder replied more assertively: 'All I can say is that it is '*ālam āshob*. At times what the writer writes does not have a form. When the writer has to say something, it is not necessary that s/he chooses a particular genre.' Manzar attempted to extract a genre label by pointing to the structure of the work: 'But it does have internal unity.' Hyder partially conceded: 'Well, the internal thing that is in it... a *marsīyah* (elegy) emerges from it. It is completely tied to the *marsīyah*.'⁴ The attempts to pin the '*ālam āshob*' down to a more

¹ See Qurratulain Hyder, *A Season of Betrayals: A Short Story and Two Novellas*, trans. C.

² Khalid Hasad (ed.), *Qurratulain Hyder ke khutūt ek dost ke nām* (Karachi: City Press Book Shop, 2002), p. 52.

³ John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdū, Classical Hindī, and English* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2004), p. 62.

⁴ Qurratulain Hyder, *Khusūsī Mutāle'a*, ed. Sayyid Amir Suhail, Shaukat Naim Qadri, Nemat ul Haq, Ali Athar (Multan: Beacon Books, 2003), p. 79.

recognizable genre (such as the *afsānah* or *marsīyah*) continued, even in the works of thoughtful writers like Intezar Hussain.⁵

Few writers feature as prominently in the history of Urdu prose as Qurratulain Hyder (d. 2007). For more than six decades, she worked marvels by drawing from the cross-section of the world she inhabited, casting the mundane as profound and the ordinary as philosophical. As the vast scholarship on Hyder demonstrates, the ethical orientation of her heroes and villains is a product of their sharp individuality, which is not always aligned with their circumstances, or with our expectations of them. It is the rift between what simply is and what is expected that becomes an analogy for representing the world through writing. The work of Hyder that I discuss documents one of her struggles to find the appropriate language and form to represent her world.

I divide this essay into four sections: in the first, I locate the genre of *‘ālam āshob* in Perso-Urdu literary history; in the second, I discuss the semantics and genealogy of the title of this work, which derives from *and* simultaneously breaks away with the elegy tradition of nineteenth-century Lucknow; in the third, I engage Hyder as she conscripts the elegy tradition into the narrative of twentieth-century crises; and in the closing section, I hope to show how her writing directed her toward a challenge of the prevalent aesthetics of literature and culture that are grounded in a particular type of masculinity and religiosity.

⁵ See Intezar Husain, ‘Qaid khāne meñ talātum hai keh hiñd ātī hai,’ in *Dunyāzād*, 27 (2010), p. 17. Husain is one of the most prominent writers of Urdu prose. In this reflection on Hyder’s *‘ālam āshob*, he criticizes the Urdu literary establishment of following Shibli Nomani and shortchanging the great elegy writer Dabir in favour of his contemporary Anis. While repeatedly referring to Hyder’s *‘ālam āshob* as *afsānah*, Husain advances the observation that Hyder in this work has utilized the Urdu marsiya tradition as a “torch.” (P. 16).

Locating the ‘*ālam āshob*

‘*Ālam āshob* is not transparent as a genre, even to a large section of the literate Urdu public. If we look to the most reliable Persian-English dictionary, we see that ‘*ālam āshob* is translated in a number of ways: the world’s terror, the world’s fear, the world’s grief, the world’s affliction, the world’s misfortune, the world’s confusion, and so on.⁶ The Persian construction also allows us to translate it as an active participle, “the disturber of the world.” In the *Būstān*, the popular literary masterpiece he composed in the thirteenth century, Sa’di Shirazi versified his beloved’s stature as that of an ‘*ālam āshob*:

parī paikarī būd maḥbūb-e man
badū guftam aye ‘ālam āshūb-e man⁷

My beloved has the stature of a fairy
I call him my ‘*ālam āshūb*

The lover/poet in the literary lyrical tradition of Persian employs the fairy metaphor for the ethereal, fickle, and coquettish beloved of the tradition.⁸ Three centuries after Sa’di, Muhtasham Kashani, perhaps Persia’s most widely read elegist, invoked the ‘*ālam āshob* in his ghazal:

na khwāham az jamāle e ‘ālam āshobat naqāb uftad
keh man devāneh gardam bāz o khalqī dar ‘azāb uftad⁹

I do not wish for the veil to fall from the beauty of your ‘*ālam āshob*
Once again I have gone mad, and the world has been thrown into torment.

⁶ Steingass, p. 67.

⁷ See <http://www.jasjoo.com/books/wordbook/dekhoda/أشوب%20عالم>, accessed 21 July 2013.

⁸ Sarasvati Saran Kaif, *Farhang Adab-e Urdu* (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 2004), p. 50.

⁹ Muhtashim Kashani, *Dīvān-e Maulānā Muḥtisham Kāshānī* (Tehran: Intesharat-e Sa’di, 1994), p. 404.

In one of his addresses to Javed (the eternal spirit that inspired him and the namesake of his son), Muhammad Iqbal, Urdu's most eminent poet of the last hundred years (and Hyder's beloved inspiration), identified his *mard-e momin*, the consummate man of faith and action, as a person whose very vision is '*ālam āshob*'.¹⁰

In the world of the Persianate traditions the figure of '*ālam āshob*' is the dandy, with all his stock mischief, cruelty, and wit. He is an extension of the *shahr āshob*, the beloved who wreaks havoc on the city with his charm, who cruises the markets, sells perfume, and steals hearts. In the eighteenth century, Urdu also begins to see the emergence of a distinctive genre by the name of *shahr āshob*. Apart from the documentation of the beloved's vanity, this genre by and large chronicles the plight of a city in political upheaval or suffering moral decadence. Several historians have turned to the rich archives of *shahr āshob* in order to access the archive of the wide range of professions and vocations prevalent in a particular city.¹¹

Qurratulain Hyder appraises her work under the label of '*ālam āshob*' and the title she gives it is *Qaid khāne meṅ talātum hai keh hind ātī hai*. The title is opaque to those who are unfamiliar with the nineteenth-century literary world of Lucknow or with the subsequent traditions of Urdu devotional literature: 'Tumult rises in the prison, for Hind approaches'? Where is this prison? Who is this Hind? Why is there a tumult upon her approach? Without a background in the nineteenth-century literary milieu of Lucknow, the title is difficult to decipher. The sixty-stanza, 360-line elegy, with this as the first line,

¹⁰ Khuwaja Abdul Hameed Yazdani (ed.), *āsān Kullīāt-i-Iqbāl (Urdu) (with Farghang)* (Delhi: Kitabi Duniya, 2006), p. 427.

¹¹ See Sunil Sharma, 'The City of Beauties in Indo-Persian Poetic Landscape', in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24 (2004): 73–81.

is composed by none other than the towering figure of Urdu elegy writing, Mirza Salamat Ali Dabir (1803–75):

qaid khāne men talātum hai keh hind ātī hai
dukhtar-e fātimah ghairat se muī jātī hai
ruh qālib men voh zindān me ghabrāti hai
be havāsi se har ek bār yeh chillāti hai
āsmān dūr zamīn sakht kidhar jāun main
bibiyō mil ke du'a māngo ke mar jāun main¹²

Tumult rises in the prison, for Hind approaches
The daughter of Fatima, struck by *ghairat*, draws close to death
Her soul fluttering in its cage, she agonizes in prison
Losing consciousness, she cries out time and again
The sky is far, the earth is hard, where shall I go
Respected women, pray with me, I shall die on this spot

The key word in this elegy, the word that conveys Zainab's state, is *ghairat*, meaning honour, modesty, or shame, or even all three of these words simultaneously. *Ghairat* in the elegy also appears with its Urdu synonyms: *khajālat* (shame), *sharm* (shame), and *hayā* (shame, modesty).

Why is the granddaughter of Islam's prophet experiencing *ghairat*? To answer this question, we must account for the context in which the *marsiya* is set: the Prophet Muhammad's family, including his granddaughter Zainab, have been incarcerated in Yazid's prison after most of their relatives have been killed in the battle of Karbala. This is the battle fought on the banks of the Euphrates when the last surviving grandson of Muhammad refused to yield to the pressures of the political authorities of his time – the descendants of Abu Sufyan, especially Yazid. Zainab, the leader of the survivors, has then faced humiliation in the markets of Iraq and Syria. She and her companions have

¹² Hial Naqvi (ed.), *Daftar-e Dabir* (Karachi: Muhammadi Education and Publications Karachi, 1995), p. 345.

been whipped and shackled because of their relationship with the slain Husain. Damascus, the city in which this family has been imprisoned, is Yazid's capital and has become the station of ultimate humiliation for the survivors of the battle. It is important to remember that unlike the twentieth-century invocations of Husain as a leader of and from the marginalized, the world of the nineteenth-century *marsiya* did not consider him a revolutionary 'from below'. The battle of Karbala in these traditions was one between a despot (Yazid) and Husain, the rightful king who exercised true sovereignty over this world and all others. In this devotional lore, Yazid, the tyrant, who has seized power immorally, is married to Hind, a woman who once served Husain's family.

Framing the Story of Hind

Historically, Hind figures in the detailed narrations of the events surrounding the battle of Karbala, regardless of the sectarian or geographical orientation of the narrator. The history of *al-Tabari* mentions Hind bt. 'Abdallah b. 'Amīr b. Kurayz as Yazid's wife.¹³ Abul Kalam Azad, writing almost a millennium later in India, mentions the sorrow of Yazid's wife Hind when she learns about the slaying of Husain.¹⁴ Ali Naqi Naqvi, the leading Shi'i scholar of twentieth-century South Asia, builds upon al-Tabari's presentation of Hind and attributes to her a sense of resentment toward her husband.¹⁵ The standing of Hind in these accounts is reminiscent of Asiya (Pharaoh's wife who nurtured Moses) in its glorification of virtuous women who do not concede to immoral men, even if they are wedded to them. The Urdu *marsiya* writers, spurred by the need to

¹³ *The History of al-Tabari*, trans. I. K. A. Howard (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 175.

¹⁴ Abulkalam Azad, *Shahīd-e 'Azam* (Delhi: Naz Publishing House, n.d.), p. 68.

¹⁵ Ali Naqi Naqvi, *Shahīd-e insāniyat* (Lahore: Imamiya Mission Pakistan, 1991), p. 463.

expand the narratives of Karbala so as to keep their audiences captivated for the two-month, eight-day mourning assemblies with which the Islamic year begins, expanded on the story of Hind with ever new colours. Mir Anis and Mirza Dabir of Lucknow transformed Urdu's poetic landscape in epic proportions. Obviously mindful that their listeners held the Imam Husain and his companions in the highest regard as the most esteemed of God's creation, they instilled in these characters a palpable humanity toward which the devotees could aspire. These poets created a literary environment that thrived on competition – competition to see who had the most authoritative command of Urdu idioms and competition to determine who could carve out the most succinctly memorable narrative from the received histories.

While at one level Anis and Dabir were rivals in the art of *marsiya* writing, at another level they generated symbiotic Karbala-related accounts. For instance, in one of Anis's *marsiyas*, Hind reminds Yazid that he would have to shoulder the blame for the tyranny he has unleashed on the orphans (at this point not even knowing who these orphans are) and injustice toward children who lose their fathers simply cannot be allotted to God or fate: *dukh de kisī ko yeh nahīñ 'ādat karīm kī, qurāñ meñ haqq ne kī hai sifārish yatāīm kī*.¹⁶ (To inflict sorrow on anyone is not the habit of the Merciful, in the Qur'an, God takes the orphan's side.¹⁷) In Anis's *marsiyas*, Hind reminds Yazid that the Prophet of Islam, along with his son-in-law Ali, and his grandsons (Hasan and

¹⁶ Quoted in Saleha Abid Hussain, *Khavātīn-e Karbalā kalām-e anīs ke ā'īne meñ* (New Delhi: Maktabah-e Jamiyah Limited, 1973), p. 218.

