Reflective Commentary

The British in India: the poetics of trauma and the emerging Sikh diaspora in England

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An Introduction to Building a Chair of One's Own

I only began to understand the importance of my identity and Punjab itself when I reconnected to my ancestry in my early twenties and engaged with childhood and teenage memories to write poetry. While being raised in the Black Country, I was never once taught by my parents or schools about the British empire, or what it did to the people it was supposedly protecting in its colonies. I did not know what the British did to Commonwealth countries, and I certainly did not know what they did to my ancestors' home. I was educated in ignorance.

When I was younger, my grandmother would often tell me stories of her family in India and how it was commonplace in the late 1950s and early 1960s that they would go without meals and how India, particularly Punjab, would become dangerous for Sikhs to live in. Little did I know that my grandmother's experiences were a result of the negative, violent, and disruptive legacy of generational trauma left behind by the British Raj, and that she and my grandfather would settle in England because of this. As I made my way through higher education, I learned less than a fraction of what I now know about the British empire; through studying about it I felt ashamed, I felt ignorant, I did not even know my own history. That was until I began to write poetry about my grandparents' and my parents' journey to England, their experiences of being Brown at a time when most White English people were hostile to those who did not look like them.[1] My grandparents would be a part of the emerging Indian Punjabi Sikh diaspora, and the trauma they experienced in their homeland would follow them over two continents to become a permanent part of their hereditary fabric; a fabric that they would unknowingly pass on to their children, their grandchildren and myself.

[1] In academic papers and books Black has been capitalised and uncapitalised. Here I choose to capitalise Black, Brown and White as a stylistic choice.

I have found that writing as a Brown poet in an academic setting isn't an easy task; at every turn like a child who wanted to annoy the parent, I asked why? Why is it so hard to express my identity and history through my writing, why are there not more academics in my department who share my heritage, why does the library have every book and magazine known to humanity on Eurocentric accounts of Victorian history, and yet evidently far less on the Indian diaspora? The answer lies in the legacy that empire has left behind, one that is tied to transgenerational trauma for many ethnic minorities residing in the UK. It is harder to exist in higher education because our faces are not reflected in the bodies who teach us, and our identities are rarely explored in the texts we are expected to learn and critique. It feels as if the coloniser as an entity is still alive, re-shaping or neglecting those who do not fit perfectly into its blueprints. When discussing sexuality and existing norms, Sara Ahmed makes a significant point on this sense of re-shaping and identity. She writes:

> If you do not inhabit existing norms, it can be uncomfortable. I often think through the politics of comfort through chairs: furniture is always good to think with. Think of how it feels to be comfortable: say you are sinking into a comfortable chair. Comfort is about the fit between body and object: my comfortable chair might be awkward for you with your differently shaped body. Comfort is about an encounter between more than one body; the promise of a sinking feeling. Heteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. Those spaces are lived as comfortable, as they allow bodies to fit in; the surfaces of social space are already impressed upon by the shape of such bodies (like a chair that acquires its shape by the repetition of some

bodies inhabiting it: we can almost see the shape of bodies as impressions in the surface).[2]

I have personally found the academy a very deeply uncomfortable place to learn and work in because often institutions still do not fully recognise the spiralling impact colonialism has had on people's lives. This lack of awareness manifests itself in everyday interactions that make you aware of how you are treated differently due to your heritage. If the seat is already fashioned for me to sit in, how could I be so ungrateful to question its uncomfortableness? I am a British citizen, and I have benefited from living in the UK, I have benefited from receiving research council funding for my Ph.D., and yet, I choose to criticise the hand that feeds me, because I deserve a seat of my own. However, the seats that are available to me in academia do not allow me to sit in comfort. These seats often belong to those who have progressed their careers on the backs of ethnic minorities, the White working class, and women. Their impression in our society and in the educational and academic setting I write in, have made me feel that I do not belong in their premade seats or the institution.

There have been and still are positive shifts in terms of decolonising the curriculum. However, these initiatives might promote tokenism or even become a farce. Many White academics use decolonisation as a trendy hashtag to conceal inauthentic attempts that are not invested in tackling inequality and inequity. These same voices often lead discussions on decolonisation, rarely asking or allowing Black and Brown individuals to participate. In this yet again, we are reduced to a mere subject. On this matter, Sara Ahmed tells us that,

[2] Sara Ahmed. *Living a Feminist Life.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 122-123; When discussing the uncomfortableness Black and Brown people experience in HE, Aimee Merrydew a fellow PhD candidate suggested I look at Sara Ahmed's work on furniture. Out of this exploration came my introduction.

> I talked informally with a diversity practitioner. She told me of an occasion when she arrived at a meeting of the diversity and equality committee and the senior staff (who were all white men of a certain age) were talking about what they used to eat at Cambridge for breakfast (a conversation, she said, about bananas), a casual conversation about a shared history of consumption that is at once an institutional history. This conversation was a way of taking up space; it allowed these individuals to occupy the official space of the meeting. The practitioner described her realization of this occupation: 'I realized how far away they were from my world.' When we reflect on diversity, we are reflecting on the creation of worlds that give residence to some and not others. [3]

This occupation of the space with White voices is not something that will easily go away; indeed, it should not be something that we should aim to erase. Our aim should be not only to allow diversity entry, but also to knowledge share and enrich these narrow spaces with the history of colonialism and our experiences of diversity and multiculturalism. We should be bringing more seats to the table rather than taking seats away.

Nevertheless, there are occasions when people from ethnic minority groups are consulted to decolonise and diversify environments. Although White voices may lead discussions, the burden of success is placed on ethnic minorities, a burden which has "historically… fallen on people of colour, particularly women of colour," reducing any burden on White individuals and increasing the workload of ethnic minorities.[4] Yet this should not be the case because decolonisation isn't the job of a few academics: if there is to be real progress, it is everyone's job, even if that means coming to terms with,

[3] Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included*, Ebook (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012) 122–23, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822395324.

[4] Jason Arday, Dina Zoe Belluigi, and Dave Thomas, "Attempting to Break the Chain: Reimaging Inclusive Pedagogy and Decolonising the Curriculum Within the Academy," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 3 (June 4, 2020): 298–313, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773257.

approaching and understanding neglected, violent, shameful histories and the generational impact placed on ethnic minority communities.

I have often been told by my parents that I am fortunate to be a British citizen, to be alive in a time where, as a woman, I have the right to speak. I am lucky to have the freedom of my own identity and in part, all these freedoms that make up who I am today, in some form are thought to owe a debt to the British empire. Without empire, Black and Brown individuals would not be in the UK, and without us being here, we would not have the opportunity of receiving an education, good health, or working a job that pays a decent wage. This view is ingrained in White, Black, and Brown individuals alike because the inadequacies of empire have not been taught. In England, although British imperialism and colonisation make an appearance in various forms on the national curriculum, they are not compulsory subjects in primary and secondary schools. There is currently no credible, comprehensive evidence base to measure or judge to what extent colonial legacies and histories are being taught.[5] Similarly, these topics are not mandatory subjects that are integrated into training in workplaces across Britain. This missing knowledge in people's education and lives has resulted in ignorance about the negative impact of the British empire on Black and Brown lives. This ignorance is widespread across sections of our society, and it augments deep rooted racism in the UK—to the extent where ignorance about race relations not only creates further divisions across our society, but it also means that Black and Brown subjects who were oppressed under the British empire and who migrated to the UK during the mid-century such as the Windrush generation, were treated poorly. When writing on the Windrush scandal, Andrew Prescott reveals that in 2010, as

[5] Alice Pettigrew, "Teaching About the British Empire: Cutting Through the Noise - HEPI," HEPI, February 7, 2024, https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/02/07/teaching-about-the-british-empire-cutting-through-the-noise/; see also, "Petition: Teach Britain's Colonial Past as Part of the UK's Compulsory Curriculum," Petitions - UK Government and Parliament, accessed April 15, 2025, https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/324092#:~:text=Currently%2C%20it%20is%20not%20compulsory,a%20far%20more%20inclusive%20curriculum.

Home Secretary, Teresa May sought to create a "hostile environment" for undocumented immigrants to reduce immigration to the UK. This hostility was heavily directed towards individuals who had arrived on Windrush on June 21st 1948, and who lacked official documentation to prove they were British citizens. As a result, many Black British individuals were wrongfully detained and deported. Much of this mishap occurred because their original landing cards had been destroyed in 2010 by the Home Office.[6] Prescott continues to recognise that the

> Windrush scandal was due to many causes, including the complex and changing legislative framework, poor management in the Home Office, the effect of outsourcing, and racist assumptions in many government agencies. Nevertheless, the destruction of landing cards symbolized the thoughtlessness and inhuman treatment of the Windrush generation.[7]

This poor treatment led to the upheaval of many lives. If government agencies were more aware of race and colonial history, would the Windrush scandal have occurred in the extremity that it did? To learn from the mistakes that led to the Windrush scandal

> The Home Office made a commitment to teaching its staff about Britain's colonial and imperial history after an independent review concluded that the Windrush scandal was caused in part by the department's 'institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness' on the issue of race and history.[8]

[6] Andrew Prescott, "Appraisal and Original Order: The Power Structures of the Archive," in *Archives: Power, Truth, Fiction*, ed. Andrew Prescott and Alison Wiggins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 109–10.

[7] Prescott, "Appraisal and Original Order: The Power Structures of the Archive," 110.

[8] Amelia Gentleman, "Home Office Tried to 'Sanitise' Staff Education Module on Colonialism," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jun/10/home-office-tried-to-sanitise-staff-education-module-on-colonialism.

Although the Home Office tried to release a course on the impact of the British empire, it was blocked by civil servants:

> Prof Jason Arday… said he had been contracted to help devise teaching material for the course and had registered his concerns over edits to the content during a meeting in April. 'There seemed to be a reluctance to fully engage with how bad Britain has been in terms of its role in upholding empire and its subsequent hangover. It felt as though the material had been sanitised by civil servants and parliamentarians who did not want to engage with the crux of racism. I felt like we were being asked to engage in historical amnesia…I was told that the Home Office wanted certain bits of information omitted because there was a feeling that this might leave people feeling browbeaten'.[9]

When institutions in the UK take part in this historical amnesia by not teaching or recognising colonial histories, the problem that arises here is that although they may not set out to be racist or biased, they end up being so through the very way in which they interact with cultural and historical amnesia. I am not saying that if these histories and their generational impact were taught, racism would cease to exist in the UK, because the truth of the matter is that, if people are diverse, if there are weaponised political divisions created in our societies, there will always be racism. However, as a society we can work to bridge divides and educate individuals on race relations. This is not a failsafe way of making sure racism doesn't exist, but it means that individuals can then make informed choices.

However, when the British government takes part in historical amnesia it becomes harder to prevent scandals such as Windrush. For instance, in a Home Office report that

[9] Gentleman, "Home Office Tried to 'Sanitise' Staff Education Module on Colonialism."

had been unsuccessfully buried, *The Guardian* "found that the 'deep-rooted racism of the Windrush scandal'" lay "in the fact that 'during the period 1950-1981, every single piece of immigration or citizenship legislation was designed at least in part to reduce the number of people with black or brown skin who were permitted to live and work in the UK'."[10] This practice of burying or forgetting our disturbing history, of overlooking racist legislation, and in the case of the British government and public, failing to see the negative effects of empire, compounds racism and creates a disbelief that racism exists in the UK—a disbelief that it exists in the heart of British institutions. When we engage with cultural amnesia, it fuels division, hate, denial, and shame.

My experience writing within higher education has not been easy because in part, I have had to contend with a violent historical past which is still not completely acknowledged by the educational establishment, or the British literary landscape I write in. Despite this, I have continued to write. Throughout this project, I have aimed to responsibly, ethically, and poetically present my family's oral stories and my memories to examine how the British Raj in India negatively affected Sikhs living in Punjab, and how colonialism drove their migration to England, where the traumas they had experienced through colonialism and migration were transferred to the next generation. Equally, this thesis also continues to examine how healing exists alongside trauma, waiting for us to accept its hand. Through writing poetry from my family's oral stories, like many writers before me, I hope this thesis enriches the educational and literary space I am interacting with.

[10] Gentleman, "Home Office Tried to 'Sanitise' Staff Education Module on Colonialism."

Chapter 1: Autoethnographic Practice and Writing the Self

The body of work presented in this thesis covers a collection of poetry, partially written from traumatic familial oral stories that have been passed down to me and mostly written from my memories of these stories and my lived experience. The poems produced broach the boundaries of Sikh philosophy, migration, loss, and the legacy of colonialism. They focus on my family's traumatic oral stories that are rooted in their migration from Punjab to England, and the impact colonialism has had on them and the wider Sikh diaspora. The final part of this thesis includes this reflective commentary. Naturally, this writing reflects on my creative process, including the stylistic choices I made, what inspired and influenced me, and why I chose to write about my family's migration history and trauma through poetry. This field of writing is known as autoethnography, a field that Jane Edwards states, "recognizes self-experience as a social phenomenon valuable and worthy of examination. Autoethnographic research seeks to deepen understanding of multiple complex dimensions of culture and interpersonal dynamics."[11] However, each autoethnographic project has its own motivations, whether it be reflective in examining one's experiences or, as this project is, focused on demonstrating that healing from trauma is possible: it is not a burden that needs to be carried alone. With this motivation comes a responsibility to ethically share my work, where the oral stories I have transformed into poetry are shared with consent and with sensitivity towards the traumatic topics discussed. This chapter takes a closer look at the nuances of writing family stories responsibly and ethically, guided by an autoethnographic approach.

Tony Adams, Stacey Jones and Carolyn Ellis in their book *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, write that numerous factors must be considered when

[11] Jane Edwards, "Ethical Autoethnography: Is It Possible?," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20 (January 1, 2021): 160940692199530, https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406921995306.

undertaking autoethnographic work. This includes; conducting interviews, carrying out autoethnographic fieldwork, immersing oneself in the field, engaging in dialogue with others, participating in active listening, collaborative witnessing, adhering to ethical standards, and managing consent along with other pertinent issues.[12] However, not every project will have the same needs: for instance, I did not undertake fieldwork, but I did immerse myself in the field by reaching out to individuals writing on similar topics. I was able to do this most successfully on the Faber Academy Advanced Poetry course, where I was in part mentored by both Racheal Allen and Daljit Nagra, and wrote alongside poets from diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, Adams et al. suggest that some projects share a commonality in that "Autoethnographers sometimes begin projects with personal experiences that we want to understand more fully, deeply, and meaningfully…sometimes these experiences are *epiphanies*—transformative moments and realizations that significantly shape or alter the (perceived) course of our lives."[13] My epiphany occurred during a tumultuous period of my life. When I started my PhD, my original proposal was centred in the school of English and began with a focus on the works of Roy Fisher, Jeff Nuttall, and William S. Burroughs. A year into my research, the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, and I began to struggle with severe depression and an eating disorder. I decided to take a year out of my studies, and I spent most of that year between my parents' home and Keele. I was then 25 and I had not lived with my parents full-time since I was 18, so I thought that returning home would have required considerable adjustment. However, returning home turned out to be the right environment to recover and as I would find, it would lead to the epiphany I needed, to not

[12] Tony E. Adams et al., *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47-66.

[13] Adams et al., *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, 47.

only write but also begin to formulate a new project that represented my research interests in documenting my family's migration history, and the emerging Sikh diaspora in England through familial oral stories, that were rife with unrecognised traumas that had transferred to the next generation.

The epiphany I experienced made me question my illness, why I felt the way I felt, and why had I starved myself so severely. For Adams et al., this questioning is about understanding what drives the epiphany. My reflections led me to focus on stories that had been orally passed down to me. These stories were so painful, so traumatic that I had not processed them when I had first heard them as a child. I felt that my eating disorder was very much connected to this sense of not processing harmful emotions, so I made it my mission to begin processing. I didn't realise how much I was holding onto the stories and memories of the past until I began my recovery. My epiphany was triggered by a need to recover from illness, but also to recover and heal from the past enough to not relapse.

While recovering from illness, I undertook cognitive behavioural therapy. It was in therapy that I was not only introduced to, but also where I applied myself to journaling, which alongside being around close family, led to more engagement with writing and made me revisit and appreciate my heritage. During my retreat to writing, I began to recall the oral stories shared with me during my childhood. As these memories resurfaced, I systematically documented each one. Much later, when I did begin to write poems, I found it challenging and distressing to revisit. For example, through revisiting traumatic events such as my grandmother's experience of the Partition of India, in the poem "White Washing," I had to contend with the violent history of Partition itself. To write about trauma, to write such violence is a heavy burden to bear. Even when following the guidelines about autoethnographic practice set out by Adams et al., I could not stop the amount of pain I felt because I could not stop my empathy. Perhaps the most important

aspect of the advice set out by Adams et al. was to invest in and be aware of one's self-care because autoethnographic work can be difficult. Adams et al. write that

> Some autoethnographic projects might prompt us to revisit traumatic events or experiences and we might find ourselves unsettled again, unable to cope or adequately manage our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours when we are revisiting these experiences. [14]

In such instances, Adams et al. observe it falls on the researcher to decide and assess whether taking the risk of being unsettled is worth continuing the project. They believe it is important to consider what counsellor Kim Etherington calls, the "ethics of consequence," where one must evaluate whether the project produces more positive outcomes than harm for the researcher, the individuals involved, and the audience.[15] During this research project, I have felt the burden of remembering, reading, and writing trauma. The writing process has often brought me to tears, and I have experienced prolonged periods of sadness and dissociation. At times, I have had to take extended breaks from the work because it became too overwhelming, especially when writing my family's stories and reading accounts of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Partition and the 1984 Sikh genocide. The process of translating oral stories and the memories of them into poetry did not become easier. When most overwhelmed, I reminded myself that I was writing to ensure my family's stories resonated with others who have had similar experiences or those who wanted to learn more about the history of their heritage. My goal was and still is to offer hope that the burdens of bearing transgenerational trauma can be prevented, suggesting that trauma does not need to be passed on to the next generation, for them to carry it with guilt. If instead it is addressed and discussed as both a community and individually, healing

[14] Adams et al. *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, 63.

[15] Adams et al. *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, 58.

becomes available, not through forgetting the past, but rather through understanding that these traumatic events occurred and that they irrevocably changed the course of people's lives. In writing my poetry collection, I wanted to offer hope that oral stories do not need to be kept hidden within a family. Painful memories do not need to be held to oneself. A burden shared responsibly with an audience willing to listen is a burden halved.

The most common question I have been asked about my project is if I undertook oral history interviews. My answer has always been no. Documenting oral histories requires stories to be recorded, often provoked by an interviewer who asks the interviewee questions that trigger their memory. Such work can be seen in Aanchal Malhotra's *The Remnants of Separation*, the interviews published by the Partition Museum in Amritsar, as well as Urvashi Buttalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, where oral histography is used as a storytelling method. There are numerous reasons why I chose not to undertake oral history interviews, one of them included wanting to write from my memories of what had been passed down to me, to capture this specific passage and the importance of it. I wanted to preserve a particular moment of transference between generations, as it was the existence of this moment that allowed both the oral stories to be heard, and the poetry to be written.

