Reading Religiosity:

Religious Experience and Aesthetic Form in South Asia and the Diaspora

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Contemporary scholarship on religion and literature has often approached religion as an object of representation, asking how literary and aesthetic works depict religious belief, practice, or identity. This dissertation advances a different mode of reading. Rather than treating religion as a stable object awaiting interpretation, it argues that religion functions within aesthetic works as a dynamic mode of thought and experience that participates in the production of meaning. Reading religion, the dissertation suggests, requires attending not only to what texts and films represent but also to the formal conditions through which religious life becomes perceptible. By highlighting the reciprocal relationship between religious experience and aesthetic form, this dissertation develops an interpretive practice that traces how literary, theatrical, and cinematic works both represent and enact forms of religious life.

This dissertation examines how literature, theater, and film from South Asia and its diaspora represent religious life, practice, and identity as living and evolving phenomena, especially under the pressures of political conflict and emerging secularism. Across four core chapters, I explore how aesthetic works negotiate religion as both a legible category and an

experiential mode that exceeds such categorization. Focusing on moments of formal distortion and transformation, I argue that novels, poetry, plays, and films create spaces in which religiosity is both conditioned by and irreducible to the political and social conditions that serve as its grounds.

To highlight these dynamics, each chapter offers a series of detailed close readings organized around novels by Tahmima Anam and Bapsi Sidhwa, poetry by Fariha Roisin and Mohja Kahf, plays by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti and Ayad Akhtar, and films by Sabiha Sumar and Tareque Masud. Through these works, I demonstrate how the constraints and determinist tendencies of textual and aesthetic representation must be negotiated, and at times exceeded, in order to accommodate religion as an experiential mode that surpasses its categorical dimensions.

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Reading Religiosity Under a Secular Sun: An Introduction

What idea of religiosity emerges when controversy becomes the primary lens through which religious expression is recognized? Literature and religion are often held in a dialectical relationship that presumes their opposition from the outset. Any perceived contradiction between the two may stem less from an inherent incompatibility than from a reluctance to consider the religious as an epistemological and methodological foundation in its own right. The legibility of religious sentiment, practice, and intellectual traditions within literary works appears to conflict with the expectation that legitimate modes of reading and interpretation must remain insulated from the influence of religious sensibility. As a result, attempts to read religion as a discrete object often rely upon hermeneutic frameworks that imagine themselves to have already transcended the very religious formations they seek to interpret. Where does the boundary between the aesthetic and the religious truly lie? To what extent is the boundary itself an interpretative construction? And how might our current reading practices account for the ways that these two domains constitute and transform each other?

This dissertation undertakes the task of reading religiosity and its spectrum of aesthetic expressions against dominant frameworks shaped by secularism. Several questions animate its main concerns: To what extent can religiosity emerge as a distinctive constellation of beliefs, practices, affects, and forms of collective life beyond the political and epistemic frameworks that delimit its expression? What role can literature play in recovering dimensions of religious experience obscured or flattened by such frameworks? What moments reveal the inextricable

entanglement of the literary and the religious, especially when these domains have so often been presented as mutually exclusive? And what becomes visible when we attend to the role of literary form in rendering religiosity legible within the text?

This project addresses these questions in three ways. First, it identifies moments across a range of literary and visual forms where religiosity becomes visible or intelligible, examining the formal, aesthetic, and interpretative conditions that allow it to appear. Second, it uses these moments to reflect on the relationship between the literary and the religious that coalesces within South Asia as both a region and a distinctive political and cultural formation. Finally, it argues that moments of ambiguity, discontinuity, or misreading are especially revealing, for they expose the ways that religious life exceeds the categorical frameworks through which it is commonly understood and represented. Attending to these moments allows for a more expansive account of religiosity as a lived habitus whose meanings cannot be fully contained by established political, social, or epistemological categories.

Anthropology has done much to map the operations, conditions, and limits of the secular, with a number of influential scholars defining the contours of the field. Yet anthropology's commitment to identifying and analyzing categories of lived realities, social behaviors, and collective practices must also contend with another fact: the stories to be gleaned from social life are often shaped by, challenged, and even exceeded by the narrative practices through which they are told. If anthropology studies culture as a text, and Clifford Geertz argues, seeks to interpret cultural meaning through acts of reading, then the anthropological and the literary necessarily converge at a common point of inquiry. What demands attention, therefore, is the relationship between the practices that become codified as categories such as religion, culture, or society and

the way these categories are subsequently represented, transformed, and contested within stories, aesthetic forms, and other imaginative constructions of the world.

This project examines not only multiple discourses that approach religion and religiosity from different, often times opposing, directions, but also the overlap between how identity and community have been configured within South Asia and the more global notions of ethnic heritage and national affinity that emanate from the experience of South Asian diaspora. At a moment when so much international interest is directed towards identifying and addressing behaviors, characteristics, and ideologies that can or should be categorized as "extreme" or "threatening," I consider how different modes of piety and religiosity are assessed by those interests, and the role our artistic representations play in shaping or depicting those assessments. Alongside scholars such as Jasbir Puar, Nasia Anam, and Esra Mirze Santesso, who map the transformation of Muslim identity and lived experience on this shifting terrain, I center religiosity and its covert and overt valences.

What follows in this introduction situates several key terms that provide the conceptual framework for this project. By tracing the terms "secular," "literary," "Islamic," and "orthodoxy" across different academic contexts, I aim to identify the points of convergence that emerge when these categories are examined in relation to one another. In doing so, I engage scholarship that has explored their intersections while also interrogating the binaries through which they are often understood. Rather than treating these concepts as discrete or oppositional domains, I argue that their meanings are constituted through a series of overlapping histories, interpretive practices, and modes of representation whose boundaries remain far less stable than they initially appear.

The Secular

Studies on secularism as a political and ideological phenomenon have interrogated it as a moving mechanism from several directions in recent years, providing a distinct set of perspectives through which the relationship between religiosity and literature can refract. From the seminal analysis of Talal Asad—for whom "the secular" as an intellectual ideogram holds clear and defined differences from secularism as a political category—to Saba Mahmood's focus on how liberal and secular epistemologies construct and then regulate the religious (Muslim) subject, these perspectives seek to reframe religion as an embodied practice that is actively shaped, interrupted, and often made only partially legible within and through existing epistemological frameworks of modernity, colonialism, capitalism, or statecraft. Considering that these formulations are rooted in anthropological inquiry and serve to interrogate, but also remain within, its disciplinary modes, the question of how literary representation itself is yet another arena where the place of religiosity is being negotiated if not adjudicated remains a peripheral concern.

This is not to say that literature is not at all a consideration. Much of the conversation in the past few decades where religion in literature has taken center stage displayed a fraught and confrontational relationship between the two categories that have been deemed incommensurate and irreconcilable. Several prominent examples from recent history—the *Satanic Verse* controversy and the Jyllands-Posten cartoon incident from 2005 to name a few—have been analyzed by scholars not only to resist the perception of religion (i.e. Islam) as the natural and inexplicable enemy of the modern intellectual literary, which seems to be confirmed by these incidents, but to also unpack how any set of actions, behaviors, or expressions within the context of contemporary global political frameworks is always already situated within referents directed by the secular. It is therefore unsurprising that religion, religiosity, or actions that can otherwise

be read as religious expression often do not find purchase within these contexts, hardening the perceived parity between the religious and the secular.

One crucial such work that brings into conversation several prominent scholars and angles of inquiry arose out of a 2007 symposium in Berkeley organized around the question "Is critique secular?" taking as its material of discussion the discursive topography that determines the evaluative frameworks through which scholars of the humanities assess, understand, explain, and even codify a multi-cultural multi-religious reality. Beginning with deliberations on secularism, free speech, and blasphemy by Asad and Mahmood, with responses by Judith Butler and counterpoints by each, the event produced a set of ideas that interrogate secularity to reveal the paradoxes that make its relationship to contemporary discourses about religiosity and religious populations opaque[1].

In a post 9/11 era, when speaking of the secular and the religious, one must be clear about where Islam falls in this dyad, i.e. the extent to which perceptions of Islam itself dictates the textures of the binary. The binary between secular and religious is particularly hampered by the difficulties of defining the former term, whose meaning is given to slippages and perplexing inexactitude:

> Consider, too, the train of associations with the secular that betray the commonsensical meaning—"secular" can suggest a condition of being unreligious or antireligious, but also religiously tolerant, humanist, Christian, modern, or simply Western. And any effort at settling the term immediately meets its doom in the conflicts among these associations, conflicts epitomized by the recent phenomenon of an American neoconservative political

[1] Asad, Talal, et al. *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. The Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009.