¹⁷ In more than a dozen verses, the Qur'an directs its followers to be kind and just to the orphans. See Chapter 2, Verse 83, for example.

Husain) implemented God's justice and mercy.¹⁸ In their spirit, Hind calls out for the betterment of prison life.¹⁹

One aspect of the *marsiya* that warrants a brief unfolding is the one that dwells on the ethics of treating prisoners. The memories of the imprisonment of several Shi'i Imams under the rule of the Umayyad and Abbasid rulers, as well as the deposition of the last rulers of Delhi and Awadh by the British in the 1850s, turn this genre into a platform for the advocacy of procedural due process, wherein the dignity of prisoners and the presumption of their innocence surface.²⁰ Interestingly, the rich genre of *habsīyāt* (prison poems) in Persian and Urdu, while delivering poignant accounts of the prison life that poets from Mas'ud Sa'd Salman²¹ to Mirza Ghalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz experienced, does not touch upon issues of due process and the ethical treatment of prisoners the way *marsiyas* from nineteenth-century Lucknow do.

Hind's Approach

Unaware of the devastation her husband's forces brought upon Muhammad's family, Hind pays a visit to the prison, partly because of the wails that spring from it – the sounds she hears are familiar but she does not dare to speculate that they could possibly be those of Muhammad's household. It is this visit that becomes a source of agony for the prisoners, especially for Zainab. Hind might be the only well-wisher of the prisoners in Damascus, but Zainab does not want to see her. We can draw at least six inferences from the *marsiya* to make sense of Zainab's *ghairat*.

¹⁸ See Hussain, *Khavātīn-e Karbalā*, pp. 219–220.

¹⁹ Hussain, *Khavātīn-e Karbalā*, p. 223.

²⁰ I have made similar points in Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 27–28.

²¹ See Sunil Sharma, *Persian Poetry at the Indian Frontier: Mas'ud Sa'd Salmān of Lahore* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000).

1. For the honourable, imprisonment is a conviction in itself; hence Zainab is concerned that the very first encounter between herself and Hind in prison renders Zainab the convict, not a defendant.
2. The benefactor-beneficiary power relations of the past would be reversed with Hind's recognition of her former masters in her husband's prison: *saltanat par voh hai nāzān main asīr o majbūr—she's proud of the empire; I am a prisoner, a captive.*²²
3. If Hind asked the family members about the reasons for their imprisonment, they would have to relive their tragedies in a language that is comprehensible to Hind. Since language simply cannot capture their tribulations, Zainab's statements might not be convincing for Hind and because there is uncertainty as to what the outcome of another trauma might be, Zainab wants only to avoid it.
4. If the words fail to press upon Hind the magnitude of the prisoner's suffering, the prisoners might be compelled to show the bruises and whip marks on their bodies; this evidence would bring only further humiliation.
5. Even if Hind accepts the testimonies of the prisoners, and succeeds in denying responsibility for the actions of her husband, how would this render justice to those who have already perished? It is a question of restorative justice for those who are killed: the martyrs would be shamed if Zainab made peace with the tyrant's wife while their remains scorched.

²² Hilal Naqvi (ed.), *Daftar-e Dabīr* (Karachi: Muhammadi Educational Publishers, 1995), p. 345.

6. The tread of Hind contributes to the distressing experience of survival, of being spared in Karbala: *hind ā pahunchī mujhe maut nah āi logo*²³ (Hind has arrived; death, however, has not approached me.) Along these lines, the memories of those who have perished induce in Zainab the *ghairat* of bearing witness to their suffering.
7. Ultimately, the *ghairat* that Zainab feels might also be for Hind: would not Hind be put to shame when her benefactors share with her their grief? How is it possible for Hind to be utterly oblivious to what was going on around her? How could Yazid's wife not know what her husband was capable of doing? And when she discovers what her husband has done to her loved ones, she might never want to face those loved ones again, because of her shame. Zainab hence risks the loss of affection that has existed between her and Hind.

So Hind's arrival – far from being a compensatory gesture to the Prophet's family, might actually add to their suffering. Zainab has suffered many losses and now she fears that Hind's visit might very well bring about the end of their bond.

When referring to the *marsiya* tradition, we must recall that these texts have their own version of Islamic and world history. However distorted this narrative may be vis-à-vis the narratives of history that exist in other genres, the *marsiya* writers, readers, and listeners form a part of an interpretive community nurtured on continually renewing emplotments of history. This creativity in history writing was encouraged in the Lucknow of the nineteenth century to such a degree that in a single commemorative gathering multiple versions of a single event may have been presented in order to generate the

²³ Hilal Naqvi (ed.), *Daftar-e Dabīr* (Karachi: Muhammadi Educational Publishers, 1995), p. 345.

exclamations of its audience. As I show in other places, the aesthetic principles that guided the creativity of this genre were the same to which the writers of the most privileged genre of Perso-Urdu, the ghazal, subscribed: ‘Hamārī but shikanī ke judā fasāne hain, hadīs-e ghaznavi o zikr-e somnāth nahīn.’²⁴ In translation, ‘The tales of our idol-breaking are different; they are not the accounts of [Mahmud] Ghaznavi and the retellings of Somnath,’²⁵ says Firaq Gorakhpuri, the only Urdu poet who received Gyanpit, one of India’s highest literary honor (in 1969), twenty years before Qurratulain Hyder (1989).

The palpable resonance of *ghairat* that appears in the first stanza of Dabir’s elegy and becomes a central component of Hyder’s work can be felt in the world of the ghazal. Below I offer an example from the ghazal of Mir Taqi Mir, Urdu’s very best, and two possible ‘translations’ among several:

ghairat se nām us kā, āyā nahīn zabāñ par,
āge khuda ke jab ham maḥv-e du’ā hūe haiñ²⁶

Out of modesty, his name would not come to my tongue;
even when I was absorbed in prayers before god.

Or,

Ashamed, I would not bring his name to my tongue

²⁴ Sauban Sayeed, *Farhang-e talmihāt* (New Delhi: Sauban Sayeed, 2011), p. 268.

²⁵ In South Asian history, Mahmud of Ghazni (d. 1031) is popularly associated with his multiple raids on the temples of the West Indian city of Somnath. Inhering in this historical framework are myths that depict Muslims who live in India as the dogmatic descendants of Mahmud. Interestingly, the iconoclasm that we encounter in the ghazal world inhabited by the likes of Firaq concerns the destruction of all idols other than the one Beloved. Hence the poet-lover in this couplet proudly accepts iconoclasm as his trait but distances himself from the iconoclasm of Mahmud’s temple destruction. Mahmud for a large number of ghazal poets is particularly relevant as a source of emulation for being a great lover at the mercy of his slave Ayaz.

²⁶ Mir Taqi Mir, *Kulliyat-e Mir*, ed. Zille Abbas Abbasi (New Delhi: Qaumi Council Baraae Furugh-e Urdu Zaban, 2003), vol. 1, p. 844, ghazal no. 1848.

[even?] when drowning in prayers before god.

If the speaker/lover were asked to explain his concern when taking the beloved's name, he might reply: I did not wish to take his name the way a wife does not take her husband's name out of respect/pride in many South Asian households, or because I did not wish the world to find out who he was – mostly out of concern that my beloved would be offended if he knew I had dared to fall for him and as a result disgrace him. Or he may even say, I did not wish to take his name because I was in god's presence and my relations with him (my worldly beloved) were illicit and shameful, or because I felt so insecure that I did not want anyone else, including god, to hear his name and fall in love with him. And he may say, of all people, *his* name did not come to my tongue? (Here, even though everyone knows who the beloved is, the lover still believes – foolishly – that any discretion, either in front of god or in the presence of others, matters.) And he may claim that he has inflicted so much damage, how could I pray for him in god's presence. Finally, he may argue that his wishes should be granted, because he observed the decorum of modesty/pride, not only when interacting with the world but also in his prayers to god.

The '*ālam āshob*

Dabir draws from all these different colours of *ghairat*. And Qurratulain Hyder positions her '*ālam āshob* as an engagement with similar concerns, without receding from the aesthetics of the *marsiya* or from those of the ghazal. The important point I wish to make here is that the narrator in this work eschews the scaffolding of a single persona, refuses to speak from one exclusivist vantage point. The varying personas of the narrator pay homage to a range of experiences through a cross-regional, cross-temporal, cross-

genre, and a cross-linguistic palimpsest. Not all the layers are evident, nor are all the references spelt out; signaling our limited access to the broader struggles unless we route them through our most intimate ones; granting us perspective; and instilling in us humility.

The *‘ālam āshob* opens:

They were hanging in the iron lockers. Upside down. Like the dusty **OBITS** files in the open iron lockers deep inside the damp dim storage rooms of newspaper offices.²⁷

The subject of the first sentence is obscure – we do not know who ‘they’ are. In this *‘ālam āshob*, readers encounter an array of hangings—of files, heads, paintings, and ideas. These hangings are reported with impunity, in ‘**cold print**’. ‘These reports are stacked up on the cold, grey floor of the lockers, in the manner of flowers in the desert, or fairies—or, strings of corpses.’²⁸

The phrase ‘cold print’ serves as an introduction for the structure and style of the *‘ālam āshob*, calling attention to Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, the celebrated 1965 collage-novel that partially captures the intertwined orbits of murder, victimhood, survival, and punishment in the American state of Kansas. Claims of invention, truth, and fiction hang in the balance of Capote’s work as they do in Hyder’s: Capote had also claimed to invent a new genre, the nonfictional novel—a blend of journalistic observations, mundane testimonials, and narrative loaded with interpretive liberties.

²⁷ Qurratulain Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand* (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2000), p. 308. The English words that appear in the *‘ālam āshob* in the Roman script are in all caps. In order to highlight them, I have typed them in bold. There are also English words that appear in the Urdu script, I have not written them in all caps but I have highlighted them by typing them in bold. The form of a few English words had to be adjusted so as to fit into the grammatical flow of my essay; these words appear in bold but not in all caps.

²⁸ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 308.

The narrative of the *'ālam āshob* advances with the arrival of the fifteenth Islamic century: on 21 November, 1979. It was early in the morning in San Francisco. Mahnaz had just returned from a **jog** with her peers.²⁹ The reader encounters Mahnaz's jogging body, profiled in the spiritual-material contrasts, and we learn that she was now covering her head, she had forsaken **disco** music for ritual prayers, and while **breakfasting**, she listened to the tapes she had bought in Paris: 'To you, the honor and rank of Alexander; to me, the rites and road of the ascetic.'³⁰ The genealogy of this line goes back to our author's namesake, Qurratulain Tahirah (1817–52), the charming hero-martyr of the Babi tradition, also lauded as Iran's most prominent nineteenth-century feminist. Those who know the story of Persian literature know well that the context of this line was the court of Tahirah's prosecutors; with these words she rebuked them for resting on their worldly power while she opposed this power from a position of humility, regardless of the consequences. A part of her legacy is eloquently captured by Hamid Dabashi:

Qorrat al-Ayn was an iconoclast poet, a messianic theologian, and a revolutionary activist of unrivalled courage and imagination, with a deep sense of millenarian mission about her public demeanor—and she happened to be a woman. Her vision was the liberation of humans in general and humanity at large, of the human psyche, from what she believed to have been archaic mandates. That she did so by practice not by preaching brought the differential figure of the feminine into the predominant masculinity of Islamic, particularly Shi'i and Iranian, political culture.³¹

Qurratulain Tahirah is a recurring motif in the Urdu literary tradition; Iqbal, in his heavenly journey *Jāvīdnāmah*, places her in Jupiter, the heaven that is the abode of the

²⁹ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 308.