However, there were other reasons for not undertaking oral history interviews and these reasons coincide with ethics guidelines provided by Adams et al. They write that when undertaking an autoethnographic project, you should "process consent." What they mean by this, is that you should "check in with participants during *each* stage of a project, from design to fieldwork to drafting and sharing of an autoethnographic text, to ensure participants' *continued* willingness to take part in a project."[16] For my project, this meant making drafts of my writing available to family members whose stories appeared in my work. It was particularly important to get my grandmother's consent for the project, as I

[16] Adams et al., *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, 57.

write quite extensively about her oral stories, but also about my grandfather who is no longer alive. It was integral that my grandmother approved of what I had written about her own and my grandfather's life. To facilitate this, I not only allowed her access to the work, but I also translated the poetry into Punjabi for her to better understand. At first, the work I had produced had upset her because it reminded her of a time that she no longer wanted to revisit. Yet, she acknowledged the importance of the poetry I had written and was content for it to be published. However, there was one poem that she wanted me to never publish. It is in predicaments like these that a researcher must consider the "ethics of consequence," whereby they must negate and minimise any harm that could come to them, as well as anyone who the project involves.[17] If I had chosen to publish the poem that my grandmother didn't want to see published, would I have created more harm than good? I pondered on this for a while and ultimately decided that it would create more harm. I did consider anonymising the poem and changing some details so that my grandmother would not be identifiable. However, I found anonymising impossible. If I anonymised, the poem would no longer be my grandmother's story, making it less relatable and potentially causing more harm than good, both to my grandmother if she ever learned of the poem's existence, and to my own work, as it would lose its authenticity through the loss of connection to the lived experience.

Therefore, seeking consent guided my decision to avoid undertaking oral history interviews because in the first instance, my family was generally unwilling to participate. Their main reservations surrounded the fact that a lot of the things they had told me had happened a lifetime ago, and they were at peace with where they were now. My grandmother noted that there were awful things that she had witnessed, but she did not want to re-live the memory of them: for her, reading about some of them was enough. It

[17] Adams et al., *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, 58.

was here that I knew that undertaking oral history interviews may cause more harm than good. My grandmother is now ninety and my parents are nearing their seventies—I did not want to upset their life by going through a past that they really didn't want to re-examine or re-explore. This is not uncommon for individuals who have lived through trauma as re-living of an event through revisiting and re-emerging can be very painful. Painter Anjolie Ela Menon, who was a child during Partition, discusses witnessing violence, including the mass killings on trains, and admits that as an artist, "It strikes me as strange that very little art came out of those experiences. I think we don't want to remember."[18] Menon reveals that she and those like her who experienced the atrocities of Partition, do not want to remember what occurred.[19] Similarly, when Aanchal Malhotra interviewed Azra Haq in *The Remnants of Separation*, Haq refused to discuss what she saw when she left India for Pakistan, telling Malhotra, "If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about what I saw. I'm sorry, I cannot speak of those things. I cannot bring them to life again. I don't want to remember them."[20] Menon and Haq both suggest that the trauma they experienced and witnessed, if remembered, will trigger hurt and pain, taking on a life of its own if voiced—here, not discussing the exact location of trauma becomes a form of self-care. Throughout this project, it has become apparent that certain experiences can be written but then are too traumatic to be discussed in detail. Even though I am writing about traumatic familial histories and colonial violence, I do not need to reveal every painful story or revisit and re-examine every traumatic poem. Choosing not to do so can be a radical and powerful form of self-care, particularly when writing and revisiting trauma becomes overwhelming.

[18] Moni Mohsin, "'The Wounds Have Never Healed': Living Through the Terror of Partition," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/02/wounds-have-never-healed-living-through-terror-partition-india-pakistan-1947.

[19] Menon's original testimony that Mohsin has used is from the *Partition Museum* in Amritsar.

[20] Aanchal Malhotra, *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition Through Material Memory* (Uttar Pradesh: Harper Collins, 2017), 69.

While this commentary falls in the field of autoethnography, it does not provide the reader with the entire family narrative. I have not written an entirely confessional collection, nor one that presents everything without ambiguity. There are moments of clarity in my poetry where the narrative is transparent, as it is in "The Blind Mother Of Old Punjab: Our History Walks The Earth," where the reader can easily work out who the poem is about. However, there are other moments where trauma is intentionally hidden within the presentation of the natural world, as seen in "The Forest That Was Never." Even though I have written this poem, it does not mean that I can analyse and revisit the trauma represented within it. Throughout this commentary, I choose not to discuss certain poems such as "The Forest That Was Never" because, at this moment in time, they are still too painful to re-surface. I cannot revisit this poem without it taking me to a past that I do not wish to re-live. Therefore, I choose not to deeply analyse it in this reflection as a form of self-care.

Similarly, I have refrained from writing extensively about my eating disorder due to its triggering nature. The only poem that discusses it to some extent is "My Therapist Listens As I Tell Her," yet even here, I did not, could not delve deeply into the severity of my condition. We should remember that Adams et al. suggest that revisiting traumatic events may disturb the researcher, potentially rendering them "unable to cope or adequately manage…thoughts, feelings, and behaviours when…revisiting these experiences."[21] They argue that it is the researcher's responsibility to determine whether continuing the project will do more good than harm. Here, they specifically reference April Chatham-Carpenter's chapter on her eating disorder from *The Handbook of Autoethnography*, where Carpenter concluded that writing about her eating disorder was worth the risk of relapse, as she believed her narrative could aid others in similar

[21] Adams et al., *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, 63.

circumstances.[22] In contrast, I chose not to explore my eating disorder and its relationship to the transgenerational trauma discussed in my poetry because for me, any potential benefits would be outweighed by the significant risk of relapse, a risk that I was unwilling to take. Even as I write about it now, as Carpenter felt at times, I find myself "cycling downwards into wanting, really wanting, to be thin again."[23]

Nevertheless, even when engaging in self-care, I at times still felt overwhelmed when trying to give oral stories form. When this feeling was most inescapable, I turned to the works of other writers who had addressed themes of trauma, loss, violence, and colonialism. Their writing provided me with hope and the motivation to persevere. By engaging with these writers, I was immersing myself in the field. During this period, I read the works of Pascale Petit (*Tiger Girl*), Jordan Abel (*Nishga*), Yomi Sode (*Manorism*), Anthony Anaxagorou (*Heritage Aesthetics*), Anthony Joseph (*Sonnets for Albert*), Jason Allen-Paisant (*Self-Portrait as Othello),* Stephanie Sy-Quia (*Amnion*), Fatimah Asghar (*If They Come For Us*), Warsan Shire (*Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head)* and many others. I found the collection *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* particularly compelling and interesting due to how it depicted trauma, and in how it explored something painful, despite it being painful. For example, within this collection can be found a mirror poem called "Backwards." Here, the poet revisits trauma, where she not only rewinds a violent event where the stepdad is the perpetrator but also splits the poem into two sections through mirroring, where there is a longing for "Dad" to come back into the speaker's life so that they can feel "loved again." The first three lines read,

> The poem can start with him walking backwards into a room.
>
> He takes off his jacket and sits down for the rest of his life,

[22] Adams et al., *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, 63.

[23] Adams et al., *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, 63.

that's how we bring Dad back.

The last three lines read,

that's how we bring Dad back.

He takes off his jacket and sits down for the rest of his life.

The poem can start with him walking backwards into a room.[24]

In the poem, the speaker declares, "I'll rewrite this whole life and this time there'll be so much love."[25] This assertion is not merely rhetorical, it is actualised through the poem's structural reversal and mirroring. The poem re-imagines how the narrative might have concluded without trauma, despite simultaneously recounting the trauma and pain experienced by the speaker. This poem portrays the vulnerability of the speaker's circumstances, as she addresses a reality that she wished were untrue, one without trauma. I found this poem especially powerful; it resonated with me and made me realise that revisiting trauma in written form can be achieved through various stylistic choices. It is possible to write about painful subject matters through their existence while at the same time wishing for and showing their non-existence. For instance, in the prose poem "White Washing," I chose to present the poem through my grandmother's dreams, where she travels in time through our shared memories. The exploration of memory through a dream presents a narrative that has the potential to disappear, a narrative my grandmother can choose to remember and forget. Similarly, in other instances I chose to explore the possibility of trauma not occurring through what is not being shared, specifically through erasure. For example, in the poem "Is Not our [redacted]," one form of erasure is established through blacking out certain words, where words that point to a specific character are erased, where the person who is causing trauma is erased. If the point of trauma is erased,

[24] Warsan Shire, *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2022), 36–37.

[25] Shire, *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head*, 36.

how can the trauma persist? It does of course, because the erasure does not undo the violence that has been done and the narrative suspended around the erasure still tells the story of violence and trauma.

When I initially began to write about traumatic events, I often felt that what I had written either did not resonate or revealed too much, making me uneasy with what was in front of me on the page. I felt that if I withheld too much information, readers would not be able to connect to the writing. On the other hand, if I became too confessional, I feared that I would not be able to protect the people who the stories belonged to. It was during these moments that I began to experiment with form and in particular, erasure. I altered the structure of my poems to better represent trauma, and at times, obscured the narrative by omitting words. This approach not only protected the identities of those whom the stories belonged, but also shielded both myself and them from further trauma—it was particularly important to do this in order to limit the negative impacts of the project on myself, and those whom I represent.[26] For example, in the poem, "Is Not Our [redacted]," it was crucial to keep a particular identity concealed to protect the characters portrayed in the poem, and to shield myself from the harsh reality of such violence. Here, erasure helped to create a safe space to explore violence. Equally, through the presentation of the blacked-out spaces, I hoped to show readers that they may not ever completely understand the poem because they have not experienced the trauma presented within it. Nevertheless, despite the trauma, what emerges is hope that healing is possible. Although the use of nature imagery through the introduction of "roses," "petals," "flowers" and the process of synthesis play a significant role in obscuring the narrative, they also give way to transformation. Here, characters become less identifiably human as they increasingly identify with flowers, allowing their existence, and the violence prevalent in the poem to become an important

[26] Adams et al., *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, 58.

part of nature, in both its cruelty and wonder. Yet the element of transformation into a new whole, made available through synthesisation, suggests healing and growth are still possible. Overall, the use of erasure in "Is Not Our [redacted]," was able to represent trauma and a hope for future healing.

Equally, the poems "We," and "You Sowed Grief Into Us And It Grew Its Own Mouth," appear consecutively, each portraying an oral narrative that is both eager and reluctant to be voiced. The poems are centred around violation, grief, and loss. Both poems could be perceived as incomplete and nonsensical, but they are a true representation of my own grief and someone else's entwined into one. "We" and "You Sowed Grief Into Us And It Grew Its Own Mouth," posed a crucial question: what are the ethics of writing about someone else's story, when they do not want to be identified but the trauma within the story also belongs to the writer? When discussing consent, Jane Edwards answers this question,

> We need to find a range of acceptable ways to ensure that persons referred to in autoethnography should be advised, and where possible their recall as to what happened should be sought for clarification. If this is not possible a range of alternate options might find satisfactory ethical bounds, such as writing the account as *fiction*, or disguising the others extensively. There is a delicate balancing act involved in getting this right, and what may seem to be advisable in one situation might not be appropriate in another. The challenges arising from the tension between the relational ethic and the ethic of the self in autoethnography are real and ongoing.[27]

[27] Jane Edwards, "Ethical Autoethnography: Is It Possible?," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20 (January 1, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406921995306.

Although I sought permission to write “We” and “You Sowed Grief Into Us And It Grew Its Own Mouth,” the person to whom some of the story in both poems belonged, did not want their identity to be revealed. I then had to find a way to write their experience and my own without revealing their identity. Ultimately, I wrote the poems to live in ambiguity and incompleteness because they reminded me that in my work the trauma that is being revisited is never completely mine to recount, even though it is part of my own experience. Therefore, in “We,” there are physical gaps in the poem that symbolise an incomplete narrative because trauma cannot always be openly discussed. Here, I felt that I had a responsibility to tell this story, without encroaching on someone else’s agency. Striking a balance between telling a story while presenting ambiguity in the same narrative, allowed the poem to live in part fiction and part real life, and in writing it, I shared an important narrative and created more good than harm through recognising someone else’s story and their trauma—both without explicitly discussing it and breaking their trust.

Throughout this project, I have sought to research and document my family’s oral stories with care, recognising that these narratives reflect genuine traumatic lived experiences and engage with a challenging and complex colonial history. Within this process, I have found a space for healing as well as a space to take a step back, to reconsider if writing about a specific trauma will aid in healing or potentially undermine it. By revisiting and writing about the past through traumatic oral stories, memories, and experiences, I have chosen to remember the history of colonial India, the Sikhs and my family. In doing so, I have learned that many wounds can heal, but there are some that struggle to, some that take decades. This project stands as a testament to ongoing healing, with the hope of adding to, expanding and creating a larger space for others to contribute to with their lived experience and stories. Nevertheless, there is still much to be learned from writers who have written about trauma, specifically Sikh writers who do not dominate the

British literary landscape. The next chapter takes a closer look at writers who inspired my practice and made me consider how I represent the Sikh diaspora and British Indians in my writing.

Chapter 2: Voices of the Sikh Diaspora

The Sikh gurus, who laid the foundations of Sikhism, attempted to establish an inclusive religion that embraced all individuals. A significant aspect of this inclusive ideology is characterised by the practice of Langar. As the founder of Sikhi, Guru Nanak insisted, "his disciples were to share meals with others, visitors, strangers, friends and foes alike. Every Sikh was expected to contribute liberally for the maintenance of *Guru Ka Langar.*"[28] Nanak equally rejected the caste system, which paved the way for Sikh temples to be open to everyone regardless of caste. Central to creating an inclusive religion in the form of Sikhi, was the offering of Gurbani (prayer) freely. Although Gurbani was scribed by the Gurus, Gurbani alongside shabad (sung prayers) have always been delivered orally to ensure everyone could access prayer and community, regardless of their background, caste, or education. The continuance of this oral tradition is at the heart of my collection. By translating my family's oral stories, I sought to create a sense of community for those who have not had a chance to voice their stories, as well as those who have not had access to their heritage. In presenting the poetry collection in both English, and transliterated Punjabi, I endeavoured to make these stories accessible to younger generations who may not be proficient in Punjabi or familiar with its oral traditions, yet who still seek connections to their identity. My thesis intends to emphasise the historical and ongoing connections between Sikhs and colonialism, revealing how these connections have created trauma, displacement, and transgenerational trauma within the Sikh community. This chapter specifically revisits the works of Sikh poets who have significantly influenced my practice, writing, and commitment to broadening access and inclusivity within the arts. In addition to this, it not only critically examines how diasporic writers engage with Re-Orientalism but also

[28] Surjit Singh Gandhi, *History of Sikh Gurus Retold: 1606-1708 C.E*. (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Dist, 2007), 1008.

explores the challenges of how an author authentically represents their work without exoticising or wrongly misrepresenting a culture or people. Lastly, it takes a closer look at intentionality, questioning the complex relationship between an author's personal intent and the broader negative and possible harmful interpretations that may overshadow their work.

> When discussing education theory, liberation and pain, bell hooks writes
>
> I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away.[29]

When I first began to journal and write poetry, I did so because I too, "wanted to make the hurt go away." While my pain did not entirely dissipate, writing poetry from my memories and the oral stories passed down to me, alleviated some of the pain I felt. Engaging with the literary space cultivated by Sikh, Punjabi, and other ethnic minority writers facilitated my exploration of both my family's oral stories and those of the wider Sikh diaspora. In reading the works of Sikh writers, I found a space where I could place my hurt. Although the field of poetry is rich with diverse genres and forms, when seeking poetry written by the wider Punjabi Sikh diaspora, the field felt limited. Sikh Punjabi poets currently in print in the English language include Navtej Bharati, Parvinder Mehta, Preeti Kaur Rajpal, as well as more familiar names such as Sandeep Parmar, Mona Arshi (born to Sikh parents), Daljit Nagra, and the most renowned, Rupi Kaur. In their work, I found a home for my poetry. Although these poets write in distinctly different styles, their diverse perspectives helped me find my own voice within my poetry collection. Three Sikh poets who influenced my work the most were Rupi Kaur, Parvinder Mehta and Daljit Nagra.

[29] Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education As the Practice of Freedom.* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 1994), 54.

Rupi Kaur is repeatedly categorised as an Instagram poet, a designation which is not meant to flatter. However, Kaur's popularity is evident in the large audiences who follow her online and who are present at her sell out tours. Kaur may not explicitly address the Sikh diaspora in her work, yet her identity as a Punjabi Sikh woman who has graced the *New York Times* bestseller list is immensely inspirational. She signals to young Sikh girls that they too, can claim spaces historically unwelcoming to ethnic minority writers.[30] I personally found Kaur's poetry to be a valuable resource for examining literature on trauma and healing, especially in her self-published debut poetry collection, *Milk and Honey*. Her work, which explores sexual violence, depression, and recovery, transcends conventional definitions of poetry through its short, sharp lyrics that appear alongside her own hand drawings. For instance, when discussing rape in *Milk and Honey,* Kaur does not do so ambiguously. Her poems within the section "the hurting" are self-aware; there is no hiding here behind metaphor. The descriptions of violation of the poet's body are vivid and they hold the violator, the uncle, accountable for the poet's trauma.[31] Equally, while writing about such violations the poet also draws pictures of her own body throughout the collection, reclaiming her body through every exploration of trauma she undertakes, so that the trauma is not passed onto the next generation. Though some may argue Kaur isn't a traditional poet, her concise verses echo the oral traditions that bind communities, through the speaker telling its story, through the speaker exploring its own history. Sasha Kruger writes that, "In sharing her poetry online, Kaur…connects to cyberspatial sisterhoods,

[30] Ashifa Kassam, "Rupi Kaur: 'There Was No Market for Poetry About Trauma, Abuse and Healing'," *The Guardian*, October 19, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/26/rupi-kaur-poetry-canada-instagramphoto#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThere%20was%20no%20market%20for,had%20captured%20through%20social%20media.

[31] Rupi Kaur, *Milk and Honey* (Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015), 11-41.

demonstrating that healing through narrative is always necessarily collective."[32] Through her reach both online and in print, Kaur makes poetry accessible and inclusive, reflecting a core tenet of Sikh philosophy. In this spirit, like Kaur I aspired to craft short accessible poems such as "The Words Of Bees" and "Citizenship In The UK," where both poems confront transgenerational trauma and its possible transmission and legacy.

Nevertheless, Kaur's work isn't just about representation of her lived experiences and being accessible. Her poetry always questions who gets a voice and who is being heard. Although Sikhi teaches us that everyone deserves respect and that people should be treated with equality and equity, this isn't always the case. It is necessary to note that, although Sikh philosophy tells us that Sikhs should be kind, that they should take part in seva, that men and women are equal, that the caste system should not exist—unfortunately for many Sikhs this remains philosophy. Many Sikhs do not follow the tenets of Sikhi, many will only marry into their own caste, many still impose patriarchy and do not see women as equals to men. Kaur, who is interacting with the poetry that is Gurbani, and who discusses trauma, the female body and Sikhi, could be seen as marginalised. The work of Gayatri Spivak can illuminate Kaur's position as a "subaltern—a person without lines of social mobility."[33] One may argue that Kaur is no longer marginalised as her work has been published and widely read and through this, she has a degree of agency. However, Spivak notes that although the subaltern woman can speak, her freedom is often controlled by colonial power (examined by Spivak through the Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829), by

[32] Sasha Kruger, "The Technopo(E)Litics of Rupi Kaur: (De)Colonial AestheTics and Spatial Narrations in the DigiFemme Age," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 11 (May 2017): 1–33, https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/26772.

[33] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? (Abbreviated by the author)," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 28.

patriarchy, by Whiteness or some other gatekeeper.[34] Though Kaur is a voice who has migrated from the once colonised nation, she is still a post-colonial voice emerging in a country (Canada) where her voice is again marginalised by the dominant Western culture. Kaur has then created space for her voice to be recognised through self-publishing her first collection *Milk and Honey.* Nevertheless, this does not mean that her voice has been heard. Some people will not receive her well, especially within academic circles where her work is not taken seriously because it is deemed Insta poetry. Her candour on taboo subjects such as sexual abuse and menstruation also rile the patriarchal and classist tendencies within Punjabi and Sikh cultures. This informal rejection of her voice is a form of regulation and silencing, the very form of muting and silencing of women's voices which Spivak discusses in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Nonetheless, this regulation of Kaur's voice does not entirely mute her. Kaur has a large following because she represents a lot of people, and she has shown a lot of people that by writing and sharing our grief within a community, we can heal, and through this, social mobility is being improved as sharing experiences can encourage silenced marginalised voices to come forward with their stories. It is important to recognise that Kaur does not pretend that she is a voice who can represent all, but rather one who tries to champion voices who are being censored or forgotten. Although Kaur writes about trauma, while also addressing colonial legacies and patriarchal and cultural marginalisation, her success as a mainstream and accessible poet who is visible does call into question her position as a subaltern woman. However, as a figure who is both marginalised and one who has agency, Kaur shows us how nuanced it is to be a South Asian diasporic writer, how hard it can be to navigate a global stage where some

[34] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea," in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, by Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 47–61, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=584675&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

people feel that you are too privileged to bring attention to marginalised voices, but not privileged enough to be taken seriously as a professional writer.