> agenda that simultaneously sought to legitimize Christian prayer in American public schools and to make secularization a central tenet of the regime change project in the Middle East. (Brown 10)

Brown outlines here the matrix of meanings and many contradictory nodes of identity connected to even a lay notion of the secular. That secularity can become a condition underpinned by such contradictions, yet remain positioned as the rationally consistent precondition of civilizational modernity as we apprehend it in our age, is yet another contradiction in terms through which the legibility of religion within that modernity is diminished—or at the very least only partially facilitated. It is also notable that "Christian" and "secular" can remain concurrent, revealing the definition of "religion" itself, especially when placed in relation to the secular, also attains a different set of associations that exist beyond and apart from its linguistic meaning. It also means that "the secular" is often positioned in a binary with Islam, even though it seems to align itself comfortably, and invisibly, with Christian intellectual and political modes but finds itself set apart from Islam. The moment in which the tri-layered potential of the secular in its "unreligious", "antireligious", or "religiously tolerant" guise encounters Islam, the latter is relegated to the role of its fractious and suspect opposite. When these contradictions within the formulation of secularity as a concept at work start to become apparent, the perceived binary between the secular and the religious dissolve, or at the very least are rendered very thin.

Asad's contribution to the panel uses the contradictions and paradoxes held within the definition, operation, and treatment, of blasphemy as a conceptualization and an effect produced by the legal framework in Western European societies to diagnose the problems inherent to discourses of liberal secularism in those states. By discussing specific examples of laws and rights that are considered a natural product of the permissiveness within a liberal secular

democracy (and makes it superior as a civilizational mode to its discursive others, i.e. Islamic societies), Asad unpacks the principles through which notions of "freedom" and categories such as "speech" are surely but invisibly determined and delimited. In the course of his explorations, he demonstrates how religious societies and secular liberal societies are governed by moral frameworks that define and curtail what reads as "freedom" within these societies, but also that conceptualizations of freedom, rights, and ethics as they develop within Islamic religious societies often do not find legibility within the liberal secular frameworks, whose origins he traces back to Christianity. By drawing a continuity between present day liberal secular modernity and its Christianity predecessor, Asad makes visible the liberal secular democracy's covert and overt relationship to religion, where "religion" as its oppositional category is always enshrined in what it reads as its civilizational other—in this case Islam.

With specific reference to how his observations relate to the question of critique and the slippery grounds it rests upon, he clarifies thusly:

> But every critical discourse has institutional conditions that define what it is, what it recognizes, what it aims at, what it is destroying—and why. Neither philosophical nor literary criticism can successfully claim to be the privileged site of reason. It matters whether the criticism/critique in question is conducted in the form of parody and satire, confession of sins, political autocritique, professional criticism, or speech under analysis. One might say that if these are all possible instances of critique/criticism, then what we have here is a family concept for which it is not possible to provide a single theory because the *practices* that constitute them differ radically. (55)

Even as he maps the arbitrariness of the secular terrain from which most of the "institutional conditions" he mentions arise, he also asserts here that the form of critical engagement, as much

as those conditions, determine our examination of criticism/critique as a practice. In this sense, the formal (and perhaps even genre) dimension of critique finds purchase in his analysis, and precipitates as an important consideration for those attempting to parse how the literary and the secular coincide.

Asad and Mahmood observe how the discursive ideogram of the liberal secular framework situates itself within a matrix of definitive components through which its grounds are determined. These components provide specific lenses through which the world is apprehended but which also misapprehend or make illegible within their definitions certain nuances of whatever is positioned as "the other". For instance, in sorting diverse ethics, practices, behaviors, and traditions under at times competing at times conflicting categories of culture or religion, the internal logic and mechanism through which those ethics, practices, behaviors and traditions operate become subsumed by the logic of the liberal secular that organizes and defines them. What is revealed in this process, however, are the incongruencies or inconsistencies that project a kind of incoherence to the moral, ethical, and behavioral structures that fall outside of the liberal secular model. That this happens while its own organizing modality and conceptual framework does not register itself as a "culture," and is inflected by its own paradoxes of meaning and contradictions in practice—many of which remain illegible within these categories—outlines the problem of liberal secularism as the basis of critique for any quarter, but especially of what it tags as religious or Islamic.

Mahmood's own work on women's religiosity, religious difference, and the construction of secularist discourses about these issues adds to this vein by interrogating how different competing epistemologies navigate religiosity as it appears in and through different forms and practices. In her seminal book *Politics of Piety*, her study of the women's piety movement in

Egypt relies on ethnographic data about the participants of these movements to fashion a new set of understandings and guidelines for personhood, subjectivity, agency, one which attends to the aporia regarding pious women in liberal secular imaginaries of women's liberation and agency. In turning away from existing vocabulary within the Western feminist corpus that Mahmood claims do not adequately capture "forms of corporeality that, while efficacious in behavior, do not lend themselves easily to representation, elucidation, and a logic of signs and symbols" (165) she establishes the need for new conceptualizations for religious practice and women's piety. The necessity for new conceptualizations that make sense of women's religiosity becomes even more urgent when considering how the secular-liberal imaginary can become an obstacle to their legibility:

> In other words, it is not that the pietists have "politicized" the spiritual domain of Islam (as some scholars of Islam claim) but that the conditions of secular-liberal modernity are such that for any world-making project (spiritual or otherwise) to succeed and be effective, it must engage with the all-encompassing institutions and structures of modern governance, whether it aspires to state power or not. (193)

That the discourse about these movements and their participants must contend with the structures of power and governance as established by the secular-liberal state and discursive formations that seek to create them as its subject in ways they are unable to control is not necessarily a unidirectional phenomenon. The mosque movement of Egypt, as analyzed by Mahmood, also reveals the limits and incapacity of those existing formations, underscoring the timeliness and relevance of her project to understanding other forms of power and agency that exist within "illiberal" non-secular societies or contexts.

It is her explication of the violent reaction to the Danish cartoons that most closely considers how secular liberal imaginary and vocabulary fail to make intelligible certain kinds of religiosity that do not adhere to the schemas of privatized or culturalized conceptualizations of religion modern liberal secular states are most comfortable with. By using the idea of *schesis*, she explains how the relationship between the Prophet Muhammad and pious Muslims in certain parts of the world do not strictly conform to that of a believer to a scriptural figure or icon. In her response to Butler's own misreading of her arguments as culturalist rather than political, she clarifies that her purpose in focusing on the "structure of sensitivities, affects, and commitments" is to find ways in which the intelligibility of such an "ethical sensibility" as she calls it—one which is as yet illegible within the power structures represented by the courts, for example—can empower Muslim minorities within Western liberal secular spaces: "To recognize the ethical underpinnings of the law is not to give causal primacy to the ethical, but to register the relationship between them, a relationship that is often ignored by legal practitioners, liberal political theorists, and, perhaps far more importantly for my argument, by European Muslims who want to\seek protection within these laws" (149). The relationship between the ethical framework she maps in her work and the system of relations she seeks to articulate through that map is attentive to the political import of these kinds of religiosity remaining invisible, incomprehensible, or illegible with the social, legal, and cultural spheres in which they operate. The extent to which religiosity—and as an extension of that, the representations of religiosity in our creative arts—is able to find purchase within the liberal secular imaginaries that form their critical frameworks is still a political question in the sense that it interrogates whether the "representable" subject must always be visible to secularity in some capacity.

The Islamic

What many such scholars of secularism leave out of their conceptualization of religion within the secularist paradigm is a deeper engagement with how literary forms and representation actively shape, and are in turn shaped by, the contours of religious identity and practice as they prevail in the world. While literary critique can and has been attentive to religion as they appear in literature, how we learn to read and interpret them as expressions of the religious and the relationship they forge between the two can use closer scrutiny. If the parameters of religion and the lens through which religiosity is ascertained or examined are predetermined by a secularly inclined conceptualization of modern life, state, and civic society, then is literature and literary form similarly implicated?

In this respect Shahab Ahmed's comprehensive publication *What Is Islam* provides several intriguing approaches and counter-positions that point towards a more focused consideration of the place of literature in wider conversations about religiosity, especially with respect to the place and purpose of literature and literary form in illuminating different dimensions of what "Islamic" as a qualifier might involve. His work observes that the attempts to make Islam into a set of coherent and congruent ideas, practices, patterns of thought and belief have resulted in definitions where what registers or reads as authentically or authoritatively "Islamic" delegitimizes, erases, or renders invisible much of which in practice remains closely associated with the religion. His goal in his work has been to catalogue the ways in which the term "Islamic" begins to unspool when assumptions about region, language, culture, and methodologies are probed.

The scope of his scholarship is therefore necessarily expansive in its conceptualizations and range, outlining a region he calls "the Balkans to Bengal complex" whose religious

practices, he argues, are often relegated to the realm of culture or studied within the context of their national literary or cultural sphere, pushing to the periphery the possibility of understanding this region as a whole through the connecting strand of Islam. Rather than focusing too tightly on the local, Ahmed is interested in what registers as "Islamic" across this vast area, concentrating not just on conventions but on the outlying contradictory practices or representations within the Islamic world that are tagged as "Islamic"—which he argues are neither outlying, nor contradictory in its purest sense. By asking questions about whether certain modes of thinking, praxis, theological points of contention are Islamic or not, he wishes produce some coherence around what Islam is. His reordering of region in this manner, and inclusion in his analysis of a huge territory of practices and different traditions that are linked to something with which they identify as Islamic, serves to decenter the Arabocentrism within Islamic studies as well as allow a diverse range of practices and texts to attain definitive force in conceptualizing the term "Islamic."