³⁰ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 308.

³¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 194–195.

Sufi hero Mansur al-Hallaj and the renowned Perso-Urdu poet Ghalib. In Tahirah the rhapsodic and the meditative are married; complacency is shunned.³²

Mahnaz hears the line from Tahirah's ghazal and changes the tape with a defiant bawl: '*takht se takhtah nigāh-e mard-e momin*' (from the throne to the bier, the sight/glance of the believer [extends]). The first part of this phrase captures the Urdu proverbial admonition that states: even if you are raised to the throne, be forewarned that you will eventually come down to a bier. The second part is a phrase extracted from Iqbal's verse (discussed below).

Hyder's text alternates from poetic phrases to a television segment: a youthful minister answers Barbara Walters questions at the other end of the continental United States, in New York. He smiles. We read next verse: 'fates are transformed.'³³ The phrase is part of Iqbal's couplet: '*koi andāzah kar saktā hai us ke zor-e bāzū kā, nigāh-e mard-e momin se badal jātī hain taqdīren*'³⁴ (Can anyone gauge the strength of his arms? [Just] with a glance/sight of the believing man, fates are transformed.) The narrator here dismembers a couplet belonging to Iqbal's poem 'Tulu'-e islām' (The rise/rising of Islam).

The text alternates yet again: 'Right after the closing of the trial, a soldier moved forward. After blindfolding him – as they emerged from the beloved's lane, then –.'³⁵ For the Urdu aficionado, the last phrase conjures up a couplet from the ghazal that Pakistan's

³² See Sabir Afaqi (ed.), *Kḥātūn-e 'ajam* (Lahore: Maqbul Academy, 1995), p. 154. This book provides an excellent account of Tahirah's legacy in Urdu. An essay especially relevant in this collection is Zahida Hina's, "Tāhirah," pp. 195–196.

³³ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 309.

³⁴ Khuwaja Abdul Hameed Yazdani (ed.), *Aasan Kulliat-i-Iqbal (Urdu) (with Farghang)*, (Delhi: Kitabi Duniya, 2006), p. 384.

³⁵ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 309.

most celebrated post-Iqbal poet, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, wrote during his incarceration in 1954: ‘*maqām faiz koi rāh men jachā hī nahīn, jo kū-e yār se nikle to sū-e dār chale*’³⁶ (Faiz, I did not find any station/encounter on the path appealing; when I departed from the beloved’s lane, I marched toward the gallows.) The lover in this world has scarce regard for any space wherein the beloved is absent. He thus marches to the gallows in the hope that he would be executed and finally be united with his beloved.

The reader is expected to become accustomed to the text’s collage of cut-outs: each component of this collage deconstructs its own original context as well as the text at hand, in which it makes its home. The narrative progresses, discarding associations that have existed between these texts and their respective literary traditions, their previous functions. The narrator’s free, indirect writing style (associated in the West with Gustave Flaubert and other modernists) is a way of writing whereby the voices and points-of-view of the narrator and those of her character fuse and part in unpredictable ways. The reader is invited to fill in the blanks at her own discretion, governed by the reader’s access to cultural/literary capital.

We then read more about Barbara Walters’s imperious interview with a young minister and prisoner of war: ‘*Barbara Walters khanda zan khanda zan*’³⁷ (striking a smile, striking a smile). We are reminded that *khanda zan khanda zan* has the same number of syllables as *mard o zan mard o zan* (men and women, men and women). Men and women surface on Walters smile as she reports ghastly news stories through handsome interlocutors. The narrator offers us plenty of phrases, but incomplete

³⁶ Faiz Ahmad Faiz, *Nuskḥahhā-e vafā* (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 1999), p. 265. See Lenn Goodman, *Islamic Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), for a translation of *maqāmāt* as “encounters.”

³⁷ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 309.

sentences. The partially completed, at times transformed, verses of poetry bear witness that access to this world in turmoil is consciously selective. Verses are not identified with their poets although most are easily recognizable to the audience well-versed in Urdu literature. The narrator frames the ruses of the journalistic media through dismembered verses, far removed from the context that is commonly identified with them: for example, Muhammad Iqbal in his 1912 poem *Shikwa* (Complaint), recounts to God the past deeds of Muslims and questions the fate that has been allotted to this community in return. One of the Muslim deeds that Iqbal highlights pertains to the outpouring of affection for God that crosses class lines:

Aīk hi ṣaf meṅ khare rah gaye Mahmūd o Ayāz
Nah koi bandah rahā aur nah koi bandah navāz³⁸

In a single row stood Mahmud and Ayaz
Neither was there a slave, nor a master

Iqbal is referring to the story of Mahmud of Ghazni and the high esteem in which he held his beloved slave Ayaz. In the eyes of Iqbal, the way in which the Muslim ritual prayers compelled the dissolution of social ranks is a testimony of Islam’s spirit of justice. But here, the narrator extracts the first part of this couplet (In a single row stood) and joins it to the “order”:

In a straight line. In a straight line. Do not break the **queue**. Please pick up the black blindfold from this table and blindfold yourself. This is the fated sorrow of these eyes. In a single line. On one side, those who spread mischief on earth, the hypocrites, the apostates, the infidels, all on one side. Women and girls on the other side.³⁹

Then we encounter a line and a half from the Dabir *marsiya*:

“āh karne kā sabab pūchā to sharmāne lage, tāziyānon ke nishān...”

³⁸ Yazdani (ed.), *āsān Kulliyāt-I Iqbāl*, p. 234.

³⁹ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 309.

When they were asked about the reasons behind their sighing, they began to feel ashamed; the bruises of flogging... Please, everybody, stand in the row. Hurry. No disorder. No slacking off. ‘**Discipline.**’ When the reasoning [for these actions] was questioned, they began to display the bruises of flogging on their backs.

Two more lines from Dabir’s *marsiya* follow:

She asked, what was the fault that brought upon this punishment? They cried and said, none whatsoever. Without any fault.⁴⁰

The readers remain in Dabir’s elegy:

I have not brought anything with me in the way of a shroud, I have arrived here after leaving my father graveless and shroudless.

Some readers will recognise that these are the words of Husain’s surviving son, Ali Zain

al-Abedin, in response to Hind’s queries about his plight. In response to this verse, we

hear a consoling sentence—a sentence whose speaker continues to remain ambiguous:

‘Don’t worry. Official shrouds are provided. Please come. This is the dust of Bū Turābis.

On it, the graves you have dug for yourself await you—with their mouths wide open.’⁴¹

Bu Turab, “Father of Dust,” is a title of Ali ibn Abi Talib, Husain’s father. Bu Turabi is a

devotee of Ali; it also means one who belongs to the Shi’a community. At least one

commentator who has remarked on this *‘ālam āshob* identifies this part of it as an

arresting lament of the persecution that the Shi’i Muslim minority has faced in Pakistan, a

nation that was conceived to unite India’s afflicted Muslims, a nation that claims Iqbal as

its arch visionary.⁴²

The readers witness polarized accusations hurled at each other, although we do not know who is representing whom. Trials are broadcast, graves are dug, sighs of despair are heaved. Pictures are disturbing in the beginning but those who had come to

⁴⁰ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 310.

⁴¹ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 310.

³⁷ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 310.

⁴² Naim Abbas Chauhdri, *Iqbāliyāt aur qurratula’in ḥaidar* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2001), p. 176.

render justice, ‘**et tu.**’ When Mahnaz expresses her outrage, she is consigned to the ‘opposition’; accused of being the ‘**agent**’ of a guileful power. The text in the next sentences states, unequivocally, ‘only two groups exist in the world – those in agreement, those in opposition. Those in the opposition deserve to be killed.’

Perhaps the narrative relates to the desensitization process: One grows accustomed to such discourses—to pictures and news stories of riots, mass murder, collective death penalties, bombings, children maimed by riots and wars, children deprived of their essential organs: Whose child is this? We are reminded of the lullaby Faiz wrote for a Palestinian child: *mat rob bachche*.⁴³ Do not cry O child, do not cry. This lullaby has lost the impact it once had for the earnest sentiments that govern it have long since atrophied. Humans are frozen in habits, perhaps like those obituaries in steel lockers.

The ‘*ālam āshob*’s elliptical account continues with photographs as subjects: photographs of execution, photographs that are real and fake.⁴⁴ Confusion seems to persist between reality and its simulacra, its representation in uncertain terms, representation that is constantly variable. How does one locate the original? A famous scientist shows off photographs of his grandchildren; they are also hanging in the steel lockers.⁴⁵ Readers are not certain if the “they” refers to the photographs or to the grandchildren themselves.

The alignment of a past photographer’s muse with the wreckage of time effectively places the spectator in the zone of a measured nostalgia. One is not quite sure

⁴³ Faiz, *Nuskḥaḥḥā-e vafā*, p. 658.

⁴⁵ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 311.

if the appeal of the photograph inheres in the image that is the initial point of its appeal or its fadedness, the photograph's contingent spirit.⁴⁶ The photograph's partiality to a particular frozen poise holds back for the viewers the holistic experience of the world in which they are set. Photographs are unable to answer our questions. And yet, they catch the eye as plaintiffs weakened (faded) by the burden of time. How can the literate Urdu reader not retrieve the opening line of Ghalib's precious ghazal at this point: naqsh faryādi hai kis kī shokhī-e taḥrīr kā, kāghazī hai pairahan har paikar-e tasvīr kā⁴⁷ (Of whose mischievousness of writing does the portrait stand (hang) as plaintiff? Every form of the picture is robed in paper). We do not know here who has captured or drawn this picture and with what intentions it has been summoned into existence. The picture might be a plaintiff for Ghalib in that it launches complains against s/he who has separated it from its source, much like the reed flute in the opening verses of Jalaluddin Rumi's great literary work, the *Masnavi*.

As we ponder the fate of the scientist's photographs, we are confronted by a “**madam**.” This is a woman whose villa is laden with flowers and whose bookshelves are stacked with French books on education. These shelves also hold old report cards from her school and college days. This madam performs her *namāz* (Muslim ritual prayer) and enters the **salon**. For the first time we hear the first-person pronoun ‘main’: the narrative for the next sentence is in first person:

I have spent my entire life in the struggle of promoting women's education. Our pioneer women confronted orthodoxy. They made great sacrifices so our girls

⁴⁶ I have found the most insightful discussion on photography in the works of Roland Barthes. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida : Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

⁴⁷ Imtiyaz Ali Arshi (ed.), *Dīvān-e Ghālib*. (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqi-e Urdu, 1992), p. 159.

could read and write. Look at their faded photographs....sixty or seventy years ago, these women...⁴⁸
In the original text, the subject has no verb. It is as if the faded photographs along with Renoir's painting is a witness to the madam's monologue. This madam is soon blindfolded and placed in the firing range.