Kaur's poetry inspired me to write more accessibly, however, when writing poetry about native Indian and diasporic Sikhs, to ensure my poetry was as authentic as possible in relaying specific collective memories of the Sikhs such as the 1984 Sikh genocide, I sought works of Sikh writers who had written poetry about 1984 from familial oral stories and memories. I found Parvinder Mehta's poetry collection, *On Wings of Words*, a vital text to read as Mehta engages with and explores Sikh identity, displacement, forgiveness, trauma, and genocide. One of the most unique features of Mehta's collection is its perspective: it is written by an Indian-born Sikh living in the United States, who has witnessed the Sikh genocide. The collection is organised into seven sections: "Feelings," "Violence," "Dislocations," "Girlhood," "Resistance," "Sikhi," and "Pandemic." The thematic breadth found in Mehta's collection is thoughtfully and carefully balanced. The section on "Feelings" which appears before "Violence," prepares the reader for the sensitive topics to come, as "Feelings" is a section that explores one being comfortable with conflicting emotions, whereas "Violence" is about feeling uncomfortable, feeling an uncontrollable rage. This careful arrangement of poems allows the reader to prepare themselves for the materials and emotions they are about to experience. When writing my poems, I took a similar approach to Mehta and I tried to balance sad poems with playful poems to provide a less disheartening reading experience, and instead one that allows the reader breathing space to understand and feel the poems presented. For example, the sombre poem "Mother In Aria," reflects on my mother's competing priorities as a woman who works and who is a homemaker as well as a mother. It becomes evident in the poem that she could not always be all three women at once, and sometimes her role as a mother was not always prioritised. The speaker's sadness of having an unhappy and absent mother is slightly alleviated by the

following playful and bittersweet poem, "Lychee." The strategic placement of "Lychee" provides the reader with a much-needed cathartic release.

However, not all poems should be placed in a way to offer relief to a previous one. Sometimes it is important to sit with the uncomfortable nature of a poem. In the section titled "Violence," Mehta weaves themes of loss, with many of the poems being deeply disturbing and upsetting, offering no respite from the pain they explore. One particularly harrowing poem, "Colors of Fury," begins with the speaker's vivid memory of a Sikh man being burned to death in front of his mother, who is subsequently murdered.[35] The speaker situates this memory in November—a recollection of the 1984 Sikh genocide. As the poem progresses, it references key indicators of the genocide, such as the mass violence in Delhi. This memory is intertwined with a Partition and post-9/11 context, where the violent repetition of history is noted with the "horrendous twin destruction" of Muslims and Sikhs in "another country, another century."[36] The poem's graphic representation of mutilation and death were hard to read, as it horrifically presents the collective memory of pain and loss experienced by Sikhs in India and the United States, as well as racial attacks that Muslims and Sikhs have endured in North America. By the end of the poem there is a call to do better. The last lines of the poem read;

> Together we must educate errors,
> open history's sealed windows to edify,
> finally dissipate those burning flames
> and dissolve these colors of fury.[37]

[35] Parvinder Mehta, *On Wings of Words* (Kington: Khalis House, 2021), 38.

[36] Mehta, *On Wings of Words*, 41.

[37] Mehta, *On Wings of Words*, 46.

These lines take all the pain and anger of this poem and ask us all to be more tolerant and to honour difference. They echo the Sikh expression "chardi kala" (rising spirits), that no matter how awful the world becomes, it is important that we allow our spirits to rise, that we stay resilient in the face of adversity. This poem made me revisit and explore my mother's and her family's experience of 1984 and the Sikh genocide. I have recorded parts of their stories and memories in the poems "In The April Of 1984," "Gold Dust Floats In A Temple In Punjab," and "The Apparitions of Genocide." Equally, "Colors of Fury" made me realise that the stories of 1984 will never stop being painful, because every time I read this poem goosebumps find their way onto my skin and a tight knot forms in my throat. Although recognising these stories are an important part of healing, they will never not hurt, because they are not stories, they are a representation of someone's painful lived experience.

Another influential Indian poet with a Sikh background who encouraged my work is Daljit Nagra. Renowned for his significant contributions to contemporary South Asian diasporic poetry, his command over form and poetic composition is most notable in his latest collection, *Idiom*. For a short period when I was completing the Advanced Poetry course at Faber Academy, I was mentored by Nagra, who carefully guided my poetic development, prompting a re-evaluation of the poetic forms I used when constructing my poems. Through his mentorship, I began to explore traditional structures such as syllabic verse, ballad, couplet, and sonnet—forms I had not previously received formal training in. This exploration allowed me to experiment with poetic structures to identify and consider how trauma was being represented.

However, when I first encountered Nagra's own writing, I found it quite challenging to navigate. On my initial reading of Nagra's *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* I felt uncomfortable and for a while I couldn't pinpoint why. As I re-read the work, I found

that the way in which Nagra had depicted the Indian diaspora felt unsettling. Sandeep Parmar pinpoints exactly what this unsettling feeling is. While addressing "lyric violence" across social, aesthetic, and cultural contexts, she specifically chooses to discuss Nagra's poem about a shop keeper, "Singh Song," which can be found in *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* While Parmar admires Nagra's poetry and advocacy for "poets of color," and how he innovatively uses the lyric form to portray the British Asian lived experience, she is concerned by what she observes as "slippages" into stereotypes that may be acknowledged without question by his "mostly white" readers. Parmar writes, "Nagra's portrayal of Mr Singh re-voices an imperial fantasy of the 'native peasant', an imbecilic inferiority that lives on in the mind of the English. It originates in the lilting nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian imitations of the military or civil service man of the British Raj turned poet."[38] Parmar's concept of "lyric violence" identifies the danger of how the traditional lyric form, rather than being used imaginatively to communicate authentic diasporic experiences and voices, can instead work to further marginalise them through portraying harmful stereotypes and ideologies. "Lyric violence" is perhaps similar to what Lisa Lau (while drawing from Edward Said's *Orientalism*) terms "re-orientalising," where representations of one's own culture (specifically by a diasporic writer) conform to the prejudiced expectations of the dominant culture.[39]

The concept of the "Orient" as a construct fashioned by the West was initially expressed by Edward Said. *Orientalism* highlighted how Western discourse historically imposed a colonial narrative on Eastern societies, depicting them as exotic, inferior and lacking any autonomy. Said asserts, "Orientalism is not an airy European fantasy about the

[38] Parmar, Sandeep, "Still Not a British Subject: Race and UK Poetry." *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 12, no. 1 (October 9, 2020):18. https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.3384.

[39] Lisa Lau, "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 2 (March 1, 2009): 572 https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x07003058.

Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment," especially through imperialism.[40] Drawing on Said, Lisa Lau notes

> Orientalism has long been evident in the literature written about South Asia from the days of colonialism, which began with non-South Asians writing and representing the Indian Sub-Continent and its people. However, even in contemporary South Asian literature in English by South Asians, the process of Orientalism can be seen to be still occurring.[41]

Writing for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* in a much earlier version of her essay "Still Not a British Subject," Sandeep Parmar addresses this process of Orientalising, or rather self-orientalising, where South Asian writers feel they must assume and internalise harmful stereotypes and representations. She argues,

> The proliferation of difference — no, the expectation from a mainly white British readership that poets of color must grapple with the longing of exile and alienation by fixating on exotic tropes (a confluence of saris, mangoes, pomegranates, arranged marriages) — is evidence that British poetry lacks nuanced, fluid, transcultural paradigms of racial and national identity. Let us remember, too, that immigration and its narratives are constantly shifting. I refuse to unthinkingly reproduce the traumatic race divides of my grandparents' and my mother's generation: BAME poets, myself included, need new, bolder ways to self-determine.[42]

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[40] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Editions, 1979), 6.

[41] Lisa Lau, "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 2 (March 1, 2009): 572 https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x07003058.

[42] Sandeep Parmar, "Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK" | *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Los Angeles Review of Books, December 6, 2015, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/not-a-british-subject-race-and-poetry-in-the-uk/.

Parmar makes a bold statement to not "reproduce the traumatic race divides" of her grandparents' and mother's generation. Yet is it as simple as this? In an interview with the writer Balvinder Banga, Kavita Bhanot remarked that

> as writers, we have been formed by this [English] literary tradition – influenced by Hanif Kureishi, by these other writers you talk about; Jane Austen, Charles Dickens. The very form of the novel comes from a certain culture, ideology, history. But the worlds that we write about, our characters, are not part of that tradition. And that's where the conflict comes in: because we're writing about characters who are from Punjab, from villages, who carry a different history, culture, worldview, all of which are not recognised by, or are dismissed as backward and uncivilised within this intellectual, literary, political tradition. Even the English language itself can't recognise these without judgement, without framing. This is what we have to grapple with in our writing.[43]

Considering Bhanot's identification of the strict structures of English language and literature that British Asians must write within, it is then perhaps harder to come to terms with Parmar's concept that British Asian writers must "self-determine" bold and new ways to discuss their culture.[44] When writing in the English tradition, even when the author adopts an experimental approach, it is extremely hard to avoid engaging with "exotic tropes" that may establish harmful stereotypes about both diasporic South Asians, as well as native South Asians—because often we still have a lot to say about "exotic tropes" such as arranged marriages as they are still such a common occurrence in our culture.

[43] Kavita Bhanot and Balvinder Banga, "'Writers Kavita Bhanot and Balvinder Banga in Conversation: South Asian Diasporic Literature, Culture and Politics,'" *South Asian Popular Culture* 12, no. 2 (May 4, 2014): 123–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2014.937025.

[44] Parmar, "Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK."

Nevertheless, this push and pull that Bhanot identifies in South Asian writing is a conflict between authentic writing, self-determination, "lyric violence" and "Re-Orientalism," which can all be seen in practice littered throughout Daljit Nagra's collection, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* For example, the poem "Arranged Marriage," fixates on the exotic trope of arranged marriage and the rituals that come with it, and this is particularly prevalent in the third stanza which uncomfortably reads,

> Granny hobbled out a ladoo
> and crashed it home with prune
> fingers — the mash of their beads
> on my gritted teeth, a feast
> for flies, as the preacher chorused
> the whole hush-temple rose.[45]

This stanza portrays Indian marriage rituals in a negative light, where the sweetening of the mouth after marriage is accepted by the speaker with "gritted teeth, a feast for flies." Although a sweetening of the mouth is often meant to be a blessing for future happiness, here the act is instead imbued with images of pain with the speaker's "gritted teeth," and decay with the "feast for flies." Then the sweetening serves more as an acceptance of the speaker's predetermined and bleak fate of a loveless marriage. This fate is perhaps why the speaker expresses such strong loathing toward the sweetening of the mouth, indicating a lack of cultural empathy stemming from his own personal discomfort. Nagra's valuable exploration of arranged marriage within this poem reflects on the harmful cultural norms that South Asians can take part in. As an Indian reader, I feel the discomfort of the speaker in this poem. My own mother was forced into an arranged marriage at a young age, and I capture my parents' arranged marriage from my mother's perspective in the poem, "When

[45] Daljit Nagra, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), 20.

Taljinder Met Tarlochan." Nevertheless, just because Nagra discusses an "exotic trope" such as arranged marriage, it does not necessarily mean he re-orientalises. Rather, he conveys the speaker's authentic experience—one that we may not be comfortable with because of its negative portrayal of certain aspects of Indian culture.

Similarly, upon my initial reading of the poem, "On the Birth of a Daughter," I again experienced a sense of discomfort reading it as the poem veered towards presenting possible harmful stereotypes. Here the speaker explores the birth of a daughter within the context of an unwanted arranged marriage. Within the poem there is a notable absence of empathy from the speaker towards their newborn daughter, where a handful of harmful descriptions of the daughter in the text evoke a sense of "Re-Orientalism." The poem, like "Arranged Marriage," retains a negative tone. Here, the birth is attributed to the mother's "subterfuge."[46] The speaker then notes, "It wasn't that you / were so late you were / nearly punch-drunk / or stillborn," equating the baby's birth to extreme violence or death, which is followed by imagery rooted in stereotypical representations, "Nor was it your full black / woman's lips, flushed / like a fresh cut" and "Or your slant oriental eyes — blind / to the forced marriage drawing you in."[47] The unhappiness that comes with a daughter being born in this poem also reflects the South Asian stereotype that most families only value sons over daughters, which can be quite a destructive and hurtful representation. Nevertheless, these lines reflect the speaker's sense of oppression within the forced marriage, projecting violent and negative sentiments onto the memory of the daughter's birth. However, the speaker then delivers the agonising line, "It was simply this: / you didn't look like us. / You looked for all the world / that you'd almost pass / for anybody's baby."[48] Here, the

[46] Daljit Nagra, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, 20.

[47] Daljit Nagra, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, 20.

[48] Daljit Nagra, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, 20.

negative descriptions imply that the baby does not resemble the parents because she is a product of an unhappy arranged marriage. As we arrive at the end of the poem, the speaker seeks a form of redemption in the lines, "I loved you for your genetic slip / from our messy family business," indicating that despite the speaker's feelings of entrapment within an arranged marriage and the daughter being a product of this, there remains a presence of love.[49] Clare Pollard observes that this poem stuck with her because it can say a difficult thing by "bravely plunging into the politics of parenthood."[50] Even though there is an engagement with stereotypes and exotic tropes in this poem, they do not define it. What emerges is messier, it is the speaker's lived experience, and it is open to many interpretations. One interpretation being, that the poem explores the truth of loving a child, despite not wanting a child. In utilising stereotypes to convey conflicting feelings and the British Asian experience, "On the Birth of a Daughter," plays with and complicates their use.

Both Lisa Lau and Cristina Mendes argue "Re-Orientalism" "is based on how cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an orientalized East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether."[51] While Nagra's work may indeed appeal to Western readers, he not only plays along with Western expectations but also discards them. It is crucial to recognise that, as a member of the diaspora and someone navigating two distinct cultures, Nagra uses voice and his own lived experience as a British Asian in "Arranged Marriage" and "On the Birth of a Daughter" to reflect the meeting of British and Indian

[49] Daljit Nagra, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, 20.

[50]Clare Pollard, "The Poetry of Parenthood," Poetry School, August 6, 2014, https://poetryschool.com/new-courses/the-poetry-of-parenthood/.

[51] Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes, "Introducing re-Orientalism: A New Manifestation of Orientalism," in *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other Within.* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1.

cultures.[52] As Parmar has already noted, this duality often emphasises the difficulties of living with and representing a complex dual identity. Additionally, the speaker in Nagra's poems depicts the challenging perspective of being manipulated by the elders within their culture, presenting South Asians in a negative light based on the speaker's personal experience. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to claim that Nagra is solely "re-orientalising" or intentionally perpetuating both "lyric violence" and "exotic tropes." Instead, Nagra is simply portraying a different perspective and experience.

However, the fact that an author may not intentionally set out to engage in a self-orientalising fantasy or "re-orientalise," does not prevent other readers and writers from interpreting it in this manner. Unfortunately, as Lau argues, although it may not be the case that "diasporic authors necessarily have any insidious intention, or consciously conceived aim, to re-Orientalise, but that it is precisely their positionality, both individual and collective positionality, that has rendered this process of Re-Orientalism so widespread as to be almost inevitable in the genre."[53] The very act of writing about one's culture can inherently place an author in the uncomfortable position of being perceived as reinforcing stereotypes, contributing to "lyric violence" or creating a "re-orientalising" narrative.

My poetry could be grouped in the "re-orientalising" category. Like Nagra, I write extensively about my Sikh Punjabi heritage and my distinctly British upbringing. For example, the poem "Kali Ma and Our Only Ballad of Hope" was written from my memories of being ill with typhoid fever in India when I was five years old. My mother assumed Mata, a form of the divine goddess had made me ill, so she took me to several temples, both Sikh and Hindu, praying for my recovery. While my memories are hazy, I

[52] See also, The Herald. "Singh Songs," January 27, 2007. https://www.heraldscotland.com/default_content/12763246.singh-songs/; The Scotsman. "I'm interested in how we get on – whether lower or upper caste." January 7, 2008. https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/books/im-interested-in-how-we-get-on-whether-lower-or-upper-caste-2460114.

[53] Lau, "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals," 574.

vividly recall seeing a statue of Kali Ma. During one fever dream, I repeatedly envisioned Kali Ma while hearing my grandmother softly recite the Sikh Ballad of Hope, “Asa Di Vaar.” A few days later, my uncle returned from a business trip, when he realised the severity of my illness, he drove me three hours to Delhi where I was admitted to a paediatric hospital. After treatment my fever broke. Reflecting upon this poem now, one might argue that I have depicted Kali Ma in an othering and stereotypical manner in her ferocious portrayal:

> Her mouth opened in an endless croon,
> she eyed me with onyx
> binding her eternity to my years of six;
> her multiple arms asking for an embrace,
> her body statued,
> her foot resting on a tiger’s face,
> her skin flushed black,
> tongue tipped red like her hands
> that held the weapons
> she wielded on the damned.

Here, Kali Ma is written not only to be feared but also respected as the protector of women and children. It is crucial to acknowledge that her role as a protector is intrinsically linked to the fear she inspires. In this poem I depicted her to be as ferocious as her appearances were in my visions, where her representation symbolises the diverse religious practices of South Asians and expresses how comfort can be attained from a deity who inspires both fear and respect. The representation of Kali Ma in this poem could be perceived as an exotic stereotype by some readers, however, she becomes so much more when we begin to see her as a feminist deity who protects beyond Hinduism. Here, as a diasporic writer, it is

even more important to remember that ambiguity in poetry is celebrated because it allows readers to have their own interpretation, which is an important part of the reading experience. Yet, the context my poems exist in become problematic because they can fall into the "re-orientalising" category and therefore are not allowed to be interpreted freely. It is then important for readers to keep an open mind when it comes to reading the works of diasporic writers, so that we are actively and empathetically trying to take in the experience presented to us on the page.

Equally, the poem "Turmeric Weeping" could be seen as another instance of "re-orientalising," not only through presenting a romanticised view of my grandfather, but also through engaging with Parmar's "exotic tropes" in the mention of my grandmother's pilgrimage, "turmeric" and "Kashmiri roses"— all three of which could be perceived as exotic imagery that the speaker, that I, utilise to pine for the homeland. However, I did not feel compelled to, as Parmar writes, "grapple with the longing of exile and alienation by fixating on exotic tropes." [54] Growing up, I was embarrassed by my culture. In fact, I really wanted to be White, which isn't unusual for diasporic children. So, when revisiting my childhood in "Turmeric Weeping," my preoccupation here was to remember my grandfather. Therefore, revisiting my memories of living with him during my summer holidays in "Turmeric Weeping" felt liberating, almost like reclaiming a past I was ashamed of. Within this poem, it was my intention to go back to a summer that I felt I had misspent. The mention of my grandmother's pilgrimage to the five holy seats of power was a factual detail intended to convey her absence and that I missed her. Consequently, references to my culture and upbringing become even more evident. That summer, I slept in my grandmother's bed to feel closer to her. She kept a powder pot of Kashmiri roses on her bedside table, which you could smell as soon as you walked into the room. I reference

[54] Parmar, "Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK | Los Angeles Review of Books."

the “turmeric” in the poem because my grandfather, who had pulmonary fibrosis, was always on a health kick and drank homemade juice with turmeric every morning. When writing the poem, I found this detail amusing considering the millennial obsession with juicing and the appropriation of turmeric in various concoctions. As a child, I didn’t enjoy these juices, but as an adult, I make the exact same one. This is not because I want to juice or nostalgically long for a homeland I scarcely know, but rather to remember that summer with my grandfather. The references to “roses” and “turmeric” in the poem were not intended as “exotic tropes,” but rather images that have burned into my memory. Yet, their very mention, particularly the reference to “turmeric” in the final line— “In the end, before he left, he planted turmeric into our wounds”—can indeed appear as an “exotic trope,” especially to readers unaware that some South Asians, including my family, use turmeric for its healing properties, especially when dressing wounds. In the poem, my grandfather’s eventual death represents the wound, while the memory of him serves as the “turmeric” healing the hurt left by his absence. When writing as a South Asian, it is hard to steer clear of “re-orientalising,” or even “lyric violence” because just through association, as Lau notes, diasporic writers who talk about their heritage will be categorised as “re-orientalising” as well as engaging with harmful stereotypes.