Even though his work means to bring together a coherent set of threads which, when woven together, reveals that Islam is marked by a complex heterogeneity, much of his analysis circles back to the notions of incongruency, contradiction, and paradox. For Ahmed, a prescriptive authoritative conceptualization of Islam sidelines many widely accepted practices, beliefs, and entire lifeworlds existing across the Balkans to Bengal complex and as a result much that is Islamic or pertaining to Islam in some way is not accounted for while defining Islam, excluding from its definition the religious experience and habitus of much of the world. In the texts that he brings together through his analysis, the idea of Islam as paradox rings truer than the notion of a consistently unified set of beliefs, practices, texts, and definitions through which Islam can be perceived.

This becomes to an extent the basis for his critique of Talal Asad's widely accepted description of Islam as a discursive tradition, one which "seeks to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history" (Asad 20). In his search for an anthropological definition of Islam, Asad's cognizance of the need for that definition to account for a diversity of practices and belief meant that the usual sociological and culturalist approaches were not inadequate. Asad's approach, in its simplest terms, meant "a practice is Islamic because it is authorized by the discursive traditions of Islam, and is so taught to Muslims--whether by an *'alim*, a *khatib*, a Sufi *shaykh*, or an untutored parent" (21). However, Asad also asserts that Islam as a discursive tradition projects itself primarily through a tendency towards orthodoxy—what he defines as a "relationship of power," where Muslims exercise the authority through the determination and enforcement of correct practice or belief—emphasizing its prescriptive nature as being crucial to understanding its modalities and how it is perceived in the world. While his definition of Islam as a "discursive tradition" also highlights the temporal axis of history through the assertion of an Islamic past, present, and future (as indicated by the term "tradition"), it rests heavily on this triad of power, prescription, and authority.

Ahmed finds several problems with the notion of placing orthodoxy at the center of the definition of Islam in this manner. First, because this aligns Asad's formulations with the prescriptive and authoritative incarnation of Islam which runs counter to what Ahmed observes within the Balkans to Bengal complex, it raises the question of where the "power" and "authority" through which an orthodoxy is instituted and regulated might be located and who becomes what kind of subject under that power. Additionally, the problem with centering orthodoxy as a primary definitive mechanism for Islam lies in its creation of a hierarchy in terms

of what is allowed to inflect and affect the idea of the "Islamic" and runs counter to the ethos of the diverse collection of texts he examines in his work:

> …I outlined the human and historical phenomenon of Islam characterized not by a definitive dynamic of a constraining thrust towards the formulation, regulation and requirement of exclusive truth (i.e. orthodoxy) and the concomitant resistance thereto, but by the conceptual and practical exploration, production, accommodation, appreciation and preservation of difference and contradiction; that is, of a historical reality in which orthodoxy—the insistence on adherence to singular truth on pain of sanction (often legal sanction)—was not only *not* definitive of a prevalent Muslim notion of Islam, but where the prevalent Muslim notion of Islam was a discursive tendency that was simply not oriented to orthodoxy. (Ahmed 276)

In Ahmed's mind, the coherence and consistency that is assumed and enforced in the management and development of a discursive tradition comes at the cost of what can be gleaned from critically observing Islam's tendency in certain quarters towards contradiction, paradox and difference. If the scope of the latter is far larger—as must certainly be the case within the Balkans to Bengal complex he explores—than what registers under the cohering umbrella of the orthodox, then is it fair to say that what is Islamic tends towards orthodoxy?

But one cannot discount the importance of Asad's assertion that orthodoxy is crucial to all Muslim traditions, especially in considering how the quality of resistance in many postcolonial or global anglophone literary works find purchase in it. In the texts I analyze, the authors as well as the figures within them are all struggling on various levels to contend with if not the fact of a dominant discourse then at least the idea of one. Even apart from the orthodoxizing impulse he situates as Islam's predominant modus, the question of how to navigate a prescriptive

authoritarian Islam looms over all these texts, shaping their expression, approaches, and responses. Through their chosen literary forms, strategies, devices—even their silences and elisions—they are attempting to position themselves against, parallel to, or apart from that overriding concretized idea of religious practice or expression as a narrowly regulated field of conventions.

By this estimation, the texts analyzed in this dissertation present, within the bounds of differing forms, a spectrum of representations that can inform any conceptualization of an outside to orthodoxy that does not replicate a heterodox dynamic by which certain expressions and experiences of religiosity are excised from Islam. Therefore, it can be said that the literary text, as analyzed through some of the works here, explores the contours and limits of Islam in its definition as a discursive tradition that can project coherence and consistency, and tries to note the ways in which the literary text envisions an exterior to orthodoxy that maintains a dialectical yet definitive relationship with Islam as a whole. In paying attention to how such a relationship unspools on the page, on stage, or on the screen, religiosity and its attendant mobilizations—of affect, of action, of belief—can find greater purchase through a host of textualities.

But in its resistance to the orthodoxizing quality of Islam, does the literary betray its most persistent allegiance to the secular?

The Literary and the Religious

The idea of the Quran itself as a text of interest to the literary scholar is not new and has emerged quite strongly in Western scholarship over the late 19th to mid-20th century. Some of the more recent scholarship has been undertaken not only with the goal of recuperating the image of the Qur'an in the Western world, which has long since considered it a "dangerous text" whose world

view posed an alarming challenge to Western civilization, but also with the objective of considering how the Qur'an challenges established reading practices within literary criticism and can incept new ones. At the same time, one must ask the question why this kind of "recuperation" must necessarily happen through the literary, and if this literary lens serves to reframe the Qur'an and its valences within Islam and for Muslims to the extent that it becomes removed from or even unrecognizable to them.

A curated window into this type of academic formulation becomes visible in a 2014 edition of the *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* which released a series of scholarly works under the topic of "The Qur'an in Modern World Literature," where prominent scholars within the humanities examined the importance, place, and significance of the Qur'an as a World Literature text. In his foreword to this collection, David Damrosch articulates the problem for this collection as an inadequacy of the tools at hand, which, in his words, is "a modern aesthetic category situated worlds away from a premodern religious text whose essence cannot be captured within the terms of ordinary literary analysis" (4). He goes on to outline the Qur'an's generic uniqueness (defying categories of both poetry and prose), narrative, thematic, and temporal non-linearity, as well as its acknowledged status as an oral-aural text as possible reasons why the analysis of the Quran is a necessary challenge to the rigid Eurocentric and colonially determined contours of literature and literary form. The study of the Qur'an as a literary text, therefore, serves to broaden these ossified categories to accommodate texts that reach beyond those qualitative limits.

As a result, a set of interesting negotiations between what reads as "religious" and what reads as "literary" precipitates within their analyses. Travis Zadeh's "Qur'anic Studies and the Literary Turn," for instance, characterizes the turn towards the literary only with precondition of

a turn away from the religious. He discusses how, beginning with German translations and meditations on the Qur'an from the turn of the 20th century onwards, engagement by Western academics with the Qur'an has increasingly begun to consider the text as literature, by slowly disengaging from Muslim theological scholarship and interpretation towards a newer mode of literary hermeneutics, one which analyzes it both thematically and form-critically following the methods used to study the Old and New Testament. Zadeh notices in his assessment of Carl Ernst's work on the Qur'an that a "literary" reading of the Qur'an is produced by Ernst through a series of formal engagements, and even formal *rearrangements*, of the Qur'anic text as designed by the earliest compilers of the text. While attention has been paid by Islamic scholars to the revelatory chronology of the Qur'an and its consequent meanings, for Ernst (and Zadeh) considering the development of the Qur'an from its earliest verses to the latest in order to catalogue the differences, changes, and recurrences in its textual and thematic elements pulls its literary qualities to the foreground, revealing the Qur'an in its "pre-exegetical and pre-canonical" form.

Something to deliberate here, however, is the binary that is instituted between the religious Qur'an and the literary Qur'an, as if the latter is not perceptible in the Qur'an's religiously authorized form, that its literariness is obscured by its religious imperatives and must be mined from the former through a textual rearrangement. When considered together with Damrosch's reasonable observation that "the Qur'an equates understanding with belief, demanding much more than the modern reader's 'willing suspension of disbelief'" (6), it appears that not only must a restructuring of the Qur'an into a literary text reconcile the differences in purpose and goals of reading between the religious and the literary, but also be cognizant of how

textual form (coupled with reading practices) can make legible or illegible the religious quality of a text.