The narrative continues a short distance away from the madam's villa, where there is a coffee house, a venue for playwrights; in one of its corners, the television broadcasts a modern '**passion play**.'⁴⁹ A famous playwright remarks: 'we have two amazing playwrights, Anis and Dabir. If their *marsiyas* were to be staged...' Here readers are left, nothing follows, there is no "then" after the if. The playwright punctuates his narrative with Urdu elegies dealing with Karbala's survivors, Zainab and Husain's young daughter who has been widowed. Perhaps the versified sentiments of the survivors are the narrator's way to bring readers into proximity to the deceased:

When people will ask her, what has happened to her arms? Where did these bruises come from – to how many people will she be able to show these bruises? She'll be terrified: *ghabraayegi Zainab*. But it's difficult to translate this into your language.
Some words resist migration from one language to another: communicate, brutalize, jog, passion play. These we find the narrator present in English.

In the voice of the playwright, the narrator offers a rejoinder: '[translation] is possible, of course it's possible, there is not much difference in any two languages. I'll present it on the stage.'⁵⁰ An actor cuts short the playwright's statement by providing an appropriate setting for this play: 'The **passion play** we saw in Germany last year—in that same **medieval** setting.' The conversation between the playwrights is then about the

⁴⁸ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 311.

⁴⁹ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 311.

⁵⁰ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 312.

representation of death: ‘However human pain, the pain of last moments, the pain of a person who is facing death, it’s difficult to present this pain. Only that person knows the pain. He’s unable to **communicate** it because he dies before he **communicates**.’⁵¹ The discussion around representation and passion plays is passionate. Verses from Anis and Dabir call for a pause to ponder the possibility of representation – the representation, for instance, of a young newly-married man departing for the battlefield and the wife’s request to settle her in a safe haven before he leaves:

‘you are parting from me, I am overwhelmed by the world of loneliness.’⁵²
Viewers and Listeners! For four years one such **passion play** has continued—the one in which countless old, young, men, women, children, those of Jesus and those of Husain participate. But what the hell is this **passion**? The madness of love? Yes Sir. It is such that Jesus’s agonies and torture on the cross are referred to as **passion**. ‘**Oh I see.**’ Why do you use so many Western figures of speech?⁵³

The narrator gives her readers no evident clues in the text that annotate the number four. It is not clear who these viewers and listeners are – if they are in a play that is directed by the playwrights we encountered in the coffee house or if they are apart from that play. The text is unremitting in keeping vague the full dimensions of the personas sanctioned by the narrator.

In the next segment of the *‘ālam āshob*, a prominent playwright stands at the altar, in the midst of his relatives, guests, religious authorities, and with his bride dressed in white. A knock is heard at the door. The following statement presumably comes from the bride: *‘rahne ka thikāna kahin batlā ke sidhāro’* (show me a place where I can stay, before you depart). In the *marsiya* tradition, this is the line that Husain’s daughter uttered before her husband of one night set out to fight. But for the narrator, the groom is

⁵¹ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 312.

⁵² Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 312.

⁵³ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 312.

blindfolded and then placed in the line of fire. ‘He deserved death.’⁵⁴ On the other side of the wall, a **passion play** continues: white lies, absolute falsehood, false propaganda of the West, accusation, these are all deeds of the fraternity of Satan.’⁵⁵

Mahnaz, whom we encountered in the first paragraph as the woman jogging in San Francisco while listening to devotional tapes she had bought in Europe, reappears. She returned from San Francisco with a great deal of passion—for the sake of her community’s reconstruction. The narrator portrays her among the ranks of the executed. Homecomings are not predictable. Her hung body can be seen as a mode of jogging: head bowed, eyes popping out; she was hanging with a pregnant woman. The narrator says, a few years ago, many of these girls had spectacularly displayed their skills on the **roman rings**. Now all of them hang in one line. We learn that the night these women were hung, the person **in charge** of the execution house had terrifying nightmares: It was as though the **Olympics** of corpses was under way; the corpses turned the nooses of the execution ropes into **roman rings**. To this man **in charge**, those who appeared in his nightmare were larger than life; they did not even blink. The narrator presents the apparatus of killing as that of a fitness regime or competitive sports on an international stage.

Next in the *‘ālam āshob*, dusk arrives. It is a **depressing** time inside the house as well as outside. Why is this the case? A godly woman reminds her listeners that it does not matter whether the person is departing the world early in the morning or at noon; during his last moments he feels that the day and night are meeting. No wonder all of us are struck by a spell of ‘depression’ just when the day meets its night. An unknown fear

⁵⁴ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 313.

⁵⁵ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 313.

settles upon the human being because his soul recognizes the twilight, the moment when the light of his life will eventually drown in the darkness of death.⁵⁶ Those who are hanging have crossed this twilight—they either hang or lie flat on their faces, like a mound of cypresses.

Suddenly, the readers are transported to the banks of the Saraswati river. This is the sacred river that flows with the Ganges and the Yamuna, but away from the exoteric gaze. The river springs from the wisdom of the goddess Saraswati, the patron-saint of knowledge and the arts. She keeps destruction at bay, underground, as long as the wise pursuit of knowledge continues. In this *'ālam āshob*, Saraswati has come out into the open and released the forces of destruction; on some of its banks thrones stand, on others gallows are raised.

The narrator takes her readers through a transition from a now-visible Saraswati to seventh-century Arabia: the second caliph of Islam, 'Umar Fārūq, upon witnessing the booty of gold and jewels from the Muslim conquest, said 'in these copious troves, I see the destruction of my community.'⁵⁷ And the next vignette captures hanging and its attendant capital punishments:

They are hanging comfortably, liberated from the sorrows of their time. This is absolutely not poetry; it's a precisely **literal** incident: the place where they are, the scaffold and the rope—To each country, its own tradition: in some places ropes, in other places knives, scalpels, swords; in the past the convention of 'gas' persisted.⁵⁸

Then there appears a variation on a verse of Urdu's renowned nineteenth-century poet, Mirza Ghalib. This is the couplet in which the poet-lover prides himself in holding a stature higher than that of the legendary lovers of the Persianate world, Qais and

⁵⁶ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 314.

⁵⁷ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 315.

⁵⁸ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 315.

Farhad.⁵⁹ So the disavowal of poetry in this instance bears a wider poetic reference—a reference from Urdu’s most widely cited ghazal poet.

The setting of the *‘alam āshob* changes from steel lockers, to jogging tracks, to television stations, and then to the black forest of Europe. The imminent story of this forest is one in a thousand such stories.⁶⁰ In the nineteenth century, the Brothers Grimm told many stories of survival in this land – Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty. The nineteenth century also treasured “Silent Night,” a Christmas carol first written in German. “Silent night, holy night! Shepherds quake at the sight. Glories stream from heaven afar. Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia! Christ, the Savior is born. Christ, the Saviour is born.”

It is during that same silent night that professors, lawyers, philosophers, linguists, scientists, musicians, and other artists are made to march in an orderly manner with their children, grandchildren, parents, and the entire clan. When these men and women left their cities, they were told that they were being taken to secure **camp**s for a few days, after which they would be returned to their homes. They are asked to bathe before they are allowed to retire to their rooms. They are led to believe that **coffee** and dinner would be forthcoming. The elderly professors in this group promptly convene a meeting and select three senior-most representatives to speak on their behalf. These three men, with **old world courtesy** present themselves to the person **in charge** of the **camp** and politely request a cup of coffee:

Please provide all of us with a cup of hot coffee first and then we will bathe. It’s very cold. A seasoned linguist, who had caught a cold, sneezed loudly and

⁵⁹ Mirza Ghalib, *Divan-e Ghalib*, ghazal number 204, couplet 2: qad o gesū men qais o kohkan ki āzmāish hai, jahān ham hain vahān dār o rasan ki āzmāish hai.

⁶⁰ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 315.

immediately asked to be excused. The smiling well-disposed **commandant** bowed down and responded with the same deference. No sir, first the bathing then the coffee.⁶¹

The characters in this vignette, all of them, are then taken into two large rooms: men into one, women into the other. They undress in the rooms. The children remove their teeny-tiny shoes with utmost deportment and place them in one line. With the decorum that had been imparted to them, they also undress themselves. In the process of undressing and removing their shoes, they laugh and fight among themselves. One boy pulls the braid of his sister. An older girl scolds him. A few stout women, dressed in the white attire of **nurses**, soon make an entry, yell at them, and then lead them into a large **hall**. Men and women are led into this hall through the other doors. Then all the doors are closed. The **gas cylinders** are turned on.⁶² ‘Forty years later, the relatives of these innocent elderly intellectuals, young artists, and innocent children, those who had survived them in other places, they...’

The narrator does not complete the sentence. We do not know what has become of them. Perhaps *ghairat* has once again raised its head for victims and witnesses. From the black forest of Europe readers are transported to the enchanted cedar-laced hills from where Khalil Gibran wrote songs for his prose poetry classic *Almustafa* (The Prophet). Readers are treated to the blue ocean, the lush hilltops, the legendary forts dating back to the time of the crusades, and the glittering new buildings.

But the reader is yet again reminded of the fragmentary feel of life and the arts with an isolated phrase: ‘a she-camel rider from Kufah.’⁶³ Kufah, to the community familiar with the world of the Urdu *marsiya* or Islamic history, was the last capital of

⁶¹ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 317.

⁶² Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 317.

⁶³ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 317.

Imam Ali, the father of Husain and Zainab. The people of Kufah had invited Husain to lead a movement of resistance against Yazid. When Husain encountered Yazid's forces en route to Kufah, he received little support from its inhabitants. In countless *marsiyas* Kufah is the synecdoche of the world of betrayal—a city that had promise but failed to live up to it. Zainab's first experience of the Umayyad prison takes place in Kufah, then she is taken to the prison of Damascus, where she reunites with Hind.

Lest the spiked curiosity regarding the fate of the black forest survivors diminishes, the narrator adds, 'the remaining progeny of those who had bathed in gas, the remaining relatives, their grandsons and granddaughters, arrive as a fleet of airplanes.' The reader must then retrace these words to come to grips with the next sentence: 'the she-camel driver came at once.'

There is a suggestion that the victims of these squadrons and fleets will classify them by the names of the enemies of early Islam, those who fought Ali, those who fought his sons. The suggestion for such a classification implies impotency on the part of the victims: they only have the power to name, they cannot act or bomb. The splendid bombs are dropped with a chicanery that leads innocent children to mistake the unexploded ones for toys – they do not live to see another moment of life. We do not hear the real names of culprits. They are like the ghazal's beloved. This could be any person's story, any nation's narrative. We must remember that in Dabir's *marsiya*, Yazid is not once mentioned by name.