Again, it is important to remember that writing is always open to interpretation, and the fear of “re-orientalising” should not limit our creative expression, even if writing authentically means we may be misread. Writers should be aware of “re-orientalising” and write as ethically as they can with this in mind, leaving interpretation open to the reader. Therefore, when writing about my heritage, I do so with the belief that discussing it will ethically bring more good than harm. Through this process, I aim to reclaim my cultural narrative from the colonial gaze. My intention is to write authentically, ensuring that I do not misrepresent diasporic Indian Sikhs. However, I am aware that interpretations of my

work may vary, and not all readers will be familiar with the specific cultural references embedded within it. It is increasingly important to acknowledge that the claim South Asian diasporic writers are engaging in "re-orientalising," and the view that they are not, are both valid and merit careful consideration. Multiple truths can coexist, and understanding this complexity is essential in allowing diasporic writing the time and space it needs to develop. Nevertheless, engaging with diasporic literature in this thesis, particularly through the works of Sikh poets, has helped my writing develop. These works have provided critical insights into the authentic representation of South Asian diasporic Sikhs living under the backdrop of post-colonialism, while also addressing state violence, sexual violence, migration, arranged marriages, displacement, and racism. My exploration of Sikh poets' writings has allowed me to acknowledge the uniqueness and validity of perspectives from the wider Sikh and South Asian community.

Chapter 3: Punjabi Sikhs Arriving in the Heart of the Industrial Empire

Between 1963-1969, my paternal grandparents and their children including my father, all came to Britain in search of a safe home. They would all eventually gain British citizenship. At sixteen years old, my mother too would make the same journey in the late 80s and gain citizenship by marrying my father. I could say that my family chose to leave India, a lie they told themselves; marriage forced my mother out, and the rest of my family left because a point came where they were uncomfortable in their own country. When I was a child, my grandparents would tell me that they chose to work and settle in England, where, to begin with, my grandfather would first make the journey alone in 1963. He would rebuild a life from only what he could pack into his suitcase and with the little wages he could save. However, the truth is that my grandfather, and my grandmother (who would arrive in Britain in 1969) were trying to escape the harrowing experience of living in Punjab by building a new life in England.

Shinder S. Thandi writes that the reasons for Punjabi migration to the UK are varied and are still contested by scholars.[55] He identifies that many of the push factors that persuaded Punjabis to leave India

> included demographic pressures leading to fragmentation of already meagre landholdings, low levels of income due to both small landholdings and lack of off-farm employment opportunities, economic dislocation caused by the 1947 Partition and, especially important in the case of Sikhs, service in the British Indian army. The main pull factor was the increased demand for labour in war-devastated

[55] Shinder S. Thandi, "Punjabi Migration, Settlement and Experience in the UK," in *Migration, Mobility and Multiple Affiliations: Punjabis in a Transnational World*, ed. S Irudaya Rajan, Aswini Kumar Nanda, and V J Varghese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 106.

> Britain, despite the long journey. Lack of domestic workers meant that many manufacturing industries, especially those requiring unskilled labour, and public services, such as the public transport system, needed 'ready-made' labour.[56]

He continues to note that post-war pioneer Punjabi migrants were young men in their early 20s, illiterate or semi-literate, with farming or rural backgrounds. Although they may have been poor, they were not pushed out of their homelands due to poverty.[57] Thandi's conclusions don't apply to the lived experiences of all emigrant Punjabis; for instance, my grandfather was not illiterate, nor did he hail from a farming background. Equally, Thandi's suggestion that Punjabi's were "economic migrants *par excellence*," contradicts the story and history of my grandparent's life and their migration to England.[58]

My grandparents did a very good job of convincing themselves that they only left India to find better work opportunities. It is a lie that becomes harder to believe when one learns that after WW2, although Britain wanted work labour from oversees, they did not want labour from the colonies. Ian Sanjay Patel reveals that Britain's drive to build the country back to its former self, meant that in 1947 they first recruited white Europeans to fill the vacuum left in home industries.[59] However, large vacancies still remained, and Britain refused to recruit from colonies as they "perceived colonial labour to be unskilled by definition."[60] Yet, migrants (from the colonies and former colonies) like my grandparents still came to Britain and began to fill the vacancies within home industries, whether Britain liked it or not. I find it fascinating that my grandfather chose to settle in a

[56] Thandi, "Punjabi Migration, Settlement and Experience in the UK," 106–7.

[57] Thandi, "Punjabi Migration, Settlement and Experience in the UK," 107.

[58] Thandi, "Punjabi Migration, Settlement and Experience in the UK," 107.

[59] Ian Sanjay Patel, *We're Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire* (London: Verso Books, 2021), 62.

[60] Patel, *We're Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire*, 64.

country that drained the wealth of his home, a drain that Utsa Patnaik underestimates at "£9,184.41 billion from 1765-1938," a "sum [that] amounts to ten times the United Kingdom's entire annual GDP for 2015."[61] I find it even more horrifying that he chose to settle in a country that had caused so much violence within the communities he grew up amongst, a country that still did not value nor want him. My grandfather's need to leave his birth country was rooted in the negative aftereffects of colonialism, which created a landscape so intolerable that Indians wanted to leave under any circumstances.

What I'd like to underline here, is that behind the guise of my grandparents and parents moving to Britain to find work, lies the haunting legacy of empire and the traumas that it left behind for Punjabi Sikhs. These traumas rooted in colonialism would include the internalisation of violence against Indians perpetrated by the British, the loss of their spiritual home (Punjab), food insecurity, the threat of disease and famine, the Partition of Punjab and finally, Operation Blue Star and the Sikh genocide and pogroms that followed. These traumas would all thwart any of their desires to go back to their homeland. Post-independence and in the decades to come, many Sikhs would leave Punjab and arrive in Britain never to return permanently to India again. It was not easy for emigrants such as my grandparents to gain British citizenship; it was not easy for them to leave their home, and it certainly was not easy for them to resettle in the country that once colonised them, and one that still did not want them.

Considering the way in which imperial history has been forgotten, rewritten and neglected, it is important to note that Black and Brown individuals are not in the UK because empire graced them with the right to do so, but rather out of need. They came

[61] Utsa Patnaik, "Revisiting the 'Drain', or Transfers From India to Britain in Context of Global Diffusion of Capitalism," in *Agrarian and Other Histories*, ed. Shubhra Chakrabarti and Utsa Patnaik (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2017), 311.

from countries that had been pillaged by the British, they came as working migrants, and they came from their country back to the coloniser to find a piece of their home. This trajectory arose due to the British Nationality Act 1948 which allowed "a non-White person born in colonial Kenya or Jamaica" or anywhere else that had been colonised by the British, to enjoy "identical citizenship, on equal terms, to Winston Churchill."[62] This may have seemed like a positive incentive from the British Government but in fact, it was just another way to control the rights and fate of Brown and Black individuals, and as Patel writes, it "was a conscious attempt to keep Britain's post-war imperial ambitions intact."[63]

When British colonies fell across the world, Britain and the Crown still influenced their subjects, not only through the Commonwealth of Nations but also through further laws introduced in the UK such as the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 and 1968, and the Immigration Act 1971, which all chipped away at migrants' rights to attain British citizenship without state interference. In the 1950s, between the British Nationality Act 1948 (a year after India's Partition fell into place) and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, which ended the automatic right of British citizenship—it was not easy for Black and Brown individuals to enter Britain.[64] I recall my grandmother often saying that the years she spent separated from my grandfather while he worked in England and she remained in India were the hardest years of her life because she had neither the capital or the legal right to reunite with her husband and settle in Britain.

My collection of poetry deals with the reverberation of colonisation in the present: this includes how trauma has formed in the lives of Punjabi Sikhs entering England over a

[62]Patel, *We're Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire*, 5.

[63] Patel, *We're Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire*, 5.

[64]Amelia Gentleman, "Home Office Tried to 'Sanitise' Staff Education Module on Colonialism," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jun/10/home-office-tried-to-sanitise-staff-education-module-on-colonialism.

decade after the British Raj fell, after Partition and after Operation Blue Star. Understanding and tracing my family's migration story begins with my grandfather who passed away in 2013.

Shortly after WW2, my grandfather worked as a munitions record keeper in the British Indian Army. He then went on to become a Patwari, the Punjabi word for village accountant, or the land surveyor and record keeper of landownerships and the crops grown in each area. After the war it became increasingly difficult for my grandfather to keep up with the cost of living in India, while also providing for his family without accepting bribes to ignore landowners breaking agricultural laws. It was only due to my grandfather's previous job as a munitions record keeper that he was able to apply and be granted a permit to work in the UK through a voucher scheme.

The loss of my grandfather's diaries and his personal account means that I did not know the exact date of his entry into the UK. I searched through old legal documents and came across his British citizenship certificate which identifies that he became a citizen in 1969, and his passport of that same year reads that he was a cold saw operator in a foundry. I finally came across an application for permanent residency in Canada for my grandfather, grandmother and his two young children. The third page of the document clarified that from October 1963 to September 1980, my grandfather had worked in an Iron & Steel Trade Union in Bilston, West Midlands. These records are of great importance because they provide a face to history. Contrary to the ignorant belief that it was easy for Black and Brown individuals to enter and live in Britain, these documents tell us that there was a lot of red tape preventing migrants from not only gaining citizenship but also remaining in Britain and living comfortably.

Nevertheless, my grandfather chose to permanently settle in England. The work he undertook was completely unfamiliar to him and required new skills. In the 1960s he

would have been classed as a low-skilled blue-collar labourer; however, this was far from the truth. While examining family archives, I came across multiple hand-drawn engineering paperwork for angles, temperatures, and types of steel that he had to manage and control. The work he undertook was in fact highly skilled and the conditions of the foundry in the 1960s were dangerous. Foundries were hot, humid, and brimming with acid, molten steel and metal fumes. The possibility of being maimed in a foundry was very high. Eventually, this work resulted in my grandfather developing occupational Pulmonary Fibrosis, a condition that occurs when the lungs are damaged and scarred. The fumes he inhaled in the foundry eventually led to his death. It was a condition that is now found to be common amongst employees who work in an environment rife with various forms of dust and fumes (wood, mineral, metal).[65] He, and the life he created in Britain, were a part of the legacy that empire left behind—a legacy that I have explored in the poem "In The Graveyard of Colony."

I often feel that the job my grandfather undertook in England did not reflect his educational background, and I often wonder how this made my grandfather feel. My grandfather was born into a community of weavers. By caste he would be labelled a low born Julaha. His father was a weaver by profession. He would weave cloth on a loom, and he had two employees that worked for him. At the time this was quite profitable, and my great grandfather was able to pay for his two daughters' education as well as my grandfather's. Although my great aunts did not continue their education, my grandfather did. My grandfather was privileged in that he was born a male into a patriarchal society. He could seek work and be easily accepted into Indian society, whereas educated women were less likely to be accepted, hence why my great aunts did not complete their education

[65] Samuel P. Tretheway and Gareth I Walters, "The Role of Occupational and Environmental Exposures in the Pathogenesis of Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis: A Narrative Literature Review," *Medicina* 54 (2018): 108, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6306764/pdf/medicina-54-00108.pdf.

and became homemakers. My grandfather, however, went onto complete a course on metrics. This led to him working as a munitions record keeper in the British Indian Army and then as a land surveyor. It was in the latter profession that his Urdu improved, and he learned Farsi and Sanskrit to interpret old land documents to solve disputes between landowners and tenants. I recall my grandfather always having a thirst for knowledge. His evenings would be spent watching a carousel of news shows. He would not watch television to escape his reality but would rather watch several news channels to understand different perspectives of the same story. He would equally read numerous newspapers from across the spectrum to listen to different voices. After retiring, he wrote and published a nine-hundred-page book on the history of the Sikhs while he was ill, and posthumously he appeared in a BBC documentary *The Story of The Turban*, where he is shown riding down the motorway on his motorcycle, breaking the law by not wearing a helmet, rather wearing his turban (27:25-27:31).[66] I do not believe that I owe a debt to the British empire, but rather a debt to those first, second and third wave migrants such as my grandfather and grandmother who worked hard, who placed their family before their own needs, who came before us and forever changed the evolution of the UK. These migrants who arrived in the UK after the Indian, African, and Caribbean colonies fell, were pioneers of who we would become today.

I had often wondered why my grandfather and those like him (Punjabi Sikhs) migrated to the UK to create and be a part of the Punjabi Sikh diaspora. The simple answer to this would be, as Ambalavaner Sivanandan, a writer and activist who came to Britain in 1953, declared: "We are here, because you were there." [67] Yet it is not this straightforward. Many migrants left Punjab right after independence and decades later because the British

[66]BBC, *The Story of The Turban* (BBC), 2012.

[67]Patel, *We're Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire*, 1.

Raj had irrevocably changed the landscape and race relations between the Indian people. The Raj left behind a terrain of historical violence against the people of Punjab, where the fear of this violence is kept alive through cultural memory. This chapter will go on to explore traumas experienced by my family, Punjabis, and Sikhs as a direct result of British rule in India. I take a closer look at the Jallianwala Bagh massacre 1919, food insecurity, famine and disease, the Partition of India 1947, and Operation Blue Star 1984. Through my family's oral stories that I have translated into poetry, I explore the traumas these events have created in their lives.

Law and Order

I do not see Punjab as the motherland or a second home. I have visited Punjab only once and it wasn't a trip I particularly enjoyed as I became quite ill with typhoid fever. In fact, much of what I saw of Punjab as a child made me not want to return. However, my interest in Punjab lies in how much I do not understand or know about it—how much of this land is connected to my family history, a history that I often feel severed from. This is not an unusual feeling for a British born Indian, and not unusual because my grandparents and parents left Punjab for Britain. What is perhaps unusual is that my grandparents and parents no longer felt that India was their home. As a child, when I would ask them if they would ever go back to settle, the answer would be, "There is nothing left for us there." This sort of fracture, this division from one's birthplace doesn't happen overnight. It occurs slowly, through generations, especially when one has lived under colonial rule.

When the Sikh Empire was dismantled by the British in 1849, the ties Sikhs had to Punjab would weaken. The coloniser would change the meaning of what home meant. The bloodshed and negativity associated with the birthplace of Sikhism would make Sikhs like

my grandfather leave; and when they left, they would also try to leave its history behind too. My father would often say, to live in India is to always question what form of violence you may walk into. When he first came to England, he was bullied for his skin colour, the turban he wore and the broken English he spoke, but soon he settled into a community. Although he had to contend with racism, the fear of violence wasn't present in England in the same sense it was when he thought about Punjab, yet he still feared violence would find him in Britain. I often feel that this fear of violence is ingrained in individuals who left Punjab, a fear passed onto the next generation. Even as a child living with my grandmother, I quickly recognised that she was very fearful of violence. Before going to sleep, she would lock every single door, in the evenings she would close all the windows in fear that someone may throw a petrol bomb through. This fear of violence felt by older generations who left Punjab, (like my grandparents and parents) is a remnant of colonial violence, a fear that the almost mythic violence of the past will make a return.

This fear is not unfounded. An infamous example in Punjabi history of such violence is the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. I first came across the Jallianwala Bagh massacre not through oral stories but rather through my PhD research. This research prompted the first discussions of the massacre in our family. Jallianwala Bagh was a defining moment in history because it truly showed the might of British violence, and it motivated Indians to fight for independence.

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre occurred when fears of Indians revolting against the British were widespread. On the 13th of April 1919, protesters who did not agree with the Rowlatt Act 1919, gathered in Jallianwala Bagh. Not only were they protesters, but also individuals who were celebrating the Sikh festival of Baisakhi.[68] In response to this

[68] Kim A. Wagner, *Amritsar 1919: An Empire of Fear and the Making of a Massacre* (London: Yale University Press, 2019), xix.

public gathering, General Reginald Edward Harry Dyer, a British officer in the Bengal Army, had concluded that "he was going to strike a blow at a conspiracy [against the British Raj] which he imagined stretched across India and of which one of the principal centres seemed to be Amritsar." He had "to do something more drastic, to raise the level of violence to a mark sufficient to put a stop to the conspiracy and to punish its supporters."[69] Derek Sayer writes that

> Within thirty seconds of his arrival [at Jallianwala Bagh] Dyer ordered his men to open fire. No warning was given, nor was there any demand that the crowd disperse. The firing continued for ten minutes; in all, 1,650 rounds were spent. Dyer ordered fire to be focused where the crowd was thickest, including the exits. He only gave the order to cease fire when his ammunition was virtually exhausted. According to official figures, 379 people were killed and over 1,200 wounded; Indian estimates are much higher.[70]

The massacre was gruesome and unimaginable. When my grandmother and my father revisited the history of Jallianwala Bagh, they were very aware of it but didn't seem to think that it was an important story to tell their children. However, when they understood how I was revisiting this history, they began to discuss how bad the British had been. I'm not sure that my parents' and grandparents' generation will ever completely be comfortable discussing or recognising how awful colonialism was because they were in the eye of the storm. They would see Britain as their saviour, a country they could settle in where they were unlikely to starve or experience violence, even though they would still fear both. They would not see Britain as the country that drained the wealth of Punjab and created

[69] Nigel Collet, *The Butcher of Amritsar: General Reginald Dyer* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005), 255.

[70] Derek Sayer, "British Reaction To The Amritsar Massacre 1919–1920," *Past & Present* 131, no. 1 (January 1, 1991): 130–64, https://doi.org/10.1093/past/131.1.130.

decades of division between Indians. They would feel so grateful to be able to settle in Britain that they would ignore of forgive the actions of the coloniser. I chose to write about the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in the poem "Jallianwala Bagh," not because it was a story I was told by my parents or grandparents, not because it was a defining moment in history, not because it marked a step towards India's independence, but rather because Punjabis who left Punjab still fear violence on this scale (not always realising where the fear comes from). Over a hundred years on, this event still has an impact on the way people who know or have a connection to this history live their lives. I wrote the poem "Jallianwala Bagh" because I didn't know anything about it. Like my grandparents and parents, I did not recognise how badly the British had behaved in India. I wrote the poem "Jallianwala Bagh" because I could not believe the horror of it. I wrote it in part to mark my ignorance, because like me, there are many readers who do not know about Jallianwala Bagh and I wanted to make this history more accessible through my poetry.