An even bigger stumbling block identified by Damrosch is the fact that apart from the divergence of purposes for the act of reading between the religious and the literary, is the fundamental belief (he does emphasize that this is a *belief*) that the literary contains an indelible secular ethos which complicates its navigation of and negotiation with the religious text:

> Even a thoroughly secular modern critic may well admire the Qur'an for its beauty and rhetorical power without sharing its theology, as was already the case for such Western writers as Goethe and Melville... The problem comes when the Qur'an's absolute religious worldview is seen as an archaic phenomenon, foreign to almost all modern writers, a view that leaves critics with no meaningful basis for comparison to begin with. It is an article of faith with many contemporary critics, after all, that modern literature is secular in its very core. While such critics may acknowledge a few religious writers... modern literature is widely viewed as thoroughly 'disenchanted'. (6-7)

As much of a conundrum as the Qur'an's own religious aura seems to be for its reading as literature, the language used by Damrosch here is notable as it invests both the category of literature as well its critics with a kind of "faith" while asserting how modern literature is defined largely within the parameters of its secularity.

The Qur'an as intertext appears in readings of Hoda el Shakry, whose work on Maghrebi literature uses the Qur'an to challenge the prevailing secularized modes of reading. Her project responds to the "occlusion of religious epistemes, practices, and intertexts" that happen when secular reading is prioritized, and as a result, focuses on the Qur'an as a literary text, but also as an intertext through which the texts she close reads and the critical hermeneutics she applies are

made possible. As she examines what model of narratology and poeises might be derived by examining the formal elements within the Qur'an as well as how they inform Maghrebi literature, she looks specifically at the genre of the novel in Arabophone and Francophone literatures from North Africa. Hers is a comparatist's project, at the intersection between literary studies, religious studies, and narratology, all situated within the North African Maghrebi context, where the Qur'an "functions as an ethical mode/l of knowledge production that fosters critical reading practices." She cites both Mahmood and Asad to assert the influences of secularism on literary critique and the need for an intervention like hers that reintroduces the Qur'an within the literary field of study to destabilize the notion of critique and literature being solely given to secular formations.

The Political

For South Asia particularly, due to the tangled nature of religion, colonialism, nationalism, and communalism, literature became the chosen grounds upon which their entanglements could potentially be deliberately and lucidly parsed. And yet, there is also a sense that engagement with these distinct elements, even within literature, must be guided through reading practices that rely more on secular-liberal conceptions of ethics and signification, an instinct that sees its origins in colonial awareness, or even over-determination, of ethno-religious identities and practices, but also establishes a continuity with if possible an even more acute caution of post-Partition sectarian realities. As a result of this, the possibility of religion as a habitus, one which also directs ethical norms or expectations separately, alternatively, or parallelly with the secular-liberal frameworks that seek to solely determine it, recedes or becomes illegible. This project is

an attempt at a double vision through which reading practices that are sensitive to both dimensions can force into legibility religiosity as both product and producer of certain expressions and lifeworlds.

The particulars of how the relationship between the state and secularism unfolds for the South Asian context present an interesting challenge for both scholars of secularism, religion, and politics. This is especially so because the decisive turn towards secularism as a political ideal directing the contours of statecraft and nation-formation—and enshrined in the constitutions of the nations in these regions—emerged directly out of communal conflicts and violence that began under colonial rule and plagued the rise of nationalism during the decolonial period. This relationship appears particularly within the discursive fields of social and political history, clustered around the twin schisms of the Partition in 1947 and the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971.

Ayesha Jalal's work on the history of the 20th century in the Indian subcontinent identifies how much of Partition historiography and the dominant narrative of Indian nationalism labeled religion as an exclusionary force, whereas the process of nation-building necessitated crucial reworking of religious ideals and identifications, which then in turn undeniably influenced nationalist cultural awakenings. Her engagement with Mohammad Iqbal's ideas about who the Muslim is politically vis a vis the logic of the state reveals how the Islamic vision for a state is a theocracy, not in its most basic meaning but in the more abstract sense of its representing a spiritual/transcendental truth through organized governance (2184). His conceptualization deeply intertwines the state as a secular machinery with the Islamically conscious populace and ethos that brought it forth. In this sense, Jalal identifies a recontextualized notion of the secular in the context of the subcontinent's political and nationalist trajectory over much of the 20th century.

We see a different awareness of the relationship between secularism and religion, especially as precipitates in academic historiography, in “Secularists, Subalterns and the Stigma of 'Communalism': Partition Historiography Revisited,” where she takes exception to Mushirul Hasan’s survey of recent Partition scholarship because it once again insists on “presenting the political differences between the Congress and the Muslim League as a simple battle between the noble ideal of 'secularism' and the nefarious construct of 'communalism'” (683). She uses this as an example to show that historians are also very much subject to ideological allegiances to and privileging of secular outlooks through which scholarly discourse itself is shaped. Her own analysis seeks to detangle this binary and look more clearly at how the construction of a national narrative around the Partition is inflected by the valorization of secularist ideals and directed by secularized epistemological referents.

Her observations and arguments ring true in terms of how religion becomes understood to be producing exclusionary “communal identities” that prevent the consolidation of an inclusive “national” identity, especially when considering the political transformations of the post-Partition period. In the years leading up to the Liberation War of 1971, the region sees the development in discourse and rhetoric of an oppositional binary between the Bengali linguistic and cultural identity and Urdu-speaking West Pakistanis predicated upon specific formulations and perceptions of religion, culture, and the practices attributed to each. This period, where the Bengali cultural identity is set apart from the Pakistani Muslim identity—with the former’s associated practices being declared un-Islamic or an expression of irreligiosity—nationalism within East Pakistan/East Bengal becomes characterized by an understanding of religion as a divisive force standing in the way of sustained nation building, coupled with the sense that the religion-forward state-formation of Pakistan had failed the Bengalis. Subsequently, when

secularism becomes one of the four main tenets enshrined in the Constitution of the new state of Bangladesh, it appears as a response to this specific association that was created between expressions of Islamic religiosity, political statecraft, and the repressions of its pre-Independence era. This association between religion and bigotry, once established, allows groups within the state that ascribe to recognizable expressions of religiosity to be excluded from the notion of a nation united. This sidelining essentially creates a situation where the rhetoric of state and nation is one within which religion can only exist in a limited curated regulated capacity.

The specific nuances of the Bangladeshi context and the unique contradictions or problems that coalesce in the dominant political and historical narrative of the country is parsed in much detail by Tazeen Murshid, who pays particular attention to the social and intellectual transformations across time that allow the Bangladeshi case to reinforce the perception of secularism and religion as persistent points of contention for concepts of nation, state, and personhood in this region. In her discussion of Bangladeshi socio-political landscape in the post-Partition and post-71 period—a through-line drawn by her analysis—she interrogates the role of the liberal intelligentsia in constructing enduring attitudes towards religion and secularism that influence conceptualizations of nation and state to this day. She outlines the problem of religion for contemporary Bangladesh as a politically significant binary between the religious right (a group that arose out of the ashes of what was once the collaborator class for the West Pakistani junta in 1971) and the liberal intelligentsia, both of whom have competing visions of the nation that can map onto the religious and secular binary. While the religious right envision a nation that follows and is aligned with a specific orthodoxical definition of Islam, that vision is exclusionary in its rendering of peoples falling outside of its practices and beliefs as minorities peripheral to the concern and operations of the nation.

The liberal intelligentsia situates itself in opposition to them for this very reason, afraid that the exclusionary forces of the brand of politicized Islam the religious right in Bangladesh endorse, and would like to implement, would alienate much of its population from participation and definitive roles in the state. What does not register within these configurations is that the logic of secularism, while nominally inclusive, has the force to render less visible and entirely peripheral the sorts of "ethical sensibilities" that Mahmood discusses. She argues that such sensibilities, attached to pious populations and through which the actions and commitments of not just the religious right as a political entity, but of its supporters and adherents might become comprehensible, do not find purchase within the logic of secularism. Even though the Bengali meaning of secularism (*dhormo niropekhhota*, i.e. literally translates to "religious impartiality") acknowledges within it the multiplicity of religious beliefs and practices, the modern liberal secular state models a subsuming, misreading, and elision of religiosity that exceeds the conditions determined by the secular grounds it must then inhabit. It is also notable that for Murshid, the liberal intelligentsia itself is historicized as a group whose development across the 19th and 20th century she tracks through their relative proximity and relationship to vernacular culture. As a result, what precipitates within these discourses about the Bengali educated elites developing the shades of a "Bengali" outlook and identity is heavily intertwined with secularism. The coalescing of a distinct culturally and linguistically attuned "Bengaliness" finds its legacy in the liberal intelligentsia that seeks to protect the markers of that identity in the face of rising religious orthodoxy.

The Project

Each of the literary and visual texts discussed in this dissertation are ensconced within discourses about their political, ideological, and cultural import. However, the goal of this project is to acknowledge the validity of those perspectives while trying to analyze what apart from those modes of reading and signification can reveal about how these texts represent and engage with religion as a habitus. Novels such as Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*, or films such as *Khamosh Pani* are situated within well researched historical and ethnographical terrains that work in conjunction to construct the meaning within these texts. My focus however is on the formal moments within these texts that either escape notice of these patterns of reading or inaugurate less categorical and more experiential modes of perceiving the religious.