The next scene shifts from the bombing raids to a river shore: In 1980, on the banks of the Tigris, Qadsiyyah, the seventh-century battle that vanquished the Sassanid Persian empire, is commemorated in the form of a movie, sponsored by the government

of Iraq and patronized by its then president Saddam Hussein. The film follows the initiation of this war by Iraq and was a part of the propaganda apparatus in the service of Arab nationalism: just as the Arabs defeated the Persians in the seventh century, the Iraqis hoped to defeat the Iranians in the twentieth. ‘Drenched in the arrogance of nationalism,’⁶⁴ the film volleys through the myth of a Muslim monolith:

the coffins of the soldiers brought back from the war front are transforming into the garden-shrine of Husain. These corpses, shrouded in national flags, are made to circumambulate the Imam’s grave. The graveyards are brimming with graves. May the Muslims unite in guarding the shrine...little children, young children from the schools, are sent to the war front with guns. According to both sides, they deserve to be killed.⁶⁵

Anyone who watched the world news in the 1980s is familiar with the haunting images of the war dead in Iran and Iraq; their corpses arrived at the holy shrines, where mourners projected the deceased not just as the defenders of their nation but also of their religion, Islam. The narrator punctures this observation of nationalism by yet another line from Iqbal: ‘aik hon Muslim haram kī pāsbanī ke liye, nīl se ke sāhil se le kar tā bakhāk-e kāshghar’ (may the Muslims unite in guarding the shrine, from the banks of the Nile to the soil of Kaashgar). This couplet, from Iqbal’s poem ‘Dunyā-e Islam’ (The world of Islam), is Iqbal’s prayer for a united Muslim front, from Egypt to China, one that would protect the principle of monotheism, symbolized by the ‘shrine’ of Mecca, the Ka’ba. The war between two countries, both professing to be on the side of Islam, lampoons Iqbal’s prayer – far from uniting Egypt with China, Islam seems incapable of bringing together even two neighbours in amity.

⁶⁴ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 318.

⁶⁵ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 318.

Next, the narrator portrays the tenuous connections between Islam's literary claims of a "community" and its living traditions by bringing into the picture the most affluent Muslim university in the subcontinent, Qurtabah-e Hind, or the Cordoba of India. The modern Muslim imaginaire makes obeisance to the Andalusian city that was a pivot of Islamicate cosmopolitanism from the eighth through the thirteenth centuries. Iqbal dedicated one of his most well-crafted poems to the Great Mosque of Cordoba, hence it is not surprising for the narrator here to raise the worth of a distinguished educational institution in India by calling it the Cordoba of India.

At the mosque on the campus of this institution, the *'ālam āshob* presents us with a poster of an innocent young girl. She is covered modestly and stands with a machine gun in her hand. In the background, the setting sun appears is amazingly appealing; the landmarks of the campus appear like rubies of Badakhshan, deposited by the sun as its residue.⁶⁶ In an old arched monument, faded portraits hang; these are the elders who had dreamed of reforming and uniting the world of Islam. The stately campus mosque is hailed with the words Iqbal used when praying in the Mosque of Cordoba: 'your majesty and beauty stand witness to the (existence of) the man of god; he also is august and exquisite, you also are august and exquisite.'⁶⁷ The 'man of god' plays a central role of reform and revival in Iqbal's poetic world: he is a man of action, love, and intellect. Such were the men who founded enlightened institutions of learning like the one we observe. And in an inspirational vein, the tomb of such a man is in the embrace of the university mosque. He deserves the praise that Iqbal used for the designers and builders of the Cordoba Mosque: 'the actions of the man of god are rich with love; love is the core of life,

⁶⁶ This image also comes from Iqbal's poem in honor of the Great Cordoba Mosque.

⁶⁷ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 318.

death is not permitted to touch it; his times are wondrous; his tales are extraordinary; he gave the tidings of departure to the antiquated age.’⁶⁸ These words, like Faiz’s lullaby, like the various portraits, seem to fade in the presence of that young girl whose poster hangs on the gate of the mosque. A dialogue between unknown characters ensues:

All those faded photos—whose are they? Come on, they once lived but are long gone. It has been so long since they died. That little girl with a machine gun on the poster hanging on the gate of the mosque. A Palestinian girl? No. Read it carefully. The caption on the bottom is not in Arabic. A young bearded Indian man looks proudly at the poster and walks into the mosque. Muslims shall unite for the haram’s... They deserve death.⁶⁹

The narrator’s serene vignette of the university is continually stirred by intrusive realities: the poster of innocent militancy hangs more at ease with those who dwell outside the campus: the street vendors, the stripped streets, the emaciated old men, the young rickshaw pullers – if all of these, with their simple hopes, were swept under the rug, then undoubtedly, undoubtedly ‘every morning over here is the morning of Egypt, every evening is the evening of Shiraz.’ Once the narrator strings these words together, readers can identify the university, at least if they are familiar with Majaz Lakhnavi’s fervid alma mater for Aligarh Muslim University, the institution of higher education founded by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan at the end of the nineteenth century. Founded as the Muhammad Anglo Oriental College in 1875, the mission of Aligarh has been to uplift the Muslim community by providing a broad education that takes into account traditions tied to Islam as well as those that are much broader. “Majaz” Lakhnavi (1911–55), the ‘Keats of Urdu,’ attended Aligarh before life hurled him into alcoholism and depression. Majaz wrote that the mornings by the Nile and the evenings in the city of Shiraz, home of the renowned Persian poets Hafez and Sa’di, augur well for those in love. He weds these two phases of

⁶⁸ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 319.

⁶⁹ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 319.

time in his alma mater and the narrator here lends a sardonic tone to this union by reminding the readers of the unfortunate ones who cannot be accommodated in such romances. Apart from the off campus street vendors tethered to poverty, the university has its share of political refugees who simply do not know what life will offer next. ‘They deserve death.’

A few of the students at this university seem to be Palestinian: they have come to acquire an education after selling off their most essential possessions—like a warm coat. Many return to fight their oppressors as soon as they hear about the air raids that are assaulting those whom they have left behind. Some reach their destinations and others do not. Some stay back. The supporters of each side in this struggle plaster the gates and walls with the posters of their martyrs. They go around writing:

‘death to so and so,’ ‘death to so and so,’ ‘death to –
Today’s generation is bewitched by death. Who has turned them into lover of death and who has **brutalized** them? You have. And you have. And you have. All of you are criminals.⁷⁰

After listing some of the guises in which death approaches the young ones, the young ones who are bombed and those who bomb, the narrator uses the English verb ‘brutalize’ again to inquire about the perpetrator. The response once again appears in the second person. Upon a further query as to who precisely this ‘you’ is, the narrator shifts to a third-person account.

The narrator writes about Alhambra, the fortress city in Granada, Spain: the palaces in this fortress, built by Muslim rulers, now house a five-star hotel. In one of its chambers, under the embossed verse of the Qur’an, a liquor bar stands. This has not been an object of protest of Muslim governments or of any Islamic organizations; in fact, the

⁷⁰ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 320.

new *arabpatis* (billionaires, literally, those married to a hundred million) who recite Islam's creed go there in droves. The homophonous play on *arab* (a word in Urdu written with an alif and that means a hundred million) and '*arab* (a word in Urdu that is written with an '*ayn* and that means Arab) cannot be missed. This irony of linguistic expression is yet another testimony to Muslim hypocrisy.⁷¹

The narrator next infuses the text with more ordinary stories; in the process she diminishes the more common focus on history's extraordinary figures. We read of young Muslim men in Atawa, Maharashtra, who ordered women to stay away from cinema halls:

it is against the divine law. (For men, it is not against the divine law.) The god-fearing, upright young censors, when they saw a couple in a movie theatre, cut off the woman's nose and the man's tongue. They also blinded him. May Allah reward you.

The process of witnessing must be closely watched and controlled. Those eyeballs that are privy to the wrong kind of witnessing must be carved out of their sockets when necessary. But this is not a new process. Did ancient emperors not issue similar decrees and pursue analogous means of torture?

Multiple modes of violence circulate in the text—the most extraordinary of which is framed as ordinary, what Hannah Arendt would call 'banal,'⁷² as simple god-fearing people following straightforward orders that descend from the more powerful. Retrospectively, we can read violence into the experiences presented in this '*ālam āshob*, but in their present they are commonplace – commonplace at least for those who are not directly at their receiving end. The reader will notice that taxonomy, whether of genre or

⁷¹ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 321.

⁷² See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

of suffering is self-evidently complicated. The performative styles of the Atawa men are not so discrete from those who implement God's justice in the more intense glare of the global limelight. The narrator cross-references violence in one geography with that of another. The same play may be performed at different venues.

The vignettes are layered over each other as in a palimpsest: each one bears traces of those above it and those under it. A plurality of voices exists but the text scoffs at pluralism tied to cultural relativism:

To each country its own traditions: ropes in some places, knives and daggers in others. Swords in some parts. In the past, there was the law of gas.

So the poor who die (as though we will never die), their souls, or whatever becomes of them, form a circuit in the vicinity; or they remain wailing in the abyss – an abyss so vast. Ooh 'black hole.' Millions, a hundred million, solar systems. How far can the poor tiny soul wander? It must be dissolved on the way. If they are martyred then it's heaven; otherwise, the well of oblivion. I only know the truth. Shall I narrate to you an astounding incident? Remember that 'party worker' at one time, Kailash Rana? Kailash and Ashish Rana were both 'party workers.' Yes, those very same ones. Ashish has been long dead. Yes, he's long dead. That's the incident. He was a successful doctor—a heart specialist who had gone to Sweden. A sudden 'heart fail' there.⁷³

The narrator then takes the reader on a bizarre journey with Kailash, Ashish's surviving wife: she places his ashes in a small book-like box, near the pen-case and flower vase on Ashish's grand writing table. She then drowns herself in prayers and chants, though she was an atheist before Ashish's death. Someone informs her that a 'medium' lives in central India; her name is Minakshi Bai. When Kailash ends up at this medium's house, the medium turns out to be a disappointingly ordinary 'housewife.' Kailash has doubts about this medium's ability to channel her husband's spirit through

⁷³ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, pp. 321–322.

the planchette placed in the middle of Minakshi Bai's room. Kailash told herself at this point that even the prayers in which she engaged after her husband's death were done just for the solace of her heart. The medium makes the fantastical claim that the faded picture of soldiers hanging in her room was that of a World War I British platoon members who died in a French ditch: a European medium at the time had invented a camera that could take pictures of souls by bringing them together through special stratagems. When Kailash turned away from Minakshi Bai with a smirk, the medium did not attempt to convince her.

Kailash quickly changes her mind about Minakshi Bai's powers, however, when she begins to receive answers on the planchette, answers only Ashish would have known: the nickname Ashish had for Kailash, the whereabouts of property documents, and so on. Kailash questions Ashish in English and the responses also came in the kind of English that Ashish spoke. Some responses were informative, others mind-boggling: when Kailash asks Ashish what kept him busy 'over there,' he responded by saying he prayed. Ashish had been an atheist in this world. Kailash was surprised that he had turned to prayers and wondered if Ashish had taken on this practice out of confusion caused by the presence of various places of worship 'over there.'

When Kailash's son returned from America, he remonstrated her for indulging in superstitions and that was the end of Kailash's relationship with Minakshi Bai. Kailash was left with more than one question. Minakshi Bai did not accept any money, nor was she popular with visitors, why? What is this medium business really about? And what was Ashish's state of mind before he died in that Swedish hospital? The last moments of those who were executed, shot, and killed in wars – the last moments of all those people?

The Kailash vignette resonates with the Perso-Urdu narrative modes of the *qissah*, often placed by the literary critic under the rubric of “folk romance.” These are oral and written stories of varying lengths that frequently display “the free play of the uninhibited artistic imagination,” with an “eerie, sensuous elegance of the Enchantment.”⁷⁴

The text moves on to a reference to a 1971 warship sunk by a submarine, which causes a Marathi poet strolling along the Arabian seashore to say: ‘My throat was parched this morning as though my mouth were filled by sand –’ Though the reader is not furnished with any background other than the year and the body of water, those acquainted with South Asian history would be able to place the sinking of this warship in the context of the 1971 war fought between India and Pakistan. In December of that year, a Pakistani submarine sank an Indian warship (INS Khukri), killing almost 200 people.