When researching the massacre and trying to understand the effects of witnessing violence, I came across two eyewitness testimonies that recounted the trauma they saw and experienced during the massacre. These testimonies informed my creative process when writing the poem "Jallianwala Bagh." The first account was from butcher Mohammed Ismail, who watched the massacre from the roof of his house and gave his account:

> After the Gurkhas had left, I went to the Bagh to look for my maternal uncle's son. Corpses were lying all over… My estimate of person I saw lying was 1500. There were especially large heaps of corpses at the corners on both side of Riazul Hasan's house near the well, as also at the corner near Meva Singh's Burj and along the well facing the platform where the troops had fired…I saw some children lying dead. Khair-ud-Din Teli of Mandi had his child, six or seven months old in his arms…

The second account came from Sardar Partap Singh who acknowledged:

> When I entered, a dying man asked for water. There is a drain that carries water from the canal Darbar Sahib… it is called Hansli. The drain is covered, but there is a pit connected with it which is about 4 feet square. When I tried to take water from that pit, I saw many dead bodies floating in it. Some living men had also hid themselves in it…[71]

Although these witnesses can recount the events of Jallianwala Bagh, I sensed a profound absence of emotion in their testimonies. This absence may partly be present because the written word is not always able to accurately capture their lived experience. Equally, this absence may also stem from the way they relive the trauma, as they share their experiences without identifying any emotions because they are so traumatised and emotionally stunned by their trauma. When discussing trauma testimonies regarding the Holocaust and the responses to them, Dominick LaCapra notes that,

> In testimonies the survivor as witness often relives traumatic events and is possessed by the past. These are the most difficult parts of testimony for the survivor, the interviewer, and the viewer of testimonies. Response is a pressing issue, and one may feel inadequate or be confused about how to respond and how to put that response into words.[72]

The most difficult part of reading these testimonies was trying to control my own emotional response. La Capra writes that empathy is hard to control, it is "bound up with a transferential relation to the past, and it is arguably an affective aspect of understanding which both limits objectification and exposes the self to involvement or implication in the

[71] Collet, *The Butcher of Amritsar: General Reginald Dyer,* 262.

[72] Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 97.

past, its actors, and victims."[73] More so, it exposed me to the fact that I couldn't change the past or take someone's pain away. All I could do was make readers aware of it. Months after I wrote critically about the massacre, a poem came to me from not only a distance from the historical event, but also a distance from my initial empathetic response. "Jallianwala Bagh" is a cold poem that delivers the facts of what occurred as is described in the second line of each stanza. However, it is also a poem that is driven by empathy which can be seen in the third line of each stanza (which connects to the first line of each stanza) where a metaphor is delivered to reveal the violence that is occurring against the human body. For example, "in a square cornered" delivers a fact— people trapped in the Bagh on the day of the massacre. Yet the next line, "by daggered sunlight shoot," (which then connects to the first line in the next stanza "the Indians") informs us of the violence that is being unleashed by the British Indian Army on the bodies of Indians gathered in the Bagh. Here, the unnatural nature of the violence is emphasised by "sunlight," as the sun is usually a source of warmth, energy and life, but here it is violently "daggered" and represents colonial violence which is ending lives. Therefore, "Jallianwala Bagh" is both a cold and emotive poem that revisits the historical event while also providing an empathetic response by recognising how Indians were murdered by the coloniser.

Before writing this poem, I examined accounts of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and my grandmother's knowledge of it and I was disturbed by the atrocities committed against defenceless individuals. There were numerous ways I could have approached writing a poem about this event. Initially, I considered adopting the flash fiction form, but I always drifted back towards the lyric form. This stylistic choice provided a space to

[73] LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 2014, 102.

explore my horror and sadness, allowing me to structure the event into a poem that almost serves as a memorial.

My empathetic response in this poem is facilitated by the lyric form. When exploring the ethics and aesthetics of the lyric form and its purpose, Gregory Orr writes:

> The personal lyric is everywhere and always because it helps people survive. It is uniquely qualified to dramatize two primary experiences we all encounter: there is a lot of disorder and randomness or accident in the world, and we need and are reassured by a certain amount of order and pattern. When a poet experiences disorder, she turns her experience into words. She turns "world into word"—the fundamental poetic decision.
>
> Its very density allows lyric poetry to handle the most intense kinds of experiential disorder: suffering, death, despair, even madness, as well as the passions, in particular grief and intense love (which the Greeks tended to classify as a form of madness). The lyric that results is a dramatizing of experience that manifests a particular, individualized version of these two basic truths: the reality of disorder (good or bad) and the human need for some form of order. When the poet moves her disorder outside herself by turning it into words and then ordering it, she is re-stabilizing herself after being destabilized by experience. She thereby masters an existential situation—joy or despair, trauma or love—that had threatened to master her.[74]

Even now when I think about the mass death that occurred during Jallianwala Bagh, Partition and the Sikh genocide that would come to pass, I find myself silenced into sadness because there are some things that we should not be continually exposed to. The

[74] Gregory Orr, "Naming the Beloved: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Lyric Poetry - Image Journal," Image Journal, March 15, 2016, https://imagejournal.org/article/naming-beloved-ethics-aesthetics-lyric-poetry/.

poem “Jallianwala Bagh,” like others in my collection, tried to “order” how I felt about the massacre into a poem that is no longer a sadness. Rather than what Orr describes as an “existential situation” that can “master” me, the poem memorialises sadness and pain. When researching Jallianwala Bagh, I felt that I had been “destabilized” by the trauma of this event, the trauma present in the testimonies I had read. I felt so disheartened, angry, and sad that I needed to write the poem “Jallianwala Bagh,” and after writing it, I felt more grounded as it had allowed me to “stabilize” myself, it had allowed me to express my own thoughts and feelings on the event. Here the lyric form allowed my pain to be bearable, because in Orr’s words, it can hold “disorder: suffering, death, despair, even madness.” It allows the poet to turn the trauma of the “world into word.”[75]

Nevertheless, although, “Jallianwala Bagh” is significantly concerned with themes of death and pain, it is also concerned with the process of healing amidst an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. The last two lines of the poem read:

in a square trapped
by hopeless prayer, a river

Much like the words “break” and “shoot” in previous lines, “a river” is also separated from the midsection of the poem. Through the addition of “a” before “river,” it is my intention to offer readers hope, that one day an untainted river will once again emerge. The significance of “a river” lies in the word Punjab which translates to “the land of five rivers,” which includes the rivers Sutlej, Beas, Chenab, Jhelum, and Ravi, with Amritsar situated on the banks of Ravi—concluding the poem with “a river” is important because these rivers provide fertile soil for the region’s growth, providing renewal. The importance of water and renewal itself can be seen in Sardar Partap Singh’s testimony. In his account

[75] Orr, “Naming the Beloved: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Lyric Poetry - Image Journal.”

he tells us of his attempt to provide a dying man with water from a drain connected to the canal (Hansli) supplying the Golden Temple. However, he was unable to do so because the pit was filled with corpses and victims hiding among them. To clarify, Hansli supplies the pool of nectar, the holy water bordering the Golden Temple. This water is believed to possess healing properties, as explored in the poem "What Grandmother Lost and Found When She Left India," where "a wounded crow would drown in the holy nectar, just to fly out / speckled white and touched by the light." With the holy water tainted by blood and death, I felt that I needed to revisit the imagery of water in the poem "Jallianwala Bagh." I aimed to write a poem that allowed me to move forward, communicating a sense of hope and healing for the survivors' ancestors and those who would inherit the history of these atrocities, like my grandparents and parents. Therefore, "a river" is an understanding that the fear of violence will wash away, and healing will come in time, where it waits for its own arrival. The representation of hope and healing in "Jallianwala Bagh" reflects the subtlety and slowness of healing, and of hope.

Although Jallianwala Bagh marked a violent time in India's history, it was also an event that incentivised the freedom movement. It would mobilise the radical left. Soon "Inquilab Zindabad" would be heard whispered and eventually shouted across British India.[76] However, it is also an event that has taught me about colonial attitudes in Punjab, and how the violent legacy of colonialism still lives on in the lives of diasporic Sikhs through a fear that violence may return at any moment.

Famine and Disease: Hunger Feeds the Ravana Under your Bed

[76] Translates to "long live the revolution."

Alongside the fear of violence, my grandmother would experience the legacy of colonial food insecurity and extreme hunger even after Indian independence. When I was younger my grandmother would tell me stories of her time in India and how she was so hungry that she could not feel anything. After marriage, my grandfather left for England and my grandmother stayed behind with her in-laws. At this point, her father-in-law's once profitable weaving business was no longer lucrative. With the loss of the weaving business, he turned to alcohol leaving his wife and his daughter-in-law, my grandmother to run the household. This meant that they all relied on my grandfather's wages from England to support them. These wages were sent specifically to my grandmother, yet she never received any of them. To cope with the changing economy, in her greediness, her mother-in-law would withhold the wages and restrict my grandmother's and her children's food intake by locking food cupboards. At the time food was scarce and became a luxury.

Curious about my grandmother's experiences, I started to research food insecurity under the British Raj, which in turn led me to look closely at disease. Through doing so, I learned that my grandmother's paternal grandparents and her father like my grandmother, were greatly affected by disease, famine and food insecurity in colonial India. What I discovered disturbed me and made me address famine and food insecurity in my poetry collection. In the poem "In 1969 Grandmother Arrived In England," I have explored food insecurity through the hunger my grandmother's children felt. Equally, so that my grandmother's story was not forgotten, so that the horror of colonial India was not erased, I felt the need to transform her oral story about her starvation into the poem, "A Letter To My Dead Grandfather, From My Future Self, Living In My Grandmother's Past." This section continues to explore the trauma created in the lives of my ancestors through the restriction of food which led to both famine and disease during and after the Raj.

Under the British Raj, the risk of famine increased. Notably, food inflation and importation contributed to famine: both would occur at the expense of Indians starving to their deaths. The Raj was able to successfully and strategically weaponise food. From my grandmother, I discovered that her grandparents lived through the Great Famine 1876-1878, and that her father survived the Bubonic Plague in 1897, only to then lose his parents to it. I would learn that my grandmother would go on to live in similar conditions to her ancestors a century later in 1960s India—a country that would again be on the brink of further famine. Inevitably, food insecurity would become a factor in my grandmother's decision to leave India for England.

When writing on the occurrence of famine during the Raj, Bimal Kanti Paul claims that

> India experienced a total of 23 severe famines and numerous shortages of food at the time of British rule (i.e., 1757-1947). This figure translates into about one famine in every nine years. Although a complete account of all the famines that occurred in the pre-British period in India is lacking, available evidence suggests that in earlier times, a major famine took place about every 50 years. Famine frequency during the British period was not only higher, but these events also claimed more lives, and covered broader areas, compared to famines experienced in India before British rule.[77]

It is peculiar that the famines under the Raj claimed more lives than those of pre-Raj, which suggests that efforts were not made to alleviate their ferocity. On this, Benjamin Siegel asserts that for "nearly two centuries, India's British administrators had

[77] Bimal Kanti Paul, "Indian Famines," in *Food and Famine in the 21st Century*, ed. William A. Dando (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2012), 39.

presided over innumerous famines, each dismissed in turn as a Malthusian inevitability."[78] Many severe famines occurred in British India during the period between 1707 and 1943.[79] One example which shows the might of British greed was when "food grains were exported from famine-affected regions even when these regions were experiencing the worst famines. For example, during the Great Famine in 1876 -1878, nearly 1.0 million tons of rice was exported each year, even while millions of Indians were dying of starvation."[80] This exportation occurred solely because the British wanted to secure more resources for themselves. Mike Davis writes that in Punjab this "famine killed at least 1.25 million people in 1878-79. As Indian historians have emphasised, this staggering death toll was the foreseeable and avoidable result of deliberate policy choices."[81] Britain again chose to export grains out of India rather than feed the starving Indian population.[82] This famine affected "a small tract of Punjab" where my grandmother's paternal grandparents lived.[83] They survived the famine only to be weakened and left susceptible to the plague.

The British stockpiled resources for themselves in India, denying the rights of Indians and protecting White Europeans during outbreaks of disease where resources were always reserved for them.[84] Sasha Tandon writes that alongside famine, "Epidemics of

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[78] Benjamin Robert Siegel, *Hungry Nation: Food, Famine, and the Making of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 5.

[79] Paul, "Indian Famines," 39.

[80] Paul, "Indian Famines," 53; my great grandparents survived this famine.

[81] Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso Books, 2017), 51.

[82] Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, 25–59.

[83] Government of India, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India: The Indian Empire, Economic, Vol. III*, *INDIAN CULTURE* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), https://indianculture.gov.in/gazettes/imperial-gazetteer-india-indian-empire-economic-vol-iii.

[84] Sasha Tandon, "Epidemics in Colonial Punjab," *Journal of Punjab Studies*, no. 20 (2013): 217–42, https://punjab.global.ucsb.edu/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.gisp.d7_sp/files/sitefiles/journals/volume20/10-Sasha%2020.pdf.

malaria, cholera, smallpox and the plague broke out intermittently and recurrently, with varied intensity in different areas of colonial Punjab."[85] The first case of the plague erupted in Khatkar Kalan village in Banga on October 17 1897— a twenty minute car ride from where my grandmother's father's parents lived in Mukandpur.[86] They both died that same year, leaving behind an orphan. As an only child, at the age of seven, my great grandfather lived alone but was raised by a Hindu woman in the village who adopted him. His story often reminds me that there are always faces who suffer because of unfair and unethical colonial policies.

Equally, during outbreaks of disease the British racially profiled Indian citizens, choosing actively to protect those who were White over those who were Brown. For example, "During the middle of the nineteenth century, when the causal factors of the diseases were not clear, measures adopted to combat the epidemics were directed against the Indians rather than the actual bacilli. The British administrators acted on the assumption that the Indians lived in unhygienic and insanitary conditions and required constant surveillance."[87] Tandon reveals that Indians traveling third class in Punjab, in 1911, during a known outbreak of disease, were often identified as posing a risk of spreading the plague by their supposedly unhygienic appearance. Tandon writes that Indians who were identified

> were taken to a separate disinfecting tank and quarters where they were disrobed, and their own clothes were disinfected with the steam apparatus…By contrast, the Europeans, and Eurasians, even if they were sick, were allowed to continue with their journey in the rail carriage in which they were travelling. Their relatives and

[85] Tandon, "Epidemics in Colonial Punjab," 217.

[86] Tandon, "Epidemics in Colonial Punjab," 220.

[87] Tandon, "Epidemics in Colonial Punjab," 222.

> friends could also accompany them… The Europeans acquired immunity from smallpox after getting themselves vaccinated and quinine gave them some protection against malaria. Due to concentration of the sanitary measures in and around the civil stations and cantonments, the European enclaves became relatively free of cholera as well. In the early years of the plague, however, the Europeans did not have any protection against this disease. The administration, therefore, sought to protect them by cordoning off their residential areas. Additional forces were deployed to ensure that the cordons were not broken and that the Europeans generally remained safe.[88]

This segregationist attitude in train stations was driven by the fact that British colonisers (not just in India, but Africa as well) feared disease and believed Indians were dirty and would attract bacteria.[89] White Europeans were protected against disease and if they were sick, they were not isolated and so spread bacteria to a point where it negatively affected Indians who were not protected. In India, the lives of natives were uprooted, and they were treated as if they did not have a voice, as if they were of no significance. My great grandparents met their death early, not because they were unclean but because their bodies were starved and not protected—the British exported too much food out of the nation, and they did not offer the same level of care to Indians as they did to White Europeans.

Less than a century later, my grandmother would find herself living on the brink of famine in India in the 1960s. She would tell me her story forty-five years later as a bedtime tale, where she would recount her struggle with starvation and her attempted suicide. Marianne Hirsch identifies this type of story-telling scene as "childhood transmission." Hirsch

[88] Tandon, "Epidemics in Colonial Punjab," 227.

[89] Ambe J. Njoh, "The Segregated City in British and French Colonial Africa," *Race & Class* 49, no. 4 (April 1, 2008): 92–94, https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396808049004060 2.

particularly acknowledges this in Art Spiegelman's *Maus,* where a father tells his young son, before bedtime the horrors of the Holocaust, where the past "is internalized without fully being understood" by the child, that is of course until adulthood. Hirsch writes that "These 'acts of transfer' to use Paul Connerton's term not only transform history into memory but enable memories to be shared across individuals and generations," with the potential for transgenerational trauma to form.[90] My grandmother's trauma is exacerbated by the fact that her migration to Britain relocates "the theatre of the postcolonial in the heart of the ex-empire."[91] In many ways there is no escape from the coloniser during and after post-colonial rule as my grandmother settled in the home country of the coloniser who often still denies her existence. However, through voicing her story my grandmother acknowledges her own existence and her need to heal. Echoing Aanchal Malhotra, the story my grandmother voiced that night, "wove history and memory together into magic," where she passed on her trauma to the next generation.[92] This passage is what Cathy Caruth (the leading voice on trauma studies) might call the "double survivor" situation. The listener becomes survivor by proxy, the two then come together to make one witness.[93] Although there can be only one true survivor, discrepancies can arise, particularly in how as a listener, I have tried to preserve the survivor's story through poetry. In doing so, the survivor, listener and writer are all captured in one traumatic memory on the page. This is especially significant when my grandmother's story has remained with me into adulthood, manifesting in the poem, "A Letter To My Dead Grandfather, From My Future Self,

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[90] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 31.

[91] Nasreen Ali, "Imperial Implosions," in *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain*, ed. Salman Sayyid, Nasreen Ali, and Virinder Kalra (London: Hurst and Company, 2006),167.

[92]Aanchal Malhotra, *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition Through Material Memory* (Uttar Pradesh: HarperCollins, 2017), 59.

[93] Cathy Caruth, "Interview With Robert Jay Lifton," interview by Cathy Caruth, *American Imago* 48, no. 1 (1991): 153–75, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26304036.

Living In My Grandmother's Past." Within this poem, I am the narrator retelling my grandmother's past. Here, the poetic recomposition of my grandmother's story risks transforming her memory and story into my own. The epistolary form allows me to build a narrative of response to my grandparent's past, bridging the distance between my grandparents' experience. For instance, my poem addresses my grandfather, "You will not know that the cascade of / poured oil can feel as if it is a kiss from the sun." This sentence is able to tell grandfather what he does not know and what my grandmother experienced. My voice can sound out what went unsaid between them, my grandfather didn't know about the abuse my grandmother suffered in India or why my grandmother was never able to write back to him. The format of the letter opens a conversation between generations to create a bridge that connects all voices to one interconnected trauma narrative.

The detail that always arrests my attention in "A Letter To My Dead Grandfather, From My Future Self, Living In My Grandmother's Past," is the hunger my grandmother often felt. Post Raj, my grandmother experienced similar circumstances to her great grandparents and her father through living in the legacy of empire in post-colonial India. Famine and starvation would come to haunt my grandmother through the food insecurity she often felt, even when she was financially secure in England. When I lived with my grandmother, she would rarely ever make rice. Often, in Indian households rice is a staple and is paired with every meal, yet our family would always have wholemeal roti. If my grandmother did make rice, she would make it as a treat. She would cook rice in water infused with butter, sugar, cardamon, turmeric, raisins, coconut, cloves, and silvers of almonds. The reason my grandmother viewed rice as a treat was because in the 1940s, "The price of rice increased by 300 per cent." This would mean that her family would not be able to afford it. Equally, analyst Lester Brown writes that from 1966 to 1968, in India, the failures of monsoons and "scarcity of foodstuffs, greatly enhanced farmers' bargaining

position in the marketplace. The world rice price, normally about $120 per ton, soared past $200 in 1967."[94] The soaring price of rice began when my grandmother was a child and continued to rise throughout her adult life in India. Food insecurity alongside the rising cost of rice meant that my grandmother did not include it as part of the meals we ate because in her mind it was still hard to acquire.

After she left India in 1969, my grandmother did not face food insecurity again. She arrived in England, claimed citizenship and found work in a leather factory in the Black Country. She would pass on her trauma to the next generation to contend with. She would try to heal, facilitated by her new life, in a new country. My grandmother is now experiencing memory loss. Sometimes when my mother cleans her room, she will find a shrivelled banana in an old handbag, a banana that my grandmother has hidden and forgotten to retrieve. Sometimes my mother will also find Indian sweets hidden in my grandmother's bedside drawer, rock hard and crystalised. Even in her old age, in her memory loss, my grandmother's body fears that there will be no food.