My first chapter analyzes how the global Anglophone novel, specifically *The Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim* by Tahmima Anam and *Cracking India* by Bapsi Sidhwa, uses an overlap of registers between performance and observance to navigate the problem of representing religious practices or actions. By examining Anglophone novels by South Asian writers that use historical settings from 20th century South Asia to center the confluence of religion, secularity, violence, and political ideology, I distill the extent to which religious and moral practices as presented in the text are discernible on the page as distinct from their entanglements with the politics of secularity. The choice of the global Anglophone novel as the form of text through which these complications are projected is crucial, especially with respect to how the use of English illuminates or elides certain facets of religious identity and practice when the latter is being represented through this literary form. Novelistic devices that often delineate the boundaries of the text—epigraphs, narrative conceits, linguistic translation and multiplicity—must negotiate those boundaries in their attempt to present religiosity beyond or in excess of its categorical production within political, historical, or anthropological discourses. In doing so, not

only must they employ strategic distortions of these structural elements, but they also expose the limits of the text in articulating religiosity as an entirely comprehensible transparent textual phenomenon. Rendering my own readings of these novels by Anam and Sidhwa, I mean to train particular attention on how moments of ambiguity, misreading, and opacity can counter both rigidity of religious ideology or of textual structure. In doing so, the juxtaposition of widespread ethnoreligious conflict with personal, individual, and communal performances that register as religious within specific contexts expect to be read as evidence of one among many ideological allegiances.

The second chapter pivots to poetry, whose long history as an acknowledged and studied vehicle for expression of Islamic ecstatic and religious experience makes it a more accepted and malleable form through which the literary and the religious can occupy a common textual space. By analyzing the poetry anthologies of Fariha Roisin and Mohja Kahf, this chapter will trace how the feminine Muslim self is realized and recuperated within the poetic form through literary strategies and improvisations that bring into relief points of coincidence between the Islamic and the literary. The connection between the identity formation that takes place in poetry and the consolidation of a spiritual-moral-religious self is particularly evident in Fariha Roisin's confessional verses. Her portrayal of an embattled but recovering embodied self in *How to Cure a Ghost* cycles its representation through meditations on racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious differences that comprise the many fractals of her identity. The anthology format allows for her religious subjectivity to find concurrence with other experiences of her subjectness explored in her poetry. In exploring the self as other, Roisin models how religiosity need not exist as only a set of external limitations on the person but might simultaneously exist in concert with all the "others" that comprise the self. The chapter pairs Roisin's anthology with Mohja Kahf's

anthology titled *Hagar Poems*, where the feminist and female-centric retelling of stories from the Qur'an and the Old Testament reclaim the female perspective and subjectivity that are missing from scriptural writing. In her hands, the poetic form actively contends with exegesis and scriptural aesthetics, where the former and the latter are deconstructed and reshaped by a project seeking to accommodate that which neither form is fully equipped to represent on its own. Both texts provide an intimate window into the lives of "believing" women, where free verse provides a flexible "form" open to containing both Roisin's bodily ruptures and Kahf's adoption of exegetical intertext. Both texts provide a take on the embodied experiences of religion through female voices, narrators, and characters, and their presentation of female religious subjectivity can be read as contemporary examples in a history of women writing themselves.

The third chapter turns towards theatre as a performance form, to analyze how it has been used by playwrights from South Asian diasporic contexts to stage literary questions about textuality and its relationship to religious audiences. For these playwrights, the stage presents an arena where a multitude of confrontations—between the religious and the literary, between the text and playwright, between the play and the audience—can work through the problem of moral or religious offense that has plagued contemporary literature of recent years. By using the play as a form to contain the "offensive" text, the playwrights employ a text-within-a-text method where the play itself as an aesthetic form anticipates, depicts, and unpack religious offense as a textual phenomenon produced through competing reading practices. By tracing the reception history and textual limits of three different plays from two different countries and diasporic contexts—*Behzti* and *Behud* by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, *The Who and the What* by Ayad Akhtar—I examine how theatre wrestles with the question of moral injury and religious offense, framing it differently than other literary forms in its attempt to account for a diverse range of religious observance and

divergent reading practices. Bhatti's two plays and her exploration of their interconnected discourse probe the relationship between the playwright and her work, reframing the textuality of a dramatic production that deals with religious themes and questions as slippery and permeable. While the violent shutdown of *Behzti* reduced it from a stage drama to a written readable script, the fictionalization of that controversy in *Behud* allows Bhatti to demonstrate how the play-text that takes religious identity or practices as its subject matter is not one that is primarily rooted in the literary and therefore not only subject to literary reading practices. For Akhtar, the text and the literary are very much spaces and tools of patriarchal resistance, but also simultaneously the inaugurators of a radical feminist exegetical mode routed through the fictional and speculative as opposed to the factual and the historical. By framing the play within domestic and familial disfunction, the deeper conflicts related to religiosity, blasphemy, and writing can be dramatized as a set of competing conceptualizations of what counts within the sphere of the intellectual as religious engagement and practice.

And finally, the fourth chapter examines the intersection of performance and observance by analyzing iterations of religion and religious practices as they appear in film. Films that take as their subject moments of historical significance for South Asian nation formation find that they too wrestle with the twinned calls for secularity and religious freedom. The extra-linguistic approaches employed in film—visual framing and juxtaposition, or visual-aural overlaps—direct the representation in this medium to overcome the limits of language and hold the multivalent reality of religious life. By attending to the dimensions of form and space as depicted in two films—*Khamosh Pani* by Sabiha Sumar, and *Matir Moina* by Tareque Masud—I highlight how religiosity and its legibility within discourses of religious nationalism are negotiated by these films. Both films depict how different forms of religious engagement help create counterpoints

within these films through which religious plurality and conceptions of religious structures outside those given over to nationalistic patriarchy can be indexed.

For the purposes of this project, even though religiosity can be considered as actions, behaviors, beliefs, and practices that are acknowledged by its participants and observers as holding a function or projected meaning related to faith-based devotion, what remains important are the reading practices that allows for such actions, behaviors, beliefs, and practices to be read as such. Many existing reading practices take for granted or even render invisible the machinery through which they have been constructed, be they the colonial history of literature, education, and academia in South Asia, or the more recent neocolonial forces of Western globalization, internationalism, and national foreign policy that mediate the cultural landscape. Rethinking religiosity within the literary productions of this region requires an awareness of how forms of secularity percolate, and how religiosity is not only produced as an identifiable set of expressions but also as a series of resistances. These resistances override how religiosity is read as well as the impulse to erase what falls away. As a result, this project interrogates not only the grounds that dictate what registers as religious, but also religiosity itself as a protean quantity within the texts I analyze.

Women and their conceptualization within media are an inseparable aspect of my analysis. Gender is an unavoidable knot within the discourse of religion, especially Islam, due to the persistent and circular debates about the influence of patriarchal mores on its processes. Attention to gender reveals the necessity of adapting reading practices to account for how dominant attitudes towards women, gender in religion, women's religiosity, and women's subjecthood within religious disciplines are often directed by secularists perspectives. I see my inquiry as an act of feminist intervention, analyzing the patriarchal male hegemony within

cultures where Islam is a force, as well as the scholarly discourses that mediate religiosity within these communities, even as these discourses impose certain liberal secular perspectives implicated with imperialist and neocolonial machinery. One of the main dimensions through which a form of globalized Islamophobia is levied into policy and action, for instance, is the treatment of women in societies with a Muslim majority. The classic trope of saving Muslim women is used as justification for the many military and political incursions into different foreign mainly Islamic countries. The implication of Islam in the "violent repression" of the non-white foreign woman, and the liberal secular Western world's intervening actions to prevent said repression serves as the basis for Lila Abu-Lughod's "Do Muslim Women Need Saving." Her work describes the politics of such "feminist interventions," wherein the morally imperative task of saving oppressed non-white women from "timeless homogeneous mythical place called Islamland" erases the heterogeneity of Muslim women and Muslim lives across one half of the globe, effacing the actual complexities of their material lives that construct their experiences.

The need for alternate approaches to the question of women especially as it pertains to religion, and even more as it pertains to Islam, finds a clear and distinct example in Amina Wadud's engagement with the Qur'an as the source of an egalitarian ethos that needs to be reintroduced into the discipline of Islamic studies, but also into the directing principles of Islamic societies. The triangulation in her analysis between the linguistic, the textual, and the gendered reveal how language and translation are at the crux of the gendered readings and interpretations of the Qur'an that short circuit its potential for gender justice. In outlining this potential for infinite interpretive possibilities within the Qur'an, she also articulates the methodology through which a new form of exegesis may become possible:

> This method of restricting the particulars to a specific context, extracting the principles intended by the Qur'an through that particular, and then applying those principles to other particulars in various cultural contexts, forms a major variation from previous exegetical methodologies. The movement from principles to particulars can only be done by the members of whatever particular context a principle is to be applied. Therefore, interpretation of the Qur'an can never be final. (10)

Her suggested intervention into the hermeneutic frameworks that dominate Qur'anic studies, one that is female inclusive and women-centered, is encapsulated in this relationship between the principle and the particular she details here. The formulation of an exegetical mode through which the female religious subject can express itself is reflected throughout this project; from Chapter 2, where Mohja Kahf attempts through a poetic engagement to inaugurate an alternate exegesis, through Chapter 3 where Ayad Akhtar's Zarina produces a fictionalized account of the Prophet's life, to Chapter 4, where the Ayesha's Qur'anic teachings are guided by her own understanding and interpretation of the sacred text. Considering how these feminine mediations of exegesis translate across different aesthetic forms, the treatment of women's religiosity within these texts, as well its varying legibility across different textual mediums, comes into relief.