The narrator’s attention retreats from this story to return to the question of the mental state of those who face imminent death:

some lose their senses out of sheer terror; some become hysterical and are calmed down by injections; some weep inconsolably. What about those who are made to kneel before their heads are hacked off? There was Anne Frank. Well, she’s dead and long gone.

The text advances to address the international edition of the **Guardian**, where an **Amnesty International** ad highlights the plight of a five-year old boy suffering in some fascist state of South America. It calls into question the agenda of those documenting such conditions: ‘**Amnesty International** is a committee of colonizers.’ It then wonders why people who object to such committees have not formed committees that are not

⁷⁴ See Frances Pritchett, *Marvelous Encounters: Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi* (Riverdale: The Riverdale Company, Inc., Publishers, 1985), p. 12 & p. 6.

tarnished by colonialism – after all, the narrator says, money is not in short supply for them.

Less serious vignettes follow: a film is being made with Dilip Kumar; a conference of architects is held in Los Angeles. Life, however, takes a serious turn soon: a woman who works in the traditional embroidery industry complains that her business is deteriorating because of the curfew that is routinely imposed on her city. In her neighbourhood, a wedding is celebrated with pomp. A popular film song from the early 1980s is played. The groom's side appears to come from Delhi: they are exporters but no one knows about all their products. Those items that they openly export include chandeliers and vessels (in the style of those that appear in the *Arabian Nights*) for the markets in the Middle East. The narrator claims that the witnesses to life that unfolds in such ways pull out their pistols at the slightest of offenses. The names of films that are released [in India] capture this state of affairs: 'Blood and Destruction, Plunder and Death, Blood Vengeance, Revenge, Fire of Vengeance.' The young boys who demonstrate their patriotism by day watch such films by night. 'Who has brutalized all of them? You have, you have, and you have. Please tell us: what sort of torture and death would you like for yourself? A lot of options exist these days. Few things remain secret.'⁷⁵

The commemoration of martyrdom and loss in parts of South Asia frequently bring together diverse communities. Muharram (the month of Imam Husain's martyrdom) commemorations are a popular component of the stories of shared spiritual traditions. The *ta'ziyah* (a paper-foil replica of a shrine of one of the Karbala martyrs) is a particularly visible icon in Muharram. Though recently Muharram has been closely

⁷⁵ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 329.

identified with the Shi'i community, the icons related to it are often constructed by non-Shi'as—this has been a tradition for hundreds of years.

The narrator mentions an occasion when he (the narrator is speaking in the masculine voice here) took a wrestler friend to see the world's tallest *ta'ziah* that is built in this part of the world. Sunni farmers in the region spend an entire year and the money they procure from their lands on this *ta'ziah*. During the British colonial regime, a special permission was granted to provide electricity to this area so that the *ta'ziah* could be brought out into the limelight. After seeing this icon, the narrator's friend returns to his homeland. He had also represented his country in a wrestling match. He was promptly arrested and shot. 'Why—? All deeds over there are performed by the will of god. Is god himself the master of the ceremony—?'⁷⁶ The last question is lifted from the ghazal of Amir Khusro (d. 1325): 'Khusro, god himself was the master of the ceremony at that assembly beyond space; Muhammad was the light of the assembly that I attended last night.' In Khusro's ghazal, the ecstatic lover is singing about an out-of-body experience in the presence of the beloved – in ghazal conventions, the beloved can remain divine or human, or even both simultaneously. And this beloved is best illustrated in the gleam of Muhammad, God's most beloved creation according to the Muslim devotional lore. In the *'alam āshob*, however, a fragment from that ghazal is emplotted in the service of a ghastly observation that suggests the facility of God's name in apologies for murder.

Lest we succumb to the delusion that only those assemblies where god/God is master are liable to hangings and shootings, the narrator brings in the godless Communist Party of India (CPI) as another partisan of unanimity. Its rival breakaway party, the

⁷⁶ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 329.

Communist Party of India (Marxist), remains silent (when it comes to allowing dissenting voices.) Silence has long been the modus operandi of people who watch one country's misfortunes from the comforts of another. In Leningrad, in Lenin's office, pictures hang of those who were killed during the war for the revolution—intellectual men and women, wearing coarse coats and rounded glasses to correct their vision. The narrator asks the readers to imagine themselves as citizens of these nation states rather than as armchair devotees. Not only is there no meaningful protest in the present but nations have gotten away with such crimes in the past also.⁷⁷ The narrator drops the name of Amnesty International again, but then quickly dismisses it as a band of colonizers. S/he who mentions this organization is questioned about her allegiances: 'Excuse me, are you the **agent** of the great Satan?'⁷⁸

⁷⁷ I am tempted here to quote from Slavoj Žižek's provocative critique of the leftists who had indubitably (and earnestly) accepted the Soviet reading of progress and politics. Although he targets the "Western leftists," many leftists in South Asia similarly took their cue from the Soviets: "Those Western leftists who heroically defied anti-communist hysteria in their own countries and did so with the utmost sincerity provide other instances of the tragic produced by the cold war. They were prepared to go to prison for their communist convictions and in defense of the Soviet Union. Isn't it the very illusory nature of their belief that makes their subjective stance so tragically sublime? The miserable reality of the Stalinist Soviet Union gives their inner conviction a fragile beauty. This leads us to a radical and unexpected conclusion: it is not enough to say that we are dealing here with a tragically misplaced ethical conviction, with a blind trust that avoids confronting the miserable, terrifying reality of its ethical point of reference. What if, on the contrary, such a blindness, such a violent exclusionary gesture of refusing to see, such a disavowal of reality, such a fetishistic attitude of 'I know very well that things are horrible in the Soviet Union, but I believe none the less in Soviet socialism' is the innermost constituent of every ethical stance." Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. New York: Picador, 2008. Pp. 51-52.

Of course the "Soviet Union" can be replaced by the name of any nation or ideology that exacts unsighted allegiance.

⁷⁸ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 330.

Although the text does not mention Iran by name, it is evident that this is the country whose post-revolutionary rhetoric is prominently figuring into the *'ālam āshob*. The text reminds us that in the early 1980s, Iranian theocrats repeatedly referred to the United States as the 'Great Satan.' Human rights violations in Iran and other countries could not be monitored because the monitors were accused of being 'agents' of colonial and imperial powers. Some were. Some were not. The excuse, however, took a heavy toll on the lives of the political dissenters. The flagrant violation of the rights of the dissenters and minorities continues with impunity not just in Iran but throughout the world.

The narrator next addresses technology; it increases the disorientation of the author-reporter because radio broadcasting is whimsical and untrustworthy in this world: radio waves can go in any direction when rising from a transmitter to an antenna and then falling on a receiving device. Fingers might move the tuner knob too quickly, too fast. How does one tune in to the most appropriate station? This remains a question for those who listen to the radio and watch television. The key is to tune in to the right station—it's easier to tune into a strong voice than a feeble one. There's always a risk that our sensitivities, our basic human decencies, might erode while watching newscasts mediated by Barbara Walters and her handsome guests: can ugliness be represented by a neatly-constructed vision of what is perceived to be beautiful?

The crackling sounds of shivering bones are heard. Tumult rises in the prison—Hind approaches. Of course she's not approaching. She has not approached as of yet. The guards change positions. Sentries move battalions. The clock strikes. These sounds collude with each other in the dark void and if they do not, they are 'jammed.' Everything is a 'black hole.' All the imprisoned grievors fell silent. That dreadful night, the frightening darkness. The decision for the death penalty has been handed down. The crackling sound of shivering bones rises. Punishment has been meted out. They deserved death. In the wilderness, from one desert to another, in the darkness of night and under the scorching sun, consuming wild honey, clothed in camel's hair, walking on blistering sand, raising the cry:

Beware! He is coming. He is coming. It has been written that Husain, on his way to the wilderness of Karbala, during the four months of a grueling journey, frequently remembered Yahya. The story of the haram is simple yet colorful.⁷⁹

Recall that Yahya is the name for John the Baptist in the Muslim traditions. His birth was miraculous. He faced hardship with fortitude and prepared the way for Jesus. All of God's prophets in the Husain-infused devotional tradition come to the meridian with Husain's travails – John the Baptist in this tradition is in the company of Job, Jacob, and Abraham. Muhammad Iqbal tells the story of the most sacred Muslim sanctuary, the Ka'ba in Mecca, by commencing it with Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and closing it with Husain – the younger grandson of Islam's prophet; Husain made more numerous sacrifices than Abraham did. At least the martyrs reached the highest spot in paradise. The tortuous questions in purgatory are for those who do not rise as martyrs.

The narrator wonders: “What will become of those women whose husbands are killed without any justification? What happens to the souls of the sinners who are shot? What happens to souls that escape the bodies through the bullet holes? What happens to souls that depart from the graves? These are serious questions for eschatologists, Jesuit priests, Muslim religious authorities, and mystics, gnostics, yogis, ‘Jetset’ rishis.”

The narrative of such serious questioning is offset by seemingly casual observations: the handbills announcing love and marriage grace trucks and buses throughout South Asia, ‘RASHID WEDS JAMILA,’ ‘MOHAN WEDS KAMALA.’ Placed on the roofs of these buses is the dowry of the bride. An impoverished man drowns in debt to acquire a radio, bicycle, electric fan, motorbike for the groom of his daughter, color television, VCR, and a Premier Padmini car. Mohan and Kamala

⁷⁹ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 331.

represent the lower-middle class couples. The bride in such instances wears a nylon sari with fancy embroidery. She has an MA, works outside of her house, saves up money with her father or borrows money—all for the sake of a dowry to pay for a husband.

Well my precious princess of a daughter-in-law, what kind of death would you like? Being blown up with the stove? Being doused in gasoline? Being strangled in that usual ordinary way? It's very likely that this innocent girl will be killed very soon. Who is responsible for her death? You are, you are, and you are.

Amid the welter of these vignettes are the echoes of music: Bismillah Khan's *shahnai*, Mithun Chakravarti's disco number *Ramba ho*, a song from the Hema Malini-Dharmendra thriller *Rajput*. The brusque sentences composed without any attention to rhyme are consoled by poetry – most of which springs from Urdu elegies.

These elegies resonate throughout the text in ever new guises: for example, the readers are led into the luxury halls of mourning in India, Pakistan, England, Canada, and the United States. The ritualization of remembrance comes to the fore, suggesting a soulless exercise of tradition, year after year. The text raises the spectre of simulacrum: what precisely are these assemblies ultimately representing? A *communitas* bound by ritual? A solidarity between those who suffered and those who claim suffering without actually bearing it? If it is the last one, then the mere representation of suffering turns into a farce. In my previous work on martyrdom, I had discussed how the Karbala template served various minoritarian agendas, ranging from those of the Twelver Shii community of South Asia to those of the nationalist and Marxist writings of twentieth century.⁸⁰ However, in the text under discussion, the majority-minority configuration does not come

⁸⁰ See Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

into particular focus. Such a configuration, apart from being mercurial, does not correspond with the propensity to wreak violence.

There is a certain connection among the stories of the text and a kinship between readers and witnesses. These texts are also tied to the tradition of Urdu literature: for instance, the vignette that follows the one on dowry murder makes a reference to the story of Sadat Hasan Manto (1912–55), a towering figure in the history of Urdu prose. In one of Manto’s stories, a prostitute goes to great lengths to secure black trousers to reflect her commitment to the martyrs of Karbala in the month of Muharram. Manto’s story pegs mindless devotion as a form of prostitution.