The generational trauma of food insecurity are the seeds of psychological fears the British left behind for future Indian generations. I often wonder whether the eating disorder I once struggled with in my early twenties arose from these psychological traumas, ones that I may have internalised as I grew up around my grandmother. Although I no longer restrict my food, I often find I am very much like my grandmother. Even now with a free-flowing food supply, like my grandmother, I avoid food waste. I don't fear that one day there will be no food, but rather I feel guilty that I have so much when often my ancestors went without food, comfort and shelter.

[94] Lester R. Brown, *Seeds of Change: The Green Revolution and Development in the 1970's* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 9.

Broken Bodies Across Time

On the 14th of August 1947, overnight one side of Punjab and Bengal belonged to Pakistan and the other to India. This parting was "followed by the forced uprooting of more than twelve million people belonging to minorities who sought shelter across the newly created boundaries."[95] At the time, my grandmother was a young girl who escaped much of the violence of that year. However, she did not escape Partition unaffected. I have documented her account in the poem "White Washing." Like this poem, the stories of those affected by the fracture of India and the birth of Pakistan are slowly but surely moving out of private family histories into the public sphere.[96] This section hopes to build on stories of trauma surrounding the time of Partition. Through the poem "In Kartarpur," I examine the decades of division instigated by British colonialism, which negatively shaped interactions between Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh communities. This imposed division was central to the violence that engulfed India during Partition, and it continues to affect all three communities. Secondly, I explore the impact segregation and violence had on women's bodies during Partition, with a particular focus on Sa'adat Hasan Manto's Urdu short story "Open It" and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India.* Furthermore, I reflect on my grandmother's personal experience of Partition in the poem "White Washing," where I too through writing am contributing to the stories of trauma that have emerged out of this deeply disturbing period of Indian history. Lastly, I take a closer look at how lineal time is absent very briefly in "Open It," and much more extensively in both *Cracking India* and "White Washing." In all three texts, characters do not remember events through the recognition of a year, month or

[95] Navdip Kaur, "Violence And Migration: A Study Of Killing In The Trains During The Partition Of Punjab In 1947," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 72 (2011): 947–54, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44146786; the focus of this reflection is on Punjabi Sikhs and the connection my family has to this diaspora which I engage with in my poems. Therefore, I will not be discussing the Partition of Bengal.

[96] Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (London: Hurst and Company, 2000), 3.

day, instead lived experience measures their passage of time, particularly when that period of time is traumatic.

Partition deeply and negatively affected Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs because they were the most affected by the efforts of the Raj to divide them and destroy their communities.[97] By the time of Partition, these groups were so divided that they could not agree on a united state. Yasmin Khan notes that during negotiations every single difference between them materialised, particularly differences and segregationist attitudes that had been sharply chiselled by the Raj.[98] These differences were the driving force behind the violence of Partition, as each group saw the other as an enemy it must erase. Yasmin Khan tells us that division was a sophisticated strategy employed by the Raj to control Indians. She writes that

> Reminders of religious 'difference' were built into the brickwork of the colonial state; a Muslim traveller would be directed to the 'Mohammedan refreshment room' at a train station and drinking taps on railway platforms were labelled 'Hindu water' or 'Muslim water'. Religious holidays were factored into the official working calendar and government statistics, maps, gazetteers, routine instructions, laws and, above all, the census, all operated on the premise that highly distinct communities, of Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus resided in the subcontinent.[99]

The British emphasised any existing divisions between Indians, not only so that Indians would be easier to control, but also because in their division, they would never be united

[97] This is not to say that there were no other religious groups such as Christians, Buddhists, Jains and Jews who were not affected by Partition, but rather that the political drive for Partition surrounded Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. In India, Hindus were the majority, Muslims were considered a minority with a majority in Punjab and although Sikhs were classed as Hindus, they were a minority in India, who currently hold a majority in Indian Punjab.

[98] Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 18.

[99] Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, 19–20.

against the British. India's partition would emerge directly from British colonialism. Such partitions, rooted in colonial ideologies, have occurred globally in various forms. Joe Cleary recognises that

> the history of partition in the twentieth century is one steeped in controversy and violence. That history is comprised of both the cold war partitions in Germany, Vietnam, and Korea and the colonial partitions in Ireland, India, Palestine, and Cyprus, as British imperial rule contracted in these locations.

Cleary points out that political partitions in Ireland, India, and Palestine were followed by major world wars, signifying the departure of imperial powers and the transfer of power to native elites. These partitions share a common structural logic, often occurring during imperial decline and clashing with nationalism within the colonies. Cleary specifically asserts that

> In each case, the impetus for partition stemmed from a minority community within the colonial state that feared that the anti-colonial national movements about to assume power would imperil their interests and identity. In none of these minority communities – Protestant Unionists in Ireland, Muslims in British India, Zionist Jews in Mandate Palestine – was the idea of partition universally embraced, but their leaderships were willing to contemplate state division where their preferred political goals could not be realised. In short, then, colonial political partitions, despite individual variables and specific circumstances, display elements of a common structural logic. [100]

The logic Cleary describes tore communities apart and erased their shared histories and traditions. The Partition resulting from the withdrawal of colonial power left India in a

[100] Joseph N. Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

challenging position with limited avenues for advancement, especially due to competing political and religious ideologies represented by the Muslim League and the Congress party. The political outlook of India was very much like Ireland before it too was partitioned by the same coloniser. When referring specifically to British colonisation in "The Art of Breaking People Down: The British Colonial Model in Ireland and Canada," Aziz Rahman, Mary Anne Clarke, and Sean Byrne, as with other historians, acknowledge that Ireland was Britain's initial colonial experiment, serving as a blueprint for subsequent colonisations. They suggest that Britain's use of a "divide and rule" tactic, fuelled tensions between Protestant settlers and Catholic natives to reinforce their control.[101] In India the very same "divide and rule" allowed Muslims and Hindus to be pitted against each other, leaving Sikhs to pick a nation when Partition became a violent reality. In her analysis of the decline of British colonial power in Ireland, Palestine and India, Barbara Harlow notes that

> Britain's withdrawal from these three of its colonially occupied and administered territories incised a deep and violently protracted scar across the political, geographical, and cultural terrains of those arenas, a scar that has been writ again and again—racially, religiously, ethnically—along the unsettled 'green line' dividing Israel from the militarily occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, on the disputed 'border' between the northern and southern parts of the island that is Ireland, and across the tense national boundaries that divide India from Pakistan.[102]

[101] Aziz Rahman, Mary Anne Clarke, and Sean Byrne, "The Art of Breaking People Down: The British Colonial Model in Ireland and Canada on JSTOR," *Journal of Peace Research* 49, no. 2 (n.d.): 15–38, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44779905.

[102] Barbara Harlow, "Drawing the line: cultural politics and the legacy of partition," *Polygraph* 5 (1992): 84–85.

In India, despite British withdrawal, colonial divisions continue to fuel negative and violent interactions among Indians and Pakistanis post-Partition.

However, prior to British colonisation, interactions among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in India were not marked by the same levels of violence and tension. During the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs were celebrating the festival of Vaisakhi when they came under fire. [103] Sikhs have and still do observe many Hindu festivals as they often fall on the same day: both celebrate Bhandi Chor for Sikhs and Diwali for Hindus. Although Sikhs do not celebrate Muslim festivals, Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims have an entwined history through the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Nanak was born a Hindu, in what is now known as Nankana Sahib in Pakistan. After he founded and converted to Sikhism, he travelled the continent with his close Muslim friend Bhai Mardana, whose work can be found in the Guru Granth Sahib.[104] The literature of the famous poets Baba Farid who was a Sufi Muslim and Bhagat Kabir Das can also be found in the Guru Granth Sahib.[105] Equally, on his last travels, Guru Nanak alongside Bhai Mardana visited the holy city of Mecca and Medina. Punjabi Hindu temples often include a painting of Guru Nanak. Indians were tolerant of each other. Throughout the centuries there have been a handful of rulers and Maharajas who were intolerant and wanted to religiously cleanse the nation such as the Mughal Emperors Jahangir and Aurangzeb. The latter was keen on conversion and his orders led to the beheading of the ninth Sikh Guru in

[103] Also spelled with a B: Baisakhi.

[104] The Guru Granth Sahib is the holy book belonging to the Sikh faith. It contains all the teachings of the ten living Guru's. However, it is also believed that the Guru Granth Sahib is the eleventh living Guru as its teachings must be honoured and followed just as the human Gurus were.

[105] Bhagat Kabir Das was born Muslim, practiced Hinduism but ultimately founded and followed his own philosophy which closely matched Guru Nanak's.

Delhi in 1675.[106] Similarly, the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev Ji was tortured and executed by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir for refusing to convert to Islam.[107] Yet, relations between the Sikhs and Mughal Emperors had not always been so violent. Before Jahangir ascended to the throne, his father Akbar the Great (1542-1605) had met Guru Arjan Dev Ji and bloodshed had not occurred. In fact, Priya Atwal notes, "From Mughal court records, we have direct testimony that Akbar met with Guru Arjan and noted with great pleasure that the Sikh leader was a man who possessed 'a great store of love'. Akbar was a relatively liberal Emperor."[108] Mostly, beyond royals and beyond the violence of empire building, Indians knew to honour difference.

In my poetry collection I address the synergy between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in the poem "We Know Nothing Of It," which retells the story of how the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, left this realm. This poem is situated in Kartarpur, where Guru Nanak not only laid the foundations of Sikhism, but it is also where he came not to pass away, but rather to become one with the "formless." Here I say "formless" because God in Sikhism is genderless in existence and non-existence. This story of Guru Nanak's passing in Kartarpur is well known. What is often overlooked today is that in religious North Indian and Pakistani communities, Guru Nanak is respected by Sikhs and Hindus who consider him their Guru, and some Muslims, particularly Sufis, regard Nanak as their Pir. "We Know Nothing Of It" demonstrates that in one time and place, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs found peace in the shared ritual of mourning. Although Muslims mourned in a different way to Hindus and Sikhs, as explored in the poem in lines 11-15, they all respectfully

[106] The ninth Guru was known as Guru Tegh Bahadur who refused to convert to Islam, which resulted in his death.

[107] Pashaura Singh, "The Guru Grand Sahib," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, ed. Louis E. Fenech and Pashaura Singh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 129.

[108] Priya Atwal, *Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 21.

shared the flowers, and the sheet left behind after Nanak's passing. These religious groups existed in North India in a near harmonic way, where most were tolerant of people's differences.

One of the most important symbolic motifs I wished to create in the poem is that of the kara. The kara was introduced by the last living Guru, Guru Gobind Singh: it is a round iron bracelet that Sikhs wear. Its endless roundness means that there is no beginning and no end to this world and our existence. This sense of eternity can be seen in the last two lines that read

by the end of our blinding the ground will know
nothing of the sky and we will know nothing of it.

Here, it is in the "ground" where the Muslims (moon) bury the remains of Nanak, where they go back into the earth, which is juxtaposed by the Hindus and Sikhs (sun and stars) who burn the remains where they connect to the "sky" and the atmosphere. Both activities of burying and burning connect to the earth as well as the "formless." These last two lines suggest that although the ground and the sky are both used as methods for the religious groups to merge the remains with the "formless"; here the ground is the antithesis of the sky. The three communities may not know completely of each other's rituals, yet in death they are interconnected as one and they are also one in not knowing what comes after death— "we will know nothing of it." This poem suggests that the myth birthed through colonial division, which proposes that Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims are very different people who could never co-exist, may be untrue.

Partition had a lasting traumatic impact, ending and changing lives and deepening existing divides. The trauma of Partition would be passed on through family oral stories, and in some cases these stories as well as the history of Partition would continue to divide Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. One specific example of this is the occurrence of train

violence during Partition, which is still often contested by different religious groups. Regarding train violence, Leonard Mosely writes:

> trains were arriving in Lahore station packed with passengers, all of them dead, with messages scribed on the sides of the carriages reading: 'A present from India' so, of course, the Muslims sent back trainloads of butchered Sikhs and Hindus with the message: 'A present from Pakistan' .... All India stank - with the stench of countless thousands of dead bodies, with the stench of evil deed, with the stench of fires.[109]

Some Indians would deny the train killings completely; others would blame it on one country and some like my father would believe Pakistan was responsible for the first train killing and not India. Urvashi Butalia, in her groundbreaking *The Other Side of Silence*, questions "Why is it that so many second-and third-generation Hindus and Sikhs after Partition have come to internalise notions of 'us' and 'them' when they have no reference to Partition—except through family and community memories."[110] My father had always thought that the first train that entered with dead bodies arrived from Pakistan with slaughtered Hindus and Sikhs. When stood corrected, he was disgusted and left silent, which suggests that in the fabric of cultural memory of Punjabis, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus, segregationist attitudes still exist as well as a habit of taking part in historical amnesia. Such amnesia makes it easier to live with such a distressing history by avoiding guilt and shame and fuelling further division.

In a very different way, just like my father, when I first encountered stories about train violence, I was left in disbelief, and I wished they were untrue. Initially, I found the history of train violence hard to believe due to the sheer amount of cruelty and sadism that

[109] Leonard Mosley, *The Last Days of the British Raj* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1960), 279.

[110] Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, 9–10.

took place, especially against women and their bodies. This history is so gory, violent and harrowing that I did not want to believe the reality of it, as believing it meant that it could be visualised, and those images are too painful to perceive. This is perhaps why literature and oral stories are so important, because long before the history of Partition was documented, it was first understood through stories voiced within families and stories published as fiction.

When reading fiction regarding train violence, I often felt an emptiness I could not define. I sometimes cried at the amount of pain a human could inflict on another. These stories troubled me so much because they were not really stories, often they were someone's lived experience. One narrative that is particularly moving is Sa'adat Hasan Manto's Urdu short story "Khol Do," which has been translated by Muhammad Umar Memon as "Open It." The story follows Sirajuddin, a father who witnesses his wife being disembowelled while trying to catch a train across the border. During this chaos, he then also loses sight of his daughter Sakina. During the opening of this story, Sirajuddin is struggling to remember the events that have occurred, because he is too traumatised by what he has seen. As soon as he wakes up,

> He stared at the murky sky for the longest time. Amidst the incredible din, his ears seemed to be firmly plugged against any sound. Seeing him in this state anyone would have thought he was deeply engrossed in thought. That, of course, was not the case. He was totally numb. His entire being seemed to be suspended in space.[111]

He is so stunned by his trauma; he is frozen in time. His memories are so traumatic that they come to him in flashes. Here and within the story, there is no mention of lineal time—there is no mention of a date, month or year. This sense of lineal time being untraceable

[111] Muhammad Umar Tr. Memon and Saadat Hasan Manto, "Open It!," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 27 (2012): 74–76, https://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/66698.

works to trap both the characters and the reader in the multiple losses being experienced, further adding to the confusion which surrounds Partition. The loss that drives the story is Sirajuddin's missing daughter Sakina. After being unable to locate her, he enlists the help of male volunteers. Unfortunately, it is implied that these same volunteers do find Sakina, and when they do, they rape her. At the end of the story, Sirajuddin finds Sakina on a stretcher, looking as if she is dead. The doctor after locating her pulse, points to a window and asks Sirajuddin to "Open it." Upon hearing this, Sakina awakens and begins to open and undo her shalwar.[112] Sara Hakeem Grewal notes that we don't learn what happens to Sakina through her verbal confession, rather we learn through her silence. We learn of her rape through her body language, through her reacting to the words "Open it."

Grewal points out that it's not just Sakina's body language that tells us of her trauma, it is also her father's reaction to finding her. Grewal argues that "In fact, the father's speech in reaction to Sakina's bodily testament to her rape—his exclamation of 'She's alive—my daughter is alive! […] does not testify to Sakina's rape, but erases it, or at least renders it insignificant [...] Manto suggests that speech that attempts to fix truth ends up destroying it."[113] Here, Sakina has not only lost her autonomy and her voice, but also the truth of her lived experience witnessed and expressed by her body. However, this is where the reader becomes a witness to Sakina's rape and trauma. As Grewal argues,

> it is the reader's ability to identify Sirajuddin's speech as untrue, irrelevant or misguided that allows her to bear witness to Sakina's trauma. In this sense, then, the success of our witnessing as readers relies on our ability to recognise bodily testimony as more reliable than spoken testimony, as well as our ability to

[112] Memon and Manto, "Open It!," 76.

[113] Sara Hakeem Grewal, "Testimony and the Urdu Troposphere in Manto's 'Khol Do,'" *South Asia Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 6 (October 24, 2019): 1042, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2019.1669112.

> recognise both Sakina's death and the impossibility of her life-in-death in the movement of her hands at the climax of the story.[114]

Sakina's story is so awful that it could be unbelievable. In fact, the ending suggests that perhaps her father will never believe her or even consider that she has been raped because he is already too traumatised to trust what he himself is witnessing. Yet, in the presentation of Sakina's trauma through the verbal absence of it, the reader is presented with a narrative of trauma and sexual violence that we can choose to believe through acknowledging Sakina's bodily reaction. It is important to recognise that Sakina's rape is never explicitly mentioned. If we were not told that she was found by the men, and if it were not for her body's reaction to the words "Open it," perhaps we may have never known that she was sexually violated. Here, the writer has placed the truth in the liminal space of worlds a story creates. We are shown just enough to believe the possibility of Sakina's rape, yet if we miss the small details of Sakina's bodily reaction, we may not have known about her trauma. Then as readers, if we see the trauma and sexual violence in the story and choose to ignore it, we are taking part in cultural amnesia—which is an enabler of sexual violence and abuse, as it is this very same cultural amnesia that destroyed communities and allowed horrific forms of violence to occur during Partition, and it is the same amnesia that will allow sexual violence to reoccur. In believing that the rape occurred, we are not placing shame and dishonour on Sakina's body, but rather on the actions of the perpetrators. Through believing Sakina's lived bodily experience, we not only validate its existence and acknowledge that Partition brought out the worst in humanity, but we also show solidarity with survivors.

Stories like "Open It," which revisit train violence, help us to comprehend the traumas associated with Partition, often exploring what we may want to forget because it is

[114] Sara Hakeem Grewal, "Testimony and the Urdu Troposphere in Manto's 'Khol Do.'"

too painful to apprehend. However, no matter how painful, these stories bring to life the horror the victims of this period lived through. A story will never truly replicate someone's trauma, but it can allow trauma to be recognised, and I will never forget Sakina's story as I know that somewhere this story is someone's truth. As awful as these stories are, I am grateful that they exist in the written form to be read and heard, because a history book cannot always teach you about someone's lived experience. It is in this very tradition of writing to be heard, that I too am trying to produce poetry from perspectives that have been overlooked and forgotten, such as my grandmother's very different experience of Partition. Yet even here, there is a tension between wanting to be heard and trying to express trauma. Much of wanting to be heard relies on readers to recognise the small details in a narrative, to be active readers who read closely and interpret widely.

The story of Partition my grandmother voiced would not entirely echo the same level of violence presented in "Open It." However, there are certain aspects of Partition that my grandmother refuses to discuss as they are too traumatic for her to revisit. Yet, she would often tell me about her father, who during Partition helped Muslims out of their village to cross the border safely. Her story was one of a community not being torn apart by division. It is a story I have woven into the poem "White Washing." My grandmother's narrative has shaped my understanding of Partition, both through what she has told me and what she has not. My grandmother often said she felt very fortunate during Partition, as she was well protected, a fact she acknowledged knowing that many other women were not. To understand the significance of "White Washing," I want to first further explore the precarious position of women during Partition. In this section I will analyse the representation of a woman's honour in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* and my grandmother's lived experience of Partition in the poem "White Washing," addressing how Partition experienced by women in both texts is not defined by lineal time, but rather

through the lasting impact of traumatic lived experiences, and how the acknowledgment of such experiences can lead to healing.