Beginning with the novel form, this first chapter demonstrates that by paying particular attention to the modes of narration as well as opacity of language and characterization, the relative difficulty of making certain forms of religiosity visible, coherent, and intelligible is brought to the fore.

Chapter 1

Performance and Observance:

Prayer and Recitation in Tahmima Anam's *Dhaka Trilogy* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*

In her insightful reading of *Small Remedies* by Shashi Deshpande, Caroline Herbert combines Edward Said's observations about the "secular critic" and the critical possibilities of the exilic experience with Aamir R. Mufti's reformulation of Said's framework to account for the minority position occupied by Muslims in India. The result is what Herbert calls "critical secularism" (71). In her estimation, both Said and Mufti are attempting to question and destabilize the fixed identity categories violently produced and enforced by nationalist projects. In this account of what qualifies as "secular" within the context of critical reading, religion appears less as a set of practices and lived experiences than as an expression of nationalist state and identity formation—and one with the authority to determine categories of belonging and "majority sense." Herbert's "secular critic" is thus positioned as the figure most capable of exposing and dismantling the fixedness of categories such as "Hindu" and "Muslim." Her analysis of *Small Remedies* aligns the secular critic with cultural production, specifically music and singing. These aesthetic forms become sites through which rigid communal identities are unsettled, revealing alternative modes of affiliation that exceed the boundaries imposed by nationalist and religious classifications.

Herbert's work is representative of a broader body scholarship that tries to address the South Asian context through the conjunction of secularism and literary criticism. And yet within this framework, religion remains largely constrained by its political function especially as a

category through which the narratives of nationalism are articulated and maintained. Its significance lies less in its lived, experiential, or intellectual dimensions than in its role as a marker of collective identity and political belonging. At the same time, Herbert's reading models the potential literature holds for exemplifying the exclusions nationalism produces. For Herbert—and ultimately for this project as well—the literary becomes the space where such exclusions can be rendered visible and contested. It is in fiction and other aesthetic forms that the instabilities of seemingly fixed categories emerge most clearly, often through the slippage between categories and through modes of performance that exceed the terms using which nationalist discourse seeks to order social life.

This chapter takes as its starting point this very ground that, within the form of the literary novel, specific modes of religiosity can be first accommodated, then read, and that the context of South Asian nationalist movements in the 20th century sets an important backdrop coopted by literature as fruitful grounds for such depictions. Tahmima Anam's Dhaka trilogy, especially the novels *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim*, as well as Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*, are set against pivotal moments of historical and transnational transformations during which religious identity, practices, and their socio-political implications were in flux. As a result, the representations of these times, places, and events—the 1971 Liberation War for the former, and the Partition of 1947 for the latter—must contend with characters whose religiosity appears to be packaged together with irrefutable political and ideological weight.

Within these novels, representations of religiosity often oscillate between two overlapping registers—what seems akin to performance, i.e. the overtly identifiable ritually significant actions through which religious identity is telegraphed in literary works, and the more subtle observances of religious guidelines which are often overtaken by the more widely

recognizable discourses of the novel. In paying attention to how the novel addresses both these registers, it is possible to model a reading that precipitates religiosity as a traceable effect within literature rather than only a categorical approximation of political, cultural, or demographic identity within literary works. Through specific depictions of observances and performances of faith, the novels determine the grounds for the translation of religious practice and belief. By focusing on specific instances or actions that read as religiously relevant, alongside contemplating the reasons and implications of reading these moments as such, my analysis will track where and how the novel's narration, characterization, and language index expressions of religiosity.

The strategies through which these novels convey religious identity and practice are necessarily filtered through specific novelistic language and literary devices but must be read with attention to how the region's cultural and linguistic attributes influence the ways of reading these choices. In considering these novels as examples of global Anglophone literature, for example, there arises the question of language and translation, i.e. to what extent is the assumed monolingual modality of the global Anglophone novel able to account for the multi-lingual regional and political situatedness these texts must project. While both Anam and Sidhwa must navigate the task of translating a multilingual partially Anglophone landscape into English, they also employ moments of selective translation or non-translation through which events, characters, and utterances can catalogue that multilingual reality.

Religiosity and its Markers in The Dhaka Trilogy

The Dhaka Trilogy dramatizes a period in the subcontinent's history where the relationship between state, political ideology, and religion was in flux. While *A Golden Age* uses the

characters of Rehana and her children to exemplify the actions and evolving allegiances of the East Pakistani citizens at this time, it also depicts the ambivalence and uncertainty experienced by these characters as they begin to reorder their relationship to state and religion. Rehana's religious practices and cultural identity must become subject to and reordered by the political landscape of war and violent insurrection her family participate in and must survive. *The Good Muslim*, by turn, focuses squarely on the next generation of this family, depicting how the aftermath of war, state-formation, and continuation of state-sanctioned violence pushes Sohail and Maya, both participants and veterans of the Liberation War, to adopt opposing and incommensurate understandings of religious ideology and practice.

Claire Chambers' discussion of the novel focuses on simplistic binaries between religion and secularism, arguing that the narrative strategies employed by the novel allow Anam to reach beyond the dichotomy of "good Muslim"/"bad Muslim" as described in Mahmood Mamdani's breakdown of post-9/11 discourse on Islam[2]. In his analysis, Mamdani suggests that in discursively creating the category of the "good" Muslim, a set of beliefs and expressions are being selected as defining this category, while another set of behaviors, practices, and traditions are determined as indicative of the "bad" Muslim. Chambers asserts that the novel works to disassemble the binary instead of instituting a simple reversal through which the image of the "bad" Muslim might emerge as the more authentic: "It is dangerous to accept the good Muslim/bad Muslim divide, even when the person doing this emphasizes the 'good' side of pluralism and tolerance within Islam. Unless these stereotypes are dismantled altogether, they can easily be reversed, whereby the 'bad Muslim' is taken to be the 'real' voice of Islam and the

[2] Mamdani, Mahmood. "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism." American Anthropologist, vol. 104, no. 3, [American Anthropological Association, Wiley], 2002, pp. 766–75, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3567254.

'good Muslim' becomes somehow inauthentic" (147). In her reading, by peopling the narrative with characters whose experience of and relationships to Islam are differentiated enough to present a spectrum of religiosity, belief, and practice, Anam pushes beyond the question of good and bad religion to a more complex representation.

This argument, however, is instantly undermined by Chambers' consequent rumination of which character the novel's title takes as its referent. Even if the novel reaches beyond this binary, it obviously fails at this task if it continues to invite the question of "goodness" as a separate but necessary qualifier to the category of "Muslim." It calls for an evaluation of each character with respect to their divergence from this binary and maintains this criterion as its primary referent for the reception of its thematic meditations. It also requires the kinds of reading practices through which this question can be made answerable within the context of the literary. That the novel takes as its leading narrative perspective the staunchly secularist Maya also limits the ways in which the novel can imagine lifeworlds and interiorities remaining stubbornly outside her own ideological imaginary. Even as the novel takes pains to interrupt her perspective with her increasingly devout Tablighi brother Sohail's spiritual transformation, Maya's alarm at the outwardly religious manifestation of this change reinstitutes this binary.

The character of Silvi, whom we periodically see in *A Golden Age*, and is frequently referenced, but already deceased, in *The Good Muslim*, appears as a cipher to these novels' own secularist frameworks, as her sudden and uncompromising religiosity becomes a problem for both texts. As a character who rarely speaks and who is perceived only mostly in relation to other characters in the narrative, the first instance where she participates in a full conversation renders her burgeoning faith and evolving lifestyle a choice that is divorced from a logical or explainable motivation. Preceded in the text by the news of the capture, presumed imprisonment, and torture

of her husband Saber, Silvi and Rehana converse about the former's newly strengthened belief in Allah. While Rehana is initially unnerved by Silvi's lack of overt grief or distress at her husband's imprisonment, her dismay increases when Silvi claims that she has entered *purdah* and does not appear before "strangers"—the stranger in question being her childhood friend and love Rehana's son Sohail.