The narrator is also clear that violence is not necessarily propagated through conventional instruments: the shaykhs of our own *Thousand and One Nights*, ensconced on Kashmiri rugs, have the power to simply flip the channel from death, destruction, imprisonment, and exile to belly dancing; their personal aircrafts wait to carry them off to Monte Carlo and Paris. The coffee houses of those cities anticipate them. ‘Is there a mother who has produced a son with the strength to stone them?’⁸¹

Each one of us is personally related to one or more of these stories – whether because we endured the brutalization or because we simply witnessed it. When we disavow our own role in them, we sound like the well-meaning couple visiting Rajasthan: Gabriel and Norma Cohen. Gabriel is a journalist; Norma a historian. They have come to India for some research and more pleasure: Norma Cohen has been told by a person at Berkeley that the descendants of Karim Khan Pindaari (the notorious plunderer of early nineteenth-century North India who had become a nuisance for the British) live in

⁸¹ Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, p. 337.

Rajasthan. These descendants are in possession of rare manuscripts. Norma has come to meet them. Gabriel Cohen hears a statement about Sarmad, Dara Shikoh's friend who was sent to the gallows by Aurangzeb's forces: 'Don't you know, Sarmad had a Jewish connection. He deserved death and that's what he got.' Gabriel Cohen brushes off this statement:

I have just come from the war theatre of the Middle East. I am a journalist. I do not get a break from assessing the death and destruction of the present so as to study the death and destruction of the past. That is Norma's job.

The narrator advances an observation about Gabriel Cohen: 'Gabriel Cohen is Jibrail Kaahan, that is, the progeny of Moses's brother Aaron, or his namesake, who occupies the media of half the world.' This is the Gabriel who sits firmly on the branch of Sidrah, heaven's highest point of observation. He is not excited by any real emotional response from the earth. The narrator presents a persona who plays on the images of a disproportionate Jewish access and control of the media.

Notwithstanding the printed appearance of the text as a unit, we must keep in mind the narrator's conscious disruption of the text's autonomy from within the text. That is, the narrator uses a fine cut and paste technique to convey the complicity of the past with the present, of one hemisphere's brutalities with the other's. Each vignette cross-examines the previous one. The forms of brutality are so numerous that subsuming them under one label would render the label meaningless.

A silence? No sir. All is well here, by the will of God. The hypocrites and those who spread mischief on this earth have been killed off with precision. They deserved execution. Those who remain, insha'allah, god willing.....they too
The prisoners await death. Blindfolded. Facing the firing squad. Agents of the Amnesty International are not allowed for they are the stooges of the Great Satan. Tumult rises in the prison, Hind approaches. Hind will absolutely not come. Why would she come? To each community its own interests. Gentlemen, dig your

graves in one straight line and queue up right here. Right away. No loitering. No dawdling. **Discipline** is a must till the very end.

I have nothing with me in the way of a shroud. I have abandoned my father without a shroud or a burial.

Do not worry. Official shrouds will be provided. Please put away the shovels appropriately. Others are about to arrive.

Count down: ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three....In the prison houses, young boys and girls await death. Their voices do not reach the governing chambers of the world. They are not heard when sovereignties are negotiated. No one has come to free them.

When no one spoke up, sorrow grew.⁸²

The text is preoccupied with ‘filing,’ ‘order,’ ‘discipline,’ ‘wave lengths,’ ‘punishment,’ and their attendants, death, genocide, silence, loss, and more punishment. How could this be a seamless narrative of any one people.

In Dabir’s marsiya, Hind actually approaches the prisoners—prisoners who are held in one cell. In this ‘*ālam āshob*, Hind’s arrival is announced and anticipated but it neither materializes nor is it assured. “Hind will absolutely not come. Why would she come? To each community its own interests.” The reader is tasked with the inference: Do those who suffer in this ‘*ālam āshob* not deserve a Hind since she is not from “their community?” Is their suffering not on a par with that of the survivors of Karbala so Hind will not grant them any access to her commiseration? Is it possible that Hind will not come due to the concern (out of the *ghairat*) that she might be mistaken for the “agent of the Great Satan”? Or, has Hind also passed on into history, existing solely in the Karbala devotional lore?

At so many turns, the answers to such questions, like the stories of the ‘*ālam āshob*, fragment into incoherence. And this is not the incoherence of the mystical kind whereby one rests assured that the ultimate epiphany that will bring matters to a resolve

⁸² Hyder, *Koh-e Damāvand*, pp. 340–341.

is worth the wait, the pain, the uncertainty. Incoherent spectacles here lead to the risk of monotony, I believe, until we reach the last two pages.

The last episode of this *'ālam āshob*, like its title, is drawn from the *marsiya* tradition. In Dabir's *marsiya*, Hind arrives at the prison and Zainab is agonized by *ghairat* to testify in her presence. Zainab first considers the device of silence (*ghair milne ko jo ātā hai to chup rahte hain*) and then she favours an identification through the state of being, through the present fate, without resorting to names. She instructs her niece Sakina: "If she [Hind] asks about your mother, tell her that she's the one exiled from home; as for your sister, tell her she's a bride turned into a widow; when she inquires about your brother, he is a prisoner in chains and shackles; speak of your father as a noble man without a grave or shrouds." Then we encounter Zainab's crowning instructions rising from *ghairat*: *dekho ghairat se main ho jāungī pānī pānī, hind ke āge nah tum māngiyo jānī pānī*⁸³: Know this: due to *ghairat* I'll turn into water/perspire with shame; sweetheart, if you asked for water in Hind's presence." The couplet rests at the nexus of an interplay of the word *pānī* (water) and the Urdu expression *pānī pānī honā* (to perspire with shame.) Recall that the forces of Hind's husband had deprived Sakina's family of water in Karbala. Zainab, as a witness and survivor, is unable to bear any favours from Hind. Sakina, after all, has been nurtured by Zainab and remains just as steadfast. Sakina assures her aunt that she will not ask Hind for water; she'll simply ask Hind to give back what rightfully belongs to Sakina: her father Husain's corpse.

Zainab in Dabir's *marsiya* would like the prison doors to remain locked so the children may not escape. In the *'ālam āshob*, however, Sakina would like the prison

⁸³ Hilal Naqvi (ed.), *Daftar-e Dabir* (Karachi: Muhammadi Educational Publishers, 1995), p. 347.

guards to unlock the doors so her father Husain may enter the prison, not so that she can flee from it. The last vignette of the *'ālam āshob* involves an imprisoned mother (Imam Husain's wife) and her daughter Sakina. The mother is concerned that the prison is dark, its floor so uneven, her daughter might be injured in a fall. Sakina pleads to the guards: 'If someone escapes from this prison, I'll take responsibility for them. Please unlock the doors. How will I fall asleep? I am so restless,' she says. 'If any prisoner flees, I am responsible.' In this most sustained narrative of the world in turmoil, an innocent six-year-old expresses the desire for the guards to open the prison doors to allow the well-wishers from the outside access to the confines of the prison.

The reader is left with the impression that one has to enter the prison in order to realize the agony of its inhabitants. Prose by this time has rendered its resignation. It's the established drama of the *marsiya* that captures the agony. Translations are metaphors to witness the state of prisoners while stepping into the prison. A restorative process requires that wrong-doers and spectators enter the prison—where they both endure suffering and perhaps this is the only way in which they can bond. Tragedies are inextricably linked just like the world they inhabit. Yesterday's oppressed can become today's oppressors in one silent night. The prison also becomes a metaphor for history – the present must be understood by stepping into the confines of the past, a past that is uneven like the floor of the prison. The imprisoned world of Sakina invites witnesses. Not witnesses with cameras, but witnesses bound by blood, by tears – the blood and tears of humanity. This discourse of invitation into a prison must necessarily come from the perspective of innocence. Not only are we asked to enter this prison as her father would, but we are also invited to look at the world from her vantage point.

The line of poetry with which the '*ālam āshob*' closes is particularly telling in the manner in which it captures the pangs of the witnesses to and the reporters of suffering:

jibrīl larazte hain simatte hue par ko

Gabriel shudders, bracing his wings

This line is (imperfectly) drawn from a Dabir *marsiya* that commences with an epic battle encounter between Husain's gallant brother Abbas (who was especially close to Sakina) and the forces of Yazid.⁸⁴ Here, Dabir compares Abbas's arrival on the battlefield with the way in which a lion charges at his prey. So potent is the orbit of Abbas's sword that the archangel that hovers over God's creation fears for his wings that sustain his buoyancy.

shamshīr bakaf dekh ke haidar ke pisar ko
jibrīl larazte hain samete hue par ko

Upon witnessing the son of Haidar wielding a sword
Gabriel shudders, having braced his wings

Where once there was fear at the sight of the battle, now in the '*ālam āshob*' there is anguish over the most appropriate means of communicating loss, sorrow, invitation, and hope. Where once there was apprehension on Gabriel's part that his wings might be clipped so as to keep him from soaring, now there is challenge to refashion his mode of communication. Where once Gabriel comfortably stood apart from humans, now he is struck by the *ghairat* of his life being spared, the *ghairat* of turning into an impotent witness. In the '*ālam āshob*', it is through the mediating voice of Sakina that the *ghairat* is

⁸⁴ Farūq Argalī (ed.) *Kalām-e Dabīr* (New Delhi: Farid Book Depot, 2005), p. 180. This is one of Dabir's frequently recited marsiyas, *kis sher kī āmad hai keh ran kānp rahā hai*. Also see Intezar Husain, 'Qaid khāne meñ talātum hai keh hiñd ātī hai,' in *Dunyāzād*, 27 (2010), p. 18. Husain in this essay also wonders about Hyder's thought process in ending this "afsānah" with this particular line from Dabir.

transposed from Zainab to Gabriel. Relaying the decrees of God to his Prophets seems to be a more effortless task than channelling an imprisoned young woman's plight to the Almighty Creator.

Following Anand Taneja's suggestion, it would be helpful to unravel the code of this Gabriel by allowing ourselves the access to Walter Benjamin's *Angel of History*—the angel who sees through the pretense that a knowledge of history's vices, even an empathy with history's victims, would curb the future unfolding of similar plights.⁸⁵

Dabir's *marsiya*s provides that ethico-religious interpersonal space where solidarities are more meaningfully created, where Hind and Zainab meet. It's a medium for the mending of the ethical by appeals to the prison-confined interpersonal world of mourning. Through mourning, solidarities are created: one must mourn not just for oneself but for the other; mourn not just from one's liberated space but from the prison space of the other; mourn not just from one's own gendered identity but by assuming that of the other; mourn not just by listening to the radio broadcasts that can be heard easily but by asking questions about the silent void around the broadcasts. One way in which we can locate meaning in the black forests of Germany and the villages of Maharashtra, on

⁸⁵ See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 257-258. Benjamin was a German-Jewish thinker who committed suicide during the gore and uncertainty of WWII. Commenting on a Paul Klee print, *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin, in an anti-historical materialist vein writes: "His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The Angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."

the jogging trails of San Francisco and in the prisons of Damascus is through mourning. Even the archangel Gabriel is sutured to this mourning.⁸⁶ But a genuine process of mourning must compel its participants to observe the loss from the perspective of those who have endured it.