Yasmin Khan tells us that "Of all the horrors of 1947, the experience of the women who were raped is the most difficult to write about. It is a history of broken bodies and broken lives."[115] The defilement women experienced in their life and in death is hard to imagine. However, the silencing of this history which came after, both from the women themselves who were seen as unclean by their families, and their communities who were too ashamed to revisit the events of 1947, all add to the historical amnesia which surrounds the time of Partition and the history that has passed on to my generation. It is a history that is unclear, one which continues to shape our lives, and one that often leaves me in wonder at human cruelty, and in horror at the lived experience of the Muslim, Sikh and Hindu women and young girls who were violated, raped, captured, killed, and abandoned.

Women's stories of Partition are often overshadowed and entwined with the presence of bloodshed and bloodlust that overcame Punjab shortly after the new borders were formed, where the violence would begin with the trains and then travel like wildfire. As refugees attempted an escape to safety, Antonia Navarro-Tejero writes that women and girls would be targeted because they carried the burden of honour, represented through their body and their religion through which they were violated.[116] Khan reveals, "even worse, many of these victims were not really 'women' at all. Girls under the age of twelve made up at least one third of the women recovered in the state-sponsored recovery operation that followed. The rest of the women tended to be under the age of thirty-five and

[115] Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, 133.

[116] Antonia Navarro-Tejero, "Sacks of Mutilated Breasts: Violence and Body Politics in South Asian Partition Literature," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 20, no. 3 (January 1, 2019): 46, https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2124&context=jiws#:~:text=In%20the%20midst%20of%20Partition,They%20are%20all%20Muslims.

from villages."[117] Once sexually violated "the shame and horror fell on everybody associated with the girls: these were not individual tragedies," they would reverberate through families and communities. [118] Many South Asian women and girls still feel the burden of honour, and it is why countless women did not come forward as victims of sexual violence during Partition, and why many still will not. This sense of honour is explored in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, a novel that attempts to return agency to women who were violated during Partition. *Cracking India*, which was published in 1988, was one of the earliest narratives to represent violence against both men and women during Partition. The novel is narrated by a child called Lenny, who discusses her nanny's (Ayah's) life in detail. The story takes a violent turn when Partition becomes a reality. Soon Ayah is abducted and raped because she is a Hindu living in Pakistan post-Partition. Sidhwa's novel focuses on how women living on the Indian sub-continent internalise the idea of honour. If a woman's honour is in question, the question reduces her to nothing.

In *Cracking India*, honour is internalised by the character Godmother (the matriarch to the family), a figure in whom Ayah confides in. After her abduction, eventually Ayah is forced into sex work by one of her abductors, Ice Candy Man, who later thinks that by marrying Ayah, he has saved her. Ayah then converts to Islam and changes her name to Mumtaz. When Mumtaz expresses to Godmother that she is unhappy in her marriage and wishes to return to her family in India, Godmother confronts and questions Mumtaz about her decision:

> "Does he mistreat you … in any way?" Godmother asks with uncharacteristic hesitancy.

[117] Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, 134.

[118] Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, 134.

"Not now," says Mumtaz. "But I cannot forget what happened."

"That was fated, daughter. It can't be undone. But it can be forgiven… Worse things are forgiven. Life goes on and the business of living buries the debris of our pasts. Hurt, happiness … all fade impartially … to make way for fresh joy and new sorrow. That's the way of life."

"I am past that," says Mumtaz. "I'm not alive."

Godmother leans back and withdraws the large cambric handkerchief tucked into her blouse. She wipes her forehead.

"What if your family won't take you back?" she asks.

"Whether they want me or not, I will go."[119]

Before I continue, we should remember, women like Mumtaz are not a figment of the writer's imagination, but rather are women who existed and still exist today—Mumtaz is just a face and identity given to the thousands of women who were violated during 1947. Surprisingly, Godmother responds to Mumtaz's violation by saying, "But it can be forgiven… Worse things are forgiven. Life goes on and the business of living buries the debris of our pasts." What Godmother says is not untrue. However, her outlook, which is the thought process of many victims, is to allow the violation to be forgiven or to forget that it happened which means that it can then continue to occur, and the perpetrator can escape punishment for the violation. Godmother's response reflects a community response of amnesia, a response to forget, due to the shame associated with the violation. Towards the end of the passage, although Godmother has helped Mumtaz throughout the novel, she seems to try to dissuade Mumtaz from going back to her family in Amritsar by asking her, "'What if your family won't take you back?'" Here, the voice of a community answers that she won't be accepted because she was raped, dishonoured, and married a Muslim.

[119] Bapsi Sidhwa, *Cracking India: A Novel* (Minesota: Milkweed Editions, 1991), 273–74.

However, Mumtaz retains her agency both by choosing not to forget, and by her decision to go back to her family regardless of what has happened to her. In doing so, she decides to heal not only through choosing to live her life, but also through holding on to her familial bonds. Equally, in changing her name to Mumtaz, the character has acknowledged that her trauma has irrevocably changed her, and this acknowledgment is what will eventually allow her to feel alive again. In her recognition, "I cannot forget what happened," Mumtaz suggests she isn't denying her past or supressing it. Instead, she is beginning to understand its impact in order to move on with her life, in order to heal. Overall *Cracking India* asks South Asian communities to move past placing honour on a woman's body, and acknowledge when their daughters, sisters and mothers have been violated, and that it was never their fault. Mumtaz's story offers hope for those women who have been violated in telling them that they have a choice in how they can begin to heal.

On the other hand, despite the destruction of many communities, there were still some communities who avoided violence and who chose to instead help each other rather than contribute to the bloodshed. Despite all the horror and pain, during and after Partition there were women and children who had not been abused and taken advantage of in the outbreak of violence. One such person was my grandmother who was nine years old at the time. The tumult and chaos she lived through would often find her in the stories she would voice to me as a child. I have captured her oral story of Partition in the prose poem "White Washing." When writing this poem, I was inspired by how linear time does not exist in *Cracking India*, the time that passes is instead measured through a life lived. Similarly, in "White Washing," I have presented a narrative that weaves the past with the present through my own and my grandmother's memory, where there is not an existing sense of lineal time. Rather, like *Cracking India*, time is again represented through lived

experience. In writing my grandmother's story, like Sidhwa, I am adding to the literature that surrounds Partition—I am weaving memory, history and story.

In *Cracking India*, the lack of lineal time has a dizzying effect on the narrative, because when violence does take place, it feels almost as if it does not occur as there isn't necessarily a year or a specific time you can attach it to. Rather the horror of violence floats somewhere in time like traumatic memory, which further adds to the sense that this is a disturbing and distressing period. The events that occur are so horrific they refuse to be measured by lineal time, and so time is instead marked through lived experience. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, we are told by Lenny (the child narrator) that we are in Lahore. As the narrative continues, we see anti-Raj sentiments. At one point when Lenny is in the park with Ayah, she notes negatively, "Queen Victoria, cast in gunmetal, is majestic, massive, over-powering, ugly."[120] We later hear "Pakistan Zindabad" numerous times which tells us that tensions are rising, and Partition is nearing. In chapter seventeen Lenny tells us, "Playing British gods under the ceiling fans of the Faletti's Hotel—behind Queen Victoria's gardened skirt—the Radcliffe Commission deals out Indian cities like a pack of cards."[121] In chapter eighteen, the reality of Partition becomes apparent. Mr Singh and his American wife, who are close friends with Lenny's family, visit to say goodbye. From Mr Singh, we learn he does not think there are any Hindus left on Warris Road.[122] He then informs them that he and his family "are to leave Lahore forever." There is a Sikh evacuation plan in place and each family will have a designated truck to leave.[123] Mr Singh then asks Lenny's family to store some furniture for them, which he hopes one day he will

[120] Sidhwa, *Cracking India: A Novel*, 28.

[121] Sidhwa, *Cracking India: A Novel*, 150.

[122] Sidhwa, *Cracking India: A Novel*, 155.

[123] Sidhwa, *Cracking India: A Novel*, 156.

be able to collect. Lenny's father agrees but like Mr Singh, he is upset and saddened by his friends leaving and his community falling apart.[124] Throughout the novel, we know what year it is not because we are told, but rather because of what is happening to Lahore, the people within it and the horror they are living through. It is also in this chapter we learn that a train has arrived from India with Muslim refugees, and everyone is dead on board, the only bodies that cannot be located are those of young women—what is found in place of their bodies are "two gunny-bags full of women's breasts."[125] The severity of what has happened is further punctuated in chapter twenty-three, when Ayah is abducted by Muslim men who want to purge Hindus and Sikhs out of Pakistan. Ayah is ripped out of her hiding place and carried away by a gang of men and presumably raped.[126] Again, we are not learning the history of Partition through lineal time but rather through the trauma experienced by human bodies.

In a similar fashion to *Cracking India*, in the poem "White Washing," there is no mention of a date, which continues to fragment the experience of lineal time, instead time is measured through lived experience. Before I continue, I must reveal that initially, underneath the title of "White Washing," I included three dates. The first date to appear was that of the Brexit referendum, June 23 2016. It was on this night that I first noticed my grandmother began to sleep with her kirpan. The second date was the memory of the oral story that is being described, August 15 2001. The third date was that of Partition, August 15 1947. I found that by including all three dates, the dates started to define the poem, and I didn't want everything that is attached to Partition to overshadow my grandmother's story. I wanted the poem to speak for itself. I wanted to explore the importance of lived

[124] Sidhwa, *Cracking India: A Novel*, 157.

[125] Sidhwa, *Cracking India: A Novel*, 159.

[126] Sidhwa, *Cracking India: A Novel*, 195.

experience that is not defined by time. So, I omitted the dates, and I feel that this allows the reader to walk into the family narrative rather than be transported to the national and historical narrative that surrounds the time of Partition. Equally, through omitting the dates in "White Washing," I was able to explore how time functions as a fluid location, allowing for seamless movement between India and Britain, between the trauma of my grandmother's past and her present life. Here, through intertwining my own memories with those of my grandmother, the poem illustrates how the past continues to disturb the present. For instance, in "White Washing," my grandmother dreams of a time when she and I were younger completing chores together. In this dream, she re-lives the past and begins telling me the story of Partition. As we wash bedsheets, she drifts further into her past, re-living the trauma of what she had witnessed during Partition, recalling that

> Her father would always come back home after he had guided their friends in the village safely to the other side of the border. The once neat pleats of his turban sitting dishevelled on his head and his clothes besmirched by blood and soil.
>
> She would learn from her father what would happen to Muslims if they stayed.

Here, her memory allows her to move between England and India, to create distance between her life in the present and the trauma of her past, connecting different time periods and locations as she shares her story. Through the examination of this intergenerational transmission of memory and trauma between myself and my grandmother, the poem underlines the lasting impact the past has on both individual and collective identity.

Additionally, through revisiting the past, my grandmother reflects on the transformations she has undergone. In the same way in which Ayah changes her identity to Mumtaz in order to show that she is healing from her past trauma, in "White Washing" my grandmother too takes part in the same healing. In the act of my grandmother recalling the past in the present through her oral story, she remembers the girl she was, the girl who

lived in fear. In doing so, she acknowledges her past and how different it is to the life she now lives. In this poem, it is my grandmother's lived experiences, her ability to understand her past, to cook with her granddaughter, to have a family, to live safely, that all allow her to live in the present and heal. However, in part what allows the healing process to occur is the transference of trauma—of having a story heard and acknowledged by someone. In this case, it is her granddaughter who has immortalised her story through poetic form so that it exists beyond her and without her.

It is striking to recognise that so much violence in India and Pakistan has occurred due to colonialism and its segregationist policies. Yet what has exacerbated this violence is the cultural amnesia surrounding the time of Partition. What "Open It" has taught me, is that if we actively take part in the erasure of history, the erasure of someone's story, we exacerbate trauma and do not allow healing to take its course. In part, this is why I wanted to document my grandmother's story, so that she can add to the growing voices that inform us of what occurred during Partition, before her voice is lost. Additionally, through my grandmother's story in "White Washing," I wanted to acknowledge that there were some communities who did not allow colonialism to destroy their familial bonds, and it was the presence of this community that kept my grandmother safe and greatly limited her exposure to trauma. Similarly, in *Cracking India*, although Godmother judges Mumtaz's life choices, Godmother does provide Mumtaz with access to a community, to friendship. It is this authentic communal response to violence and trauma that is lacking in "Open It," but it is this response that helps women like my grandmother and Mumtaz to reclaim their voices and bodies, while also guiding their own healing. When reading these stories, our communal response is important because believing a story can not only facilitate someone else's healing, but also our own.

1984: A Landscape of Loss

For Sikhs, 1984 would bring about the launch of the Indian government's Operation Blue Star, the deaths of thousands of innocents, the assassination of India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and the beginning of the third Sikh genocide. Urvashi Butalia argues that for Sikhs, 1984 became a violent repetition of Partition.[127] If Partition did not separate Sikhs from their homeland, 1984 would. In this section, I re-trace the heavy silence that came after 1984, and how it reinforced trauma in the lives of those who lived through it. I particularly examine how important journaling was to my poetic practice when working through my thoughts and feelings about my mother's and her family's experience of what they encountered during this tumultuous period. I have written three poems that provide a small insight into the horror of 1984. The poem "In The April Of 1984," bridges my mother's life in England to her lived experience of residing in Punjab during Operation Blue Star. The poem "Gold Dust Floats In A Temple In Punjab" has been loosely written from stories shared by family members in India and it explores the repercussions faced by those affected by the Indian government's assault on the Golden Temple during a sacred day. Lastly, "Apparitions of Genocide" reflects on the aftermath of this attack, and the genocide that ensued due to Sikh retaliation against the Indian government through the assassination of Indira Gandhi. These poems do not memorialise the dissidents who are remembered as martyrs. They do not provide agency to the central government who allowed the genocide to occur; rather these poems remember the events of 1984 through the people who experienced them, through the thousands who lost their lives to unfathomable pain.

[127] Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, 4.

At the centre of the violence of 1984 was Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a saint-like figure who wanted more autonomy for Sikhs. In 1977 the Congress party would see Bhindranwale as a figure who could strengthen their hold on Punjab.[128] Lutz and Lutz suggest the Congress party "covertly supported Bhindranwale who created a new party to challenge the dominant Akali Dal."[129] Bhindranwale would go on to unofficially lead the Sikh separatist movement. To some Indians, Bhindranwale and his followers would be known as saviours, dissidents, and to others, terrorists. By 1984, Bhindranwale's popularity grew and with it so did violence. On the 3rd of June 1984, Operation Blue Star was launched by the Indian government. For the Indian government, the aim was to restore peace, regain control in Punjab and to remove and neutralise Bhindranwale and his followers, who had sought safety in the Golden Temple. On that day 10,000 pilgrims were visiting the temple site.[130] They had travelled to Amritsar for the martyrdom day of Guru Arjan Dev Ji and were caught in the crossfire between the Indian government and Bhindranwale and his followers. On the 6th of June, "A media blackout was imposed in Punjab for Indian and foreign journalists. With constitutional rights suspended, human rights abuses inevitably followed."[131] Pandey and Singh claim, "The *Times* reporter Michael Hamlyn recounted that journalists were picked up from their hotels at 5 a.m. in a military bus, taken to the adjoining border of the state of Haryana and 'were abandoned there.'"[132] That same day, before Indira Gandhi sent out her orders, seven

[128] Pav Singh, *1984: India's Guilty Secret* (London: Kashi House, 2017), 66.

[129] James M. Lutz and Brenda J. Lutz, *Global Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 76.

[130] Namrata Goswami, "Insurgencies in India," in *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, ed. Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn (London: Routledge, 2012), 213.

[131] Singh, *1984: India's Guilty Secret*, 5.

[132] Hemant Kumar Pandey and Manish Raj Singh, *India's Major Military & Rescue Operations* (New Delhi: Horizon Books, 2021), 160.

Vijayanta tanks were already positioned inside the Golden Temple Complex. [133] As soon as a "go ahead signal was given to General Brar," tank operators "bombard[ed] the Akhal Takht."[134] Fighting lasted more than twenty-four hours and resulted in the Akhal Takht reduced to skeletal rubble alongside the death of Bhindranwale and his followers. These happenings "led to the killing of 4000 to 8000 people in the Darbar Sahib alone."[135]

The events of 1984 and their aftermath are still a trauma that Sikh families inherit, one that is preserved and passed down to each generation through oral stories. It was through my mother's oral stories that I learned that months before Operation Blue Star was launched, on the 12th of April 1984, she boarded a plane to Punjab with her 5-month-old daughter. Little would my mother know that two months earlier the Indian government had asked the British government for advice on a military operation.[136] On the 13th of April my mother landed in Amritsar during a curfew completely unaware of the violence she had walked into. The poem, "In The April Of 1984," is inspired by my mother's oral stories, where my mother's story is being relayed through my voice, marking the transference of oral stories as well as trauma from one generation to the next. The two voices present in this poem legitimise the story and the history connected to it, where the written form allows the truth of a lived experience to be acknowledged and not forgotten. In this poem my voice channels my mother's story and tells the reader of the passing of my mother's mother against the backdrop of Operation Blue Star. This is juxtaposed with my mother's return to England, a return to the ordinary: "nappies, cleaning, cooking and cashing the register." The mundaneness found in this poem as well as the flatness of "stacking the beer

[133] The number of tanks used varies from source to source, for instance Namrata Goswami in their essay "Insurgencies in India" in *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, notes that six tanks were used rather than seven.

[134] A. R. Darshi, *The Gallant Defender* (Amritsar: B. Chattar Singh, Jiwan Singh, 2004), 120.

[135] Darshi, *The Gallant Defender*, 187.

[136] Singh, *1984: India's Guilty Secret*, 69.

shelves, glass bottles in hand" is so banal in comparison to the violence about to consume Punjab. Here I specifically chose to allude to violence rather than explicitly show it. I chose this approach not only to prepare readers for the poems about Operation Blue Star and genocide that would follow, but also to limit an unnecessary exposure to violence and trauma. However, I still felt that I needed to write a poem that told my readers that violence did occur, because as Khushwant Singh (who has written extensively on the Sikh diaspora through novels, criticism, and newspaper columns, and before 1984, was a part of Indira Gandhi's cabinet) relays, in retaliation against the assassination of the Prime Minister, Sikhs were targeted with violence. I wanted my readers to know that

> young Sikh women [were] gangraped and Sikhs …between the ages of 15 and 50, [were] brutally murdered. Amongst train casualties were scores of army officers in uniform. The killings followed a set pattern. The victims were first bludgeoned with iron rods, then doused with petrol and set alight. In the later stages of the holocaust, a certain amount of finesse was added to the method of killing: the victim's hands were pinioned behind him and a burning motor tyre lowered around his neck like a flaming garland…"[137]

I felt that my readers needed to know how many lives were uprooted. I wanted them to know that overnight, "Over 50,000 Sikhs were lodged in refugee camps in Delhi. Between 20,000 to 30,000 Sikh families left their homes in different parts of India and migrated to the Punjab."[138] Equally, many "who had the means, left India altogether, escaping to the US, Canada and the UK primarily through family connections."[139] I needed readers to

[137] Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: 1839-2004* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 378; in 1974 Khushwant Singh was awarded the Padma Bhushan medal by India. In 1984, considering the government's actions, he returned the medal.

[138] Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: 1839-2004*, 379.

[139] Pav Singh. *1984 India's Guilty Secret,* 170.

know that for Sikhs in the UK, what hurt the most was the fact that there may have been British involvement in Operation Blue Star. This fact came to light in 2014, when the Home Office lost a Freedom of Information court case to Declassified UK. In the documents made available, journalist Phil Miller found evidence that "British officials were considering 'the possibility of an SAS involvement'" in Operation Blue Star. The rest of the file was censored, "so it was unclear whether or not the SAS training had gone ahead."[140] I wanted to explore in my writing how Sikhs like my mother who were also British citizens and who were trapped in India during Operation Blue Star, would feel betrayed by Britain. However, despite my efforts to try and include all this information in my work, I had to remind myself that my writing was guided by oral stories. To take on such history was an impossible task, because I was already finding it hard to express my family's stories of this horrific time.