Rehana's inability to fully understand the reason or logic behind these changes in Silvi frame for the reader yet another way in which religiosity eludes translation past a certain point. To herself, Rehana thinks: "Strangers? What had happened to Silvi? What religion had possessed her? Certainly not the familiar kind" (161). It is the practice of *purdah* (the practice of maintaining religious modesty through wearing the veil and following strict gender segregation) as well as the notion of receiving absolution from God, both of which Silvi mentions as her abiding wish in return for her piety, that seems foreign and inexplicable to Rehana in a way that her own regular prayers and supplications do not. For Rehana, prayer seems to be an action separate and distinct from the larger ideological, theological, and practicable demands of Islam. Her expression and practice of Islam is articulated as a privatized and personal observance centered around comfort and solace—"He was a God of comfort, a God of consolation. She accepted the relief with entitlement, with confidence, and in turn she demanded very little from Him – no absolution, no change of destiny. She knew, from experience, that this could not be achieved" (162). This is a far cry from Silvi's own vision of Islam and her practices, which force Rehana and the other characters to confront an incomprehensible challenge to their own conceptualization of religion.

Rehana herself is not exempt from the conundrum of religion, but for her, it muddles together with questions of political, ideological, and cultural belonging. As the protagonist of *A*

Golden Age, Rehana, whose personal history is one of migration and displacement across the ever-shifting national borders between India and Pakistan, considers at the outset of the War what her allegiances and political convictions must be given the tangled nature of her linguistic affinity:

> She spoke, with fluency, the Urdu of the enemy. She was unable to pretend, as she saw so many others doing, that she could replace her mixed tongue with a pure Bengali one, so that the Muslim salutation, *As-Salaam Alaikum* was replaced by the neutral *Adaab*, or even *Nomoshkar*, the Hindu greeting. Rehana's tongue was too confused for these changes. She could not give up her love of Urdu, its lyrical lilts, its double meanings, its furrowed beat.
>
> No, Rehana did not have the exactness to become a true revolutionary. (Anam 47)

The lack of "exactness" she bemoans is the straightforward sense of hierarchy in terms of political, cultural, and linguistic belonging. Her ambivalence towards the war is articulated within the text not in terms of her acceptance of the West Pakistan's policies or a strong belief in the Bengali resistance, but as a predicament for the tongue, where the present moment of national transformation is linguistically determined. The example she considers, the matter of greeting, is immediately fraught not just with the anxiety of announcing with it one's linguistic history and origins, but through that choice of greeting a political affiliation and commitment that the present moment inextricably binds to it. A third dimension overlaying the linguistic and the political, perhaps not immediately apparent, is of course the religious. The dilemma for Rehana is not solely the choice of an Islamic greeting over a non-Islamic one, but culture and language cannot so easily be unspooled from religion, belief, and practice. The Urdu her "mixed tongue"

finds natural seems as inextricable from the Arabic Islamic greeting of "As-Salaam Alaikum," as "Adaab," the more regional and inter-language interfaith greeting, feels foreign to it.

In this moment of impending war and nationalist revolution, the alignment of religious practice with "the Urdu of the enemy" while characterizing the choice as one of culture and language instead of Islamic faith or observance, frames for the readers that the primary way in which the religious can find purchase in the text is through this translational process of culturalization. It highlights how the Liberation War necessitated the diverse and diversely religious population of Bengal to reassess national identity through the categories of culture, language, and religious practice, one where religion, especially specific forms of Islamic practice, becomes tagged as against the national interest or identity.

There are two specific moments in this text where English disappears as a language, but results in two very different effects for very different reasons. The first instance occurs at Silvi's impromptu wedding to Saber, where Sohail is requested to recite a poem and mark the occasion. The text does not gloss over the Islamic ceremony that precedes, but translates "the marriage verse" from the Qur'an (referred to more than once only as "the Holy Book"), Sūrat al-Rūm verse 21, as a precursor to the exchange of rings—"She had to recite the marriage verses from memory: He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts" (59). In contrast to this, Sohail's recitation of verse 2 from Gitanjali stands out differently. Not only is the latter verse not contextualized for us, as if it is meant to stand "untranslated" on its own, it is also left ambiguous whether Sohail recites the poem in English or in Bangla, since there are two incarnations of the poems from Gitanjali in two different languages. It almost does not seem to matter in which language he recites here, for the cultural significance of his recitation translates without explicit

address. This is one moment where the text does not seem to be "born translated," to use the words of Rebecca Walkowitz, so much as throwing into question whether Bangla is even the object of translation for this scene. It is Bangla that is made to disappear from the text.

This instance is the first time in the trilogy where we see the religious and literary texts occupying the same plane of solemnity, celebration, and ceremony. Even across the linguistic difference, the purpose and direction of the two invocations occur in tandem. They are presented as equally compelling and significant verbal moments of the ceremony, but in their treatment there is a privileging and easy facility afforded to Tagore that is denied to the Qur'anic verse, which is instead framed as a text requiring a specific type of linguistic mediation.

Much later in the narrative, however, a similar scene of translated verse has an entirely different foreignizing as opposed to familiarizing effect. A scene of congregational prayer within the home, where the recitation within the prayer is rendered in English, asserts for the reader how textual representations of religious practices can render them foreign to the object of translation itself. The congregants' initial reluctance and eventual acquiescence, alongside the descriptions of their awkward configuration into standing rows are all in direct contrast to the several passing references to prayer times and Rehana's own comfortable namaz practices. Most of all, the translation of a section of the prayer does not read as a representation of a language with which the congregants themselves have anything past an aural and vernacular familiarity. The words of the prayer are mostly only accessible to them aurally and phonetically, not as they are represented in the text as a set of meanings. The translation itself is partial and divorced from the actions of the prayer, rendering a selective and incomplete description of the scene as well as the act of prayer, setting it apart from the cultural, emotional, and textual completeness of the

previous example. Linguistic translation, in this case, does not help to culturally translate the practice but perpetuates instead its alienation from a full representation.

At the same time, in their literary incorporation of religious "texts" (such as surahs and duas etc), Anam's books blur the lines at times in terms of a binary between culture and religion. However, the incorporation of these religious verses and the representation of these practices do an implicit work of "culturalizing" Islam for her global Anglophone audience. It is only when characters display opacity in terms of religious practices and beliefs which find no purchase in the characters' or readers' minds that religiosity truly appears independently on its own terms, and, as a result, illegibly—impenetrable even to the text itself. When language becomes an acute part of the text's strategy to depict religious and cultural affiliations or entrenchments, religion itself is situated on the same plane as, often in competition with or contestation of, culture, literature, music, etc. However, when it escapes the text's ability to make religiosity intelligible (such as with Silvi's character) we see a different dimension of faith and observance distill on the page.

The illegibility of Silvi's faith is further reinforced after her husband Sabeer's death, when she claims before her mother, Rehana, and Maya that "not everyone believes what you believe" (GA 248), in an oblique but direct response to questions about her political allegiances and convictions regarding the Liberation War. In this moment, when the martyred Sabeer is being hailed by Maya as a hero for his death as a freedom fighter, Silvi's resistance to the war rhetoric which presents its legitimacy and liberatory ideology as unquestionable (and any alternatives to it untenable) is treated by the other characters as at best inchoate and at worst unconscionable. While her mother can only state "I don't know what's become of her," Maya's engagement with Silvi escalates into an argument where the latter is forced to assert her

allegiance with the vision of a united Pakistan, a choice she articulates as one which would "keep the Ummah[3] united." Her choice to imagine everyone involved in the war—the Bengali guerilla forces, the Pakistani Army, and the civilians caught in between—as part of the same religious collective, whose splintering reveals a failure of religious harmony rather than a question of political liberation, does not find purchase with her audience.

One valid way to interpret Silvi's assertions would definitely be as a representation of how religion was used by the Pakistani junta as a justification for the violence perpetrated on the people of East Pakistan, as well as its general pogroms against Hindus across the countryside. The idea of a united Pakistan representing a united ummah, the politicized narrative that its splitting was what the West Pakistani forces were trying to prevent, painted them as soldiers in a war sanctioned by God and categorized the Bengalis not just as rebels but as religious dissidents. By forcing her character to articulate her beliefs using the political language of the war, Silvi's character can be read as a figure through which the slippage between intensifying religious belief and its attendant political entanglements or implications are being relayed.

However, slippage is exactly that. It remains hard to determine what precisely motivates her beliefs, a question that remains asked and unanswered, even within the diegesis of the text. Is her increasing religiosity inspired by her passive support for a united Pakistan as she states "as though reciting from a textbook?" Or is it the other way around, where she cannot truly disentwine her religious convictions from the direction in which the political fate of her country has evolved? The text does not provide these answers, presenting only the uncomprehending or furious reactions of the other characters. Maya's indignation, Rehana's incredulous

[3] The Arabic word for "community" or "nation," it is used in the Qur'an and in Islamic scholarly works to refer to the Muslim collective as a whole, across all possible human distinctions and categories. It treats the followers of the faith as one body with a shared identity.

disappointment, and Sohail's absolute denial all color the readers' own access to and understanding of Silvi. It is hard not to consider the possibility that even diegetically, it becomes impossible for Silvi's religiosity to register apolitically, or even the slightest bit disengaged from the political rhetoric that co-opts it for the nationalist cause. To interpret her religiosity (as well as passivity within the war situation) as a competing liberatory ideology, one which cannot find purchase in political circumstances that have already determined the terms for liberation as that of secular nationalism, would be to consider her silence as the extra-linguistic sign that indexes what cannot be defined or held within the text.

This question of whether religion can ever be rendered as distinct or separate from the political forces that make it legible intensifies in *The Good Muslim*, where Sohail's commitment to the Tablighi Jama'at tenets and Maya's inability to reconcile these changes in him with their previously shared belief in the culturalist humanist tenets of the war provoke an ideological and interpersonal estrangement between the siblings. Her commitment to remembering the war as one Pakistan waged against the Bengalis in the name of Islam prevent her from accepting or even acknowledging the possibility of an alternate vision of collective organization, service, and cross-cultural exchange which the Tablighi Jama'at might represent.

Historian Barbara Metcalf and her substantial work on the Islam, colonial transformation of Muslim identity in South Asia, and the history of different Muslim communities in pre-Partition and post-Partition India becomes important in providing crucial context into the Tablighi Jama'at, a Sunni *da'wa*[4] group which is global in reach and apolitical in ideology. Her

[4] Saba Mahmood, in her work analyzing the Egyptian piety movement, defines the term *da'wa* thusly: "*Da'wa* literally means "call, invitation, appeal, or summons." It is a Qur'anic concept associated primarily with God's call to the prophets and to humanity to believe in the "true religion," Islam" (57). While the modern prevalent meaning of the term connects it to a host of different activities such as "establishing neighborhood mosques, social welfare organizations, Islamic educational institutions, and

analysis of the gendered parameters of piety and practice in South Asian Tablighi communities helps reveal the ways in which religious communal life in general, and the Islamic Tablibhi Jama'at lifestyle in particular, arranges itself within the larger tapestry of civil life in this region as an alternative to the latter's political ebbs and flows. With a focus on teaching and modeling the highest tenets of pious Islamic living, the group's *da'wa* activities consist of traveling across borders to preach, conduct congregational worship events, and expand their organization. The picture that emerges from Metcalf's analysis outlines a set of international cosmopolitan networks existing parallel to, yet separate from, those built through nationalist, political, or secularist modes of engagement rather than religious ones.

In their insistence on a life removed from the politics of governance (i.e. *rajneeti*), the rise of the Tablighi Jama'at can be positioned as a reaction to the political upheaval of the war and its preceding years, during which period much of the rhetoric justifying the violent repression of the East Pakistani populace appropriated the regulation and imposition of "correct" religious practices and the purification of Islamic identity. The text does represent the global dimension to the Tablighi groups' religious *da'wa* work through visits from different international delegations encountered by both Zaid and Maya through the Tablighi gatherings at their house (Anam 60). Maya does not consider the implications of these foreigners from places like Italy, Cuba, and France in her home, or recognize it as a representation of a multiculturalist mode of affiliation where the ideology of ummah supplants that of the nation. Zaid's open delight in learning new words through these foreigners do nothing to reconcile the notion of this

printing presses, as well as urging fellow Muslims towards greater religious responsibility, either through preaching or personal conversation," she also traces the history of the term to the principle of *amr bil-ma'ruf wa nahi 'an al-munkar* ("to enjoin others in the doing of good or right, and the forbidding of evil or wrong") (58).

form of piety with a wider and more cosmopolitan engagement with the world. She is unable to see past the political framework through which religion continues to resonate only as a regressive counterpart to the enlightened secularism of the nation-state, and thus the potential of an alternative to it remains illegible to her and to the text's narration.

This question of the "good Muslim" confounds the second novel itself just as much as it confounds the story's characters. As highlighted by Chambers, the one character explicitly pronounced as a "good Muslim" is Sohail's late wife Silvi, whom Maya blames for his evolution from moderate pluralist to rigid orthodoxist. The novel positions Silvi as one extreme example of Islamic piety, a representation that is barely softened by her son Zaid's memories of a loving playful mother. Maya's perception of Silvi and her later reconsideration of this impression betrays the secularist grounds from which the novel cannot depart. The narrative importance given to Maya's perspective overwhelms the possibility of any other characterization of Silvi aside from that of a rigidly pious and severe woman whose devotion borders on a kind of unreasoning inhumanism in Maya's eyes. This means that even the only explicitly stated "good Muslim" in the book is one whose brand of Islam is rendered as exclusionary and barely palatable. That Silvi is only humanized in Maya's eyes, and as an extension in the eyes of the reader, through behaviors that are considered not a part of her piety such as playing Ludo with her son and promising to send him to a regular public school, reveals the way in which these actions and desires are situated as implicitly antithetical to and separate from religious devotion. Chambers' own evaluation of Silvi's characterization considers these later revelations about her as "mitigating" her portrayal as a rigidly dogmatic individual (148).

This misreading works on two different levels. It exposes Maya's own understanding of Islamic piety as comprising a particular notion of the personal, familial, and collective with

which Silvi's desires and behaviors (as described by her son Zaid) do not comply. Maya's misapprehension helps depict how the liberal secular imaginary always seeks to understand religion by delimiting its expressions and defining it in terms that reduce it from the fullness of its material, bodily, and psychic realities. That Silvi's relationship with her son perhaps is not separate or incommensurate with her piety, and may in fact be as much an undifferentiated projection of her religious devotion as regular prayer and veiling, is not a reading that is possible within a diegetic world that seeks to subordinate religiosity to what it considers more encompassing, and ultimately more "human", dimensions. It also sheds light on the ways in which literature and the reading practices that construct certain texts are complicit in this kind of delimited understanding of religion.

Ultimately, though, most binary categories refuse to stay separate, betraying the shaky grounds on which they are constructed. A scene much later in the book that dramatizes the question of literature and its function within the liberal secular polity appears at a climactic moment in the narrative, where it serves to contextualize the motivations behind the schism between the two siblings at the heart of the book. Situated within an extended sequence preceded by descriptions of Sohail's collection of Western literary texts (including everything from novels by Lawrence, Fitzgerald, and Hawthorne to poetry by Rilke), his decision to give away his books provokes Maya into singing Bengali songs and culminates in Sohail burning all the books instead. The description of Maya's singing unsettles the implied separation between the cultural and the religious:

> She was singing without thinking now, whatever song came to her. She started one without finishing another. Her body swayed with it, fingers and breath and tongue obeying. Eyes squeezed shut, believing that when she opened them, she would have sung

> them back to another time. A time when her brother wasn't packing his books into crates. The singing was heating up the garden. This is how Tagore must have meant his songs to be done. Warming the spirit and the body. Words coming out with the roar and spit of a fire. (Anam 101)

What stands out in this first paragraph is the character Maya's singing, whose description is very similar to that of praying, especially the Islamic modes of *dhikr/zikr* addressed earlier in the novel.[5] Through the closed eyes and swaying, specific invocations of songs by Tagore and Nazrul Islam devolve into a kind of non-rational vocalization the narration emphasizes she does "without thinking." In describing the physicality of her singing, as well as the fact that she has seemingly entered a realm beyond thought, there is a suspension of the linguistic and intertextual implications of singing and song. It makes way for bodily feeling, affect, and memory, which the passage aligns with sensations of warmth and metaphors of fire. When this is immediately followed by the realization that the source of the warmth is no longer her own zealous defense of inherited literary and cultural traditions but from Sohail's pyre of books, the failure of Maya's secularist culturalism in the face of a religiously motivated "intolerance" is cemented.

This passage stands out because it renders the complicated entanglement of a secular vision of literature and its occupation of the "sacred" space in the secular imaginary, with the perceived threat of religion and religiosity reclaiming that space, as a deadlocked doomed binary between siblings. On one level, Maya's rendition of the songs by Tagore and Nazrul Islam can be read as a defiance of Sohail's abandonment of their shared socialization where an engagement in Islamic religious practices was tempered by a culturalized and privatized notion of faith. Her

[5] These instances are performed by the Tablighi Jama'at women, in segregated spaces with which Maya had become familiar in the course of the novel.

singing positions her as a holdout before the rising tide of "fundamentalist" Islamism which would see literature reduced to One Book and One Author. It posits the secular and the religious positions as irreconcilable and prone only to violent conflagration at its points of contact. However, in portraying Maya's singing as being beyond thought and felt instead in her mouth and hands (she plays the harmonium), the areligious culturalism underpinning her identity as a Bengali is portrayed as an inhabitation much in the way that Islam and its practices are inhabited by the Tablighi group to which Sohail belongs. It troubles the secular-religious dyad to the extent that literature itself can destabilize the grounds of its own establishment.

The Religious and the Moral in *Ice-Candy Man*

In a 2000 BBC radio interview, Bapsi Sidhwa and Urvashi Butalia, upon being asked about the importance of literary writing on the Partition, agreed that a certain set of human experiences that were elided from the historical representation of this major event can only ever be encountered through literary fictional writing. As significant figures writing and publishing notable works that render the Indian