In Hyder's *'ālam āshob*, this mourning, with all its risks, is never perfected or completed. It is as incumbent upon the witnesses as it is on the survivors. Mourning, like poetry, is the communication between hearts when prose fails. How does one mourn the loss of the ordinary in a language of loss (*marsiya*) that is exclusively for the extraordinary (Karbala)? Ultimately, we must turn the extraordinary into the ordinary – and not think of the Holocaust as the Holocaust of six million, but as an episode in the suffering of a community, an episode that could happen in any place, at any time. Similarly, Karbala, the epic battle, is not held up as the reference point of all calamities; it is just a reference point. Knowledge of the past is not a deterrent in this world; it simply produces another metaphor-simile in the chain of the figurative language. Every suffering is its own suffering, in its own way, in spite of the facility with which these stories may be replicated. It is this recognition of the uniqueness of each suffering, and the commiseration that follows, that strengthens the bonds among the grief-stricken. The *'ālam āshob* is an invitation to recognise this diversity so as to equip oneself better when it is time to condole. In order to heed history's lessons, they must first be stripped of their

⁸⁶ Apart from Dabir's *marsiya*, the idea of Gabriel bearing witness might also remind students of Urdu literature of a Ghalib couplet: *pātā hūñ us se dād kuch apne kalām kī, ruḥ al-qudus agar cheh merā hamzabāñ nahīñ* (I receive from him some justice, accolades, for my words; even though the Pure Soul [Gabriel] is not my fellow-speaker). In the context of this *'ālam āshob*, one can read this Ghalib couplet as a plaudit: it is as though the narrator is suggesting in closing that the praise for her writing is coming from none other than the Most Trusted Spirit, who simply has no corresponding words and style to match that of the narrator.

exceptionalism, they must be demystified. Questions about God's loyalty are futile; the invocation of his name is self-serving and formulaic.

The narrator employs, in part, poetry, words that are ordered by the guiding principles of rhyme and meter, along with a free indirect style of writing, as catalysts to disrupt the cadence of 'order' that is allotted privilege in bureaucracy, etiquette, and the arts. At times this poetry appears as an intelligible line of thought and at other times it only grants access to those who have previously encountered it. A distancing strategy is created at times through the imperfect recollection of the verses: the similarities between two contexts are correlated without making them commutable. The striking visual components of the verses, especially the elegy verses in the last section, disrupt the binary self-other logic in favor of a more introspective and inviting critique of the world we inhabit. In this *'ālam āshob* women bear disproportionately more visible marks of the order of the time, but the feminism that emerges is one that challenges the interwoven complicity of nationalism, religious chauvinism, vacuous leftist slogans, and technology.

Hyder and Urdu Aesthetics

In the final part of this essay, I would like to draw attention to some of the literary and cultural conversations in which this work intervenes. The first conversation is with those literary critics who partition Urdu literature into masculine and feminine camps. From the late nineteenth century onwards, certain genres were deemed excessively emotional, hence feminine. The Urdu *marsiya* was one of these feminine genres, according to notable critics like Niyaz Fatehpuri.⁸⁷ Interestingly, literary class-

⁸⁷ Niyaz Fatehpuri, *Mudhākīrāt-e Niyāz* (Lucknow: Nigar Book Agency, 1942), p. 106.

consciousness was tied to the readings of the *marsiya* as feminine. Within this narrative, the attribution of wailing detracted from the valor of the martyrs of Karbala:

By assigning such a large place to pathos the poets as well as their readers and listeners appear to have overlooked a very important fact, namely, that if the characters are made to wallow in distress, they will come perilously close to losing their dignity, and therefore forfeit the reader's respect.⁸⁸

Even though writers like Sadat Hasan Manto had quite a different concern than Fatehpuri when they displayed the resilience of their survivors, they unwittingly scored points against mourning by valorizing characters who were unsparing toward tears: Like Rajesh Khanna in *Amar Prem*, Manto's male heroes 'hate tears.'⁸⁹ Notwithstanding their sensitive depictions of women, Manto's stories (*Bāsit* and *Yazīd* for example) fall back on the assumption that tears detract from the initiative to take action. Hyder's work, on the other hand, harbours an approach to aesthetics that does not spurn tear shedding.

Apart from the domains of literary criticism and creative writing, an anti-mourning discourse has acquired deep roots in parts of the Sunni-Salafī theological world. The Saudi Salafī architects of Muslim "reform" have marked mourning rituals as a contradiction to Islam's faith in God's will – a challenge to the idea of predestination. Although this ideology was present in the early years of Islam, especially when assemblies of mourners asked questions about the perpetrators of crime and violence against the Prophet's family, who in most cases were the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs, it has gained prominent currency in the last hundred years. In 1925, King Abdul Aziz Ibn

⁸⁸ Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 211.

⁸⁹ Here I am referring to the popular 1972 Hindi film, *Amar Prem* ('Immortal love'), which captures the relationship between Anand, a jaded businessman, and Pushpa, a woman forced into prostitution. Rajesh Khanna, India's most popular star of the time, plays the role of Anand and delivers the English line that would be remembered as his signature line: 'Pushpa, I hate tears.'

Saud, for instance, sanctioned the demolition of the shrines of Islam's early martyrs in the Al-Baqi cemetery of Medina, much to the dismay of the larger Muslim community that visited these shrines and held mourning assemblies in its vicinity. With the assistance of Petrodollars, the "shaikhs" who have followed Ibn Saud have cast an anti-mourning spell which has become difficult to resist for many Muslims who are at the mercy of their patronage.

Moreover, vocal resistance to the assemblies of mourning is undoubtedly entrenched in a Iran/Shii-phobia: the fear that Iran's revolution would spill over its borders. The strong bond that mourning processions have to political resistance in the modern world is also apparent when one studies the Hizbullah uprising in Lebanon. And any student of modern Pakistan realises that Muharram commemorations are especially targeted not just with the excuse that they promote mourning that is beyond the acceptable realm, but also with the very real apprehension that these commemorations would emotionally galvanize the Shii community to challenge the rising exclusivist Saudi inflected version of Islam in Pakistan.

Mourning in Hyder's work is very much tied to *ghairat* – *ghairat* as pride, not shame – this is the pride one takes in telling one's story on one's own terms, through one's own tears. Lest this work is confused as a work of reformist Muslim literature (this is something that thoughtful writers like Intezar Husain have been guilty of), it is important to mention that the *'ālam ashob* has no hint of Muslim exceptionalism.

Thoroughly impressed with Iqbal, as Hyder was, she steers clear of singling out any marked 'Muslim' devastation as more worthy of attention than any non-Muslim one. Her very recourse to the *marsiya* of Dabir should be a reminder to us that this is a genre

that refrains from raising theological issues. It is not a surprise then that it attracted a good number of poets and listeners who did not identify with Islam. What the *marsiya* does capture are interpersonal dynamics, the dynamics of affection, expectations, and losses that are universal. As Judith Butler reminds us:

That universality is not speakable outside of a cultural language, but its articulation does not imply that an adequate language is available. It means only that when we speak its name, we do not escape our language, although we can—and must—push the limits.⁹⁰

The ethics flowing from the *marsiya* are those that spring from the Indo-Persian poetics of *adab* (ethics) and *akhlāq* (etiquette), which are only tangentially tied to the texts produced in Islam's first century. Even when the narrator in the *'ālam āshob* speaks of the desecration of Granada, she is speaking of it as a desecration that should not be tolerated for any place of devotion that is important to a community.

A Womanly Writing of the Universal

The last conversation that is relevant to this essay is related to Hyder as a woman and a writer. We have already seen how she struggled with the genre label. She also faced questions about her patriotism. Born in an undivided India of 1927 into a family of reformers and creative writers, Hyder migrated to Pakistan with her mother in 1947, the year the new nation-state was created. She was one of hundreds of thousands of Muslims who migrated either because they feared for their safety and lost opportunities in India, the majority of which would not be Muslim, or because they wished to join their relatives in Pakistan. From Pakistan, she moved to London. After a brief stint at the BBC, in 1961 she returned to India and rose to prominence as a print journalist. Straddling the line

⁹⁰ See Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 41.

between genres proved to be just as difficult to do as straddling two competing nationalisms. She balked at the questions of her return from Pakistan, her national and religious allegiances, and her marriage. She fell out with the most formidable literary movement of her early life, the Progressive Writers Movement, which was Marxist in its orientation. She felt that these writers had dug their own graves by relegating religion to the realm of the mythical.⁹¹ While giving a brief nod to the English modernists like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, she disavowed their direct influence on her art and scoffed at the suggestion that she wrote in a “stream of consciousness” style. When asked about the symbolic value of and the frequency with which she used English words in her Urdu writings, she dismissed the question by saying that English has a significant presence in South Asia, so it is not surprising that its words are seamlessly woven into her Urdu writing. She charged Urdu literary critics with adhering to a few hackneyed words and phrases when commenting on her works: nostalgia, Weststruckness, and the use of English language.⁹² She especially disputed the acclaimed tendency of her critics to read her life into her writings. Many around her insisted on reading all her words as autobiographical: as a woman she could only speak of herself and never convey a universal experience.

The *marsiya* of Dabir, the *‘ālam āshob*, and Qurratulain Hyder, the writer, are in the grip of a similar anxiety: they are expected to make statements about what has befallen their worlds but they are not quite sure to what ends these statements would be applied. These are stories of actual suffering as much as they are of witnessing that

⁹¹ See Hyder, *Khusūsī Mutāle’a*, p. 235.

⁹² Qurratulain Hyder, *Dāstān-e ‘ahd-e gul*, ed. Asif Aslam Farrukhi (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2004), p. 271.

suffering. The *'ālam āshob*'s title announces the arrival of one witness, Hind; the closing line gives us an access to another witness, Gabriel. In its trans-communal discourse, the marsiya anticipates the *'ālam āshob*; the *'ālam āshob*, however, moves beyond the marsiya.

This *'ālam āshob* is also an allegory of the struggle of a writer – a writer who is not content with the existing genres, with the mode of acceptable prose. The writer tests the way literature that is linear and manly is privileged. Hyder once said: 'Even the most liberated women are exploited by men. Equality to men means that you sit like them, cross your legs appropriately, smoke, carry on vulgar conversations. With such traits you are demonstrating "you have achieved a kind of metaphysical manhood."'”⁹³ A corrective aesthetics is in order.

The writer assumes the position of Sakina, not to escape from the prison of language, but to gain the prerogative to invite the empathetic outsider in. It is an invitation that is more easily extended than it is accepted. Even the archangel Gabriel shudders at this invitation—after all, it calls into question all his past transmissions, it challenges him to bind with those who form the most disadvantaged rung on God's creative ladder, rather than with those who are raised as prophets – *jibrīl larazte hain sanbhāle hue par ko*. This Gabriel is set apart from the one we have encountered before: Gabriel Cohen. Gabriel Cohen's work ethic for engaging the past is strong but his ability to empathize with those in his present/presence is non-existent; he is insulated from the

⁹³ Hyder, *Khusūsī Mutāle'a*, p. 155. She says the last part of this statement in English.

carnage around him, from the maelstrom of mourning. The *'ālam āshob* calls for an assumption of responsibility for the brutalization and the brutality of our past and present co-creation. In this *'ālam āshob* memory is not just at the service of recalling; it is undoubtedly not an escape. It is an invitation to refashion time, imagination, and writing with the help of tears that bind all of us in commiseration.