It took me months to write a poem that not only represented the Operation Blue Star tragedy, but also one that acknowledged my mother's family's stories of 1984. When trying to construct a poem that merged the voices, and communal memories of 1984 from my mother's father, aunt, sister, and brother, I couldn't seem to find the right form or the right language for their stories. After fifteen re-writes, I decided to settle on a prose poem. Shortly after, when trying to find documents that alluded to British involvement in Operation Blue Star, I found that many were redacted or blacked out. The documents reminded me of erasure poems, and subsequently in William Burroughs' style, I first started to cut up verses to rearrange them. Unhappy with the final product, I started erasing parts of my work which led me to an erasure poem that was reminiscent of a classified redacted report. The poem appears in my collection as "Gold Dust Floats In A Temple In Punjab." Again,

[140] Phil Miller. "Revealed: British Officials with Conflict of Interest Helped Investigate SAS Role in Golden Temple Massacre," Declassified Media Ltd, Aug 4 2020. https://declassifieduk.org/revealed-british-officialswith-conflict-of-interest-helped-investigate-sas-role-in-golden-temple-massacre/. (Accessed October 11 2022).

here the practice of erasure was useful in navigating trauma, as this device allowed me to craft a poem that considered the private and public history of Operation Blue Star from numerous voices within my family.

Utilising erasure also allowed me to explore trauma and loss in numerous ways. When discussing the relationship between trauma and erasure, Muriel Leung writes that

> In a workshop on erasure poetry, I described erasure as a subversion of the belief that it is poetry's job to reveal. If the writing of trauma, for instance, requires some excavation of the recesses of the mind, then how do we account for the blank spots? For the perpetrators we cannot name? The histories we can no longer access because they were stolen from us? Calling upon Édouard Glissant's concept of the right to opacity, can we consider poetry for the ways it does not tell? How it retains its dignity through selective silence? In this case, erasure is a strategy that at first mimics the psychological embodiment of what we have lost. Then the loss blankets the page. Then the poem becomes synonymous with loss itself. [141]

Leung's insights on how an erasure poem embodies "loss itself" is striking. "Gold Dust Floats In A Temple In Punjab" evokes the emotional voids that I not only found in the oral stories relayed to me, but also the voids of ignorance I felt when writing about Operation Blue Star. Through erasure, death materialised within the poem, arriving from the blacked-out sections that also started to symbolise my ignorance of what happened within the temple complex, much of which remains unknowable because I was not there. Echoing Leung, through erasure, "Gold Dust Floats In A Temple In Punjab" found a way to "retain its dignity in selective silence," because although I discuss what happened to the pilgrims trapped in the temple, I stop short of describing all that happened to them. The oral stories that

[141] Muriel Leung, "Erasure in Three Acts: An Essay," The Poetry Foundation, November 1, 2021, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2021/11/erasure.

helped shape this poem come from numerous voices, from accounts that saw and heard different things. The truth of what happened on that day will never be completely realised. The blacked-out words show the reader that truth is a complex narrative that belongs to many voices, to those who died and to those who lived through this horror. Furthermore, I felt that the deaths I was representing on the page still deserved dignity. Although their deaths needed to be recognised in the poem, they also deserved respect and privacy. The use of erasure meant that their deaths were not represented as the spectacle that the Indian government intended them to be. Lastly, erasing parts of the poem also allowed me to both explore and protect my emotions, limiting my exposure to the violent past, echoing the guidance set out by Adams and his co-authors, that a researcher should engage in self-care. The practice of erasure allowed me to protect myself from being re-traumatised through narrative while still telling an important story.[142] Here, erasure symbolised many things including loss, death, preserving someone's dignity and to an extent, protecting myself and readers from unnecessary trauma.

Unfortunately, in the decades after Operation Blue Star, violence against Sikhs continued both openly and secretly. The years 1985-95 marked the decade of disappearances where government brutality in Punjab was at its height: a whistleblowing police officer confessed to murdering over eighty Sikh youths under orders from superiors. It was a period where women were taken to private places to be questioned by officers and then brutally violated and raped.[143] The violence did not stop. In fact, it was legally permitted. To prevent another insurgency in Punjab, the central government introduced a cocktail of

[142] Adams et al. *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, 63.

[143] Angana P Chattergi and Mallika Kaur, "'The Subject of Rights: conflict violence and transitional justice in India,'" in *Human Rights in Postcolonial India*, ed. Om Prakash Dwivedi and V. G. Julie Rajan (India: Routledge, 2016), 188.

special laws that breached human rights and made sure that Sikhs would always lack agency and safety. These laws included

> AFSPA [Armed Forces Special Powers Act], the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1985 and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, served to deny due process, falsify charges, violate Habeas Corpus and enabled the armed forces to operate with impunity. AFSPA was enforced in Punjab in 1983 and withdrawn in 1993, even while crimes committed by state forces personnel during that time remain immune to legal prosecution.[144]

These laws pardoned atrocities committed at the hands of the government, creating a hostile environment where murder was acceptable and those willing to speak out were silenced. This would include the "Human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khalra" who "uncovered secret mass cremations [of Sikhs] in Punjab, documenting over 6,000 cremations in one district (Amritsar) alone. Khalra, himself, subsequently disappeared."[145] Khalra's research "brought to light 25,000 disappearances during the period from 1984-1985."[146] However, Khalra didn't just disappear; he was illegally detained by Indian security forces, tortured and killed.[147] Khalra was only trying to provide answers to where the disappeared had gone, in doing so, he too met the same fate. The aftermath of Operation Blue Star and the decades of silencing that followed, are beyond harrowing due to the systematic abuse carried out by the Indian government and the lack of justice for victims. When writing this

[144] Chattergi and Kaur, "'The Subject of Rights: Conflict Violence and Transitional Justice in India,'" 188.

[145] Chattergi and Kaur, "'The Subject of Rights: Conflict Violence and Transitional Justice in India,'" 188.

[146] Tridivesh Singh Maini, "Sikh Politics and the Indo-Pak Relationship," in *The Politics of Religion in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Ishtiaq Ahmed (London: Taylor and Francis, 2011), 75, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203817131-5.

[147] Ensaaf. "The Murder of Human Rights Defender Jaswant Singh Khalra." *Ensaaf.* 2021. https://ensaaf.org/jaswant-singh-khalra/#:~:text=In%20September%20and%20October%201995,cremations%20in%20Amritsar%20district%20alone.

sub chapter, for months, each night before I fell asleep, I would see my mother on the return plane home to London. I would see the dead she had left behind; I'd see the accounts of those who survived embellished in my mind. I'd see lifeless bodies. I often thought of Khalra and of the dead and wondered what they left behind for the living, for their family and friends. Unable to clear myself of this past, I journalled. I wrote every detail down and eventually they formed a poem.

I first encountered journaling when I was receiving CBT therapy for my eating disorder. Overtime, journaling became an important part of writing poetry about loss and trauma. In instances where the poem did not come to me easily, I would journal. Psychotherapist Susan Borkin suggests that "Using journaling as an adjunctive therapy empowers clients by making them directly responsible for their own healing… The path journaling takes often remains uncertain at the outset, but a willingness to explore it can lead to profound and unexpected insights."[148] I would begin to journal to clear myself of the violent history attached to 1984. The more I wrote about my own response to this history, the more I understood how healing can be made available by working through conflicting emotions. Journaling was not easy, but it allowed me to come to terms with the past and write poetry that explored and revisited trauma.

Although I personally benefited from journaling, there were times when it became overwhelming. It was during these periods that I turned to reading the works of writers who focused on similar subject matters. One such text was Jordan Abel's *Empty Spaces*. This book of prose poetry, through various forms of erasure, vividly portrays how nature actualises both the fullness of life and the loss of it—a loss that represents the voids of trauma present within Indigenous communities due to colonialism, genocide and state

[148] Susan Borkin, *The Healing Power of Writing: A Therapist's Guide to Using Journaling With Clients* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 10–11.

violence. James Mackay and Polina Mackay have carefully discussed “blankness” (a term given to both the whiteness of the page and differing forms of erasure) in Jordan Abel’s work. They write that “Abel particularly frequently dramatizes intergenerational trauma using blank spaces.”[149] However, they also recognise that the link between blankness and trauma represents more than just numbness and silence, as Abel’s work is also about Indigenous land. They argue that “The most significant linkage between land and blankness” comes in *Empty Spaces*, “the only book of Abel’s that does not involve visible plays with white space.”[150]

In *Empty Spaces,* Abel does not formally use cut-up or erasure techniques to explore trauma and the loss of life; instead, he alludes thematically to spaces which are erased. As a result, *Empty Spaces,* employs language to evoke erasure through describing how full of life the natural world can be, while paradoxically showing the reader how it can also represent absence and brokenness. Abel writes

> On the shore, there is a deep, narrow chasm that leads down into some other, darker place. On the shore, there are black rocks and roots and mud and tree stumps and broken bones and broken branches. On the shore, a river cuts through the trees. Sometimes there is a moment. Sometimes there are other, softer places. At this very moment, there is lightning and then there is a tumbling in the air a mile above us. At this very moment, white lightning breaks open the sky and runs straight through the open heavens into some

[149] James Mackay and Polina Mackay, “Indigenizing Blankness in the Works of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Gerald Vizenor, and Jordan Abel,” *Critique Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, March 25, 2024, 8, https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2024.2319694.

[150] Mackay and Mackay, “Indigenizing Blankness in the Works of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Gerald Vizenor, and Jordan Abel,” 9.

other place. In the forest, there is a deep hollow.[151]

Within this passage, and throughout *Empty Spaces,* words that imply a literal empty space, a void, a fissure in time and space, reappear to create a form of erasure to show us that something is missing, that something does not feel quite right. Words such as "chasm," "broken," "cuts," "lightning," "bones," "breaks," "hollow," imply that once life existed, that once something was whole but now no longer is, much like the lightning that appears as quickly as its fullness disappears into "the open heavens" that give way to "some other place," beyond our knowing, a place we have not yet experienced. Despite these erasures, the recognition of "some other place" suggests that there is a journey here, there is a process, and blankness and brokenness are a part of it—because, although there is an overwhelming presentation of trauma and loss in *Empty Spaces*, here, nature still offers hope for the possibility of regeneration. When addressing nature and the land in *Empty Spaces*, Mackay and Mackay recognise that the most notable, and perhaps only appearance of blankness (whiteness on the page) is during the first page of a chapter, where Abel's own artwork of the natural landscape makes an appearance surrounded by white space. They identify that this space "potentially allows the land to become itself again, erased of the damage done by human actions."[152] Here, despite the emptiness that language creates on the page, Abel reminds us there is hope in nature to restore and to heal. As a writer who is also trying to give trauma a form, the text reminded me of the importance of acknowledging experience—recognising that emptiness isn't ever really emptiness at all, that those feelings that I couldn't express needed time to be realised and understood so that that they could eventually manifest in my writing. *Empty Spaces* reminded me that writing about transgenerational trauma isn't easy, it's a journey full of brokenness where, as a

[151] Jordan Abel, *Empty Spaces* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2023), 31.

[152] Mackay and Mackay, "Indigenizing Blankness in the Works of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Gerald Vizenor, and Jordan Abel," 10.

writer, I am trying to understand this brokenness to heal. I am trying to move into "some other place" where I feel whole.

Eventually, when I went back to my own writing and when reading through my journal notes on 1984, a poem arrived in pieces and quickly took shape as "The Apparitions Of Genocide." When crafting the poem, I drew inspiration from Abel's delicate portrayal of absence and remembrance. I focused on expressing loss and the absences left behind by those who died rather than trying to depict violent death. The original title for this poem was the "Apparitions Of Amritsar." I renamed it "The Apparitions Of Genocide" because not only does it relate to a more universal suffering, but "Genocide" transports the reader directly into a landscape of loss. Equally, during my writing period, I participated in a workshop with Daljit Nagra on syllabic verse. Here I was introduced to "Zapotec Crossers (or, Haiku I Write Post-PTSD Nightmares)" by Alan Pelaez Lopez, who wrote the poem in syllabic verse and turned the form into an activist one. Remembering the lessons of this workshop, "The Apparitions Of Genocide" uses syllabic verse to produce a protest poem, where I explore the mass silencing of the murdered and the vacuum of pain they left behind. Originally, I wrote the poem as prose. Subsequently, I began to erase words and then cut up stanzas to rearrange the narrative while always counting syllables. The "mother, I cannot find you, / father, I cannot see you, / we have lost friends" became a refrain, repeating after every two stanzas, where each refrain except for the last follows the pattern of 7,7,4,3 syllables in each line, and presents a return to the narrative, a return to loss. Additionally, each stanza that isn't a refrain reads as 7,7,7,3 syllables per line. Every single line in this poem has an odd number of syllables, where this oddness implies something is uneven and missing—that is except for the third line of each refrain where the "we have lost friends" at four syllables, presents an even number to suggest that the only indisputable thing the speakers know, is that they have lost

someone. The poem ends with this concrete certainty among all the other wonderings. Much like Abel's prose, here words like "lost," "buried," "barren," "burnt," and "desolate" represent absence and erasure within the poem. To write about 1984, I used erasure strategies, journalled, and engaged with the works of writers who explore trauma to overcome the difficulty of verbalising trauma.

A pivotal aspect of my project and the research that I conducted involved revisiting the events of 1984. I chose to diverge from re-creating the narratives of martyrdom surrounding figures like Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, Indira Gandhi, and the assassins Beant Singh and Satwant Singh who murdered her. Instead, I focused on the voices of those who survived, who carried with them the enduring trauma of that period. I also tried to honour those who lost their lives to the violence of 1984. Writing poetry about this history felt essential because as a diaspora, Sikhs continue to mourn friends and family lost to this violence. My mother still thinks of all those she was never able to help. British Sikhs still feel betrayed by Britain for its involvement (however small) in the events that led to the bloodshed of 1984.[153]

[153] See also, Darsham Singh Tatla, *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search For Statehood* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1999); Shinder S Thandi, "Promise of Punjabi Diaspora: Rhetoric and Reality of Failed Engagement," *Economic & Political Weekly*, January 21, 2017, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A478422859/GBIB?u=keele_tr&sid=bookmark-GBIB&xid=acb586af; Pav Singh, *1984: India's Guilty Secret* (London: Kashi House, 2017).

Healing as Beginning

The relationship my ancestors had cultivated with the land that they were born in was disrupted by British imperialism, leaving colonised subjects with a conflicted sense of home. So, when emigrants such as my grandparents came to England, they had to find a home in a country that did not entirely welcome them. My grandparents would tell my parents and their grandchildren stories of their life in India. My parents would tell me stories of what they could remember of India, but also what it was like to grow up in England. In his life's work, *The Body Keeps The Score*, psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk tells us that "Trauma affects not only those who are directly exposed to it, but also those around them."[154] Pairing this with Marianne Hirsch's concept of the transmission of trauma in childhood from one generation to the next, would mean that it was unavoidable that my father and mother would inherit their parents' trauma. Both generations would all have to contend with assimilation into Britain, where they would be taunted for their skin colour, what they ate, their traditions, what they wore, and their mother tongue. In the stories they passed on to the next generation, unavoidably they talked about their trauma. In doing so, they passed on their traumas to their children. Rather than causing us to yearn for the homeland they felt alienated from, these narratives served as a warning to us—a plea to strive for better lives, a lesson to grasp every opportunity, and most importantly, these narratives served as a reminder to always be empathetic and kind. As an English born Indian, in this reflection and poetry collection, I wanted to explore my parents' and grandparents' journeys to England, to understand and consider some of the traumas that migrants and their families have inherited from empire, specifically, British imperialism in Punjab. I also wanted to capture how their lives have shaped my own, and how by realising

[154] Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (London: Penguin UK, 2014), 1.

trauma, and healing from trauma, we can prevent its passage from one generation to the next.

Through my research and my lived experience, I have learned that transgenerational trauma, collective trauma, trauma—exist not only in the initial occurrence of the event that caused the trauma, but also in the aftermath too, in what is inherited by the next generation through orality and transference where the presence of transgenerational trauma becomes undeniable. The violence Indians experienced under the British Raj, division amongst Indians and Pakistanis, disease, famine, colonial legacies that led to genocide and transgenerational trauma—cannot always easily be placed into neat little boxes. Instead, they exist as ugly and unimaginable because the traumas these events have created for millions within the Sikh, Indian and Pakistani diasporas live on through inheritance. Through poeticising familial oral stories this thesis has revisited some of the legacies these traumas have left behind for the lives who have experienced and inherited this history. These personal narratives of human memory that I explore through my family's oral stories have been deeply painful to write. Yet, like other existing accounts of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, famine, Partition and the Sikh genocide, the stories I have explored in this thesis are unique because they are specific to my family—to their lived experience that has not been previously thoroughly examined and so, though painful to translate into the poetic form, these stories have been necessary to write in order to allow myself to heal and to live in the present.

Bringing this reflection to a close means that it is important to recognise that with trauma exists the possibility of healing. In documenting oral stories through poetry, this thesis has always tried to return to the idea of healing and how one can make space for healing through revisiting the past. At every point as a writer, I have chosen healing. Through wanting to heal, I have been able to revisit the past and through writing

creatively, I have been able to heal. However, healing isn't always this straightforward. On the act of healing, Bessel Van der Kolk argues that

> We have discovered that helping victims of trauma find the words to describe what has happened to them is profoundly meaningful, but usually it is not enough. The act of telling the story doesn't necessarily alter the automatic physical and hormonal responses of bodies that remain hypervigilant, prepared to be assaulted or violated at any time. For real change to take place, the body needs to learn that the danger has passed and to live in the reality of the present. Our search to understand trauma has led us to think differently not only about the structure of the mind but also about the processes by which it heals.[155]

Healing is not a one-day process; trauma must first be understood by both the body and the mind, only then can healing truly begin. In my own experience, when trauma is addressed both collectively and individually, healing becomes available through recognising that these traumatic events occurred. Although revisiting traumatic experiences will always be painful at first, it is a necessary pain that allows one to live in the present and not the past. What has become apparent through my grandmother's oral stories is that when one is part of a community, healing becomes a more viable option. Similar to the poems of Rupi Kaur that demonstrate "that healing through narrative is always necessarily collective," through writing poems about my family's oral stories, I sought to connect to a larger community of readers who wanted to understand more about their own heritage and the past—an audience that may have needed to read these poems to recognise that they are not alone, that they are part of a larger community.[156] As it is within a community, we have space to be heard, to grow and to heal.

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[155] Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, 182.

[156] Kruger, "The Technopo(E)Litics of Rupi Kaur: (De)Colonial AestheTics and Spatial Narrations in the DigiFemme Age."

As I have already expressed throughout this reflection, I have not found it easy to write, in part due to the educational environment I am writing from, as well as the subject matter I am writing on. However, I was driven by a need to write. I felt that to heal, to prevent trauma from passing on to the next generation, I needed to try and give trauma a form through poetry. This project has been guided first and foremost by oral stories and memory, and then by the history interconnected to these stories and those of others. My writing has helped me to understand some of the traumas experienced by the Punjabi Sikh diaspora and my family. However, healing by understanding and realising the trauma that exists in lived experience does not erase the trauma—rather it makes it easier to live with. Throughout my poetry collection and reflection, I have tried to suggest healing from trauma is possible, but only through revisitation. This project stands as a testament to ongoing healing amidst an overwhelming sense of hopelessness, where healing will open to you when you arrive at its door. In choosing to revisit the past and heal, we are choosing not to transfer harmful traumas and experiences to the next generation.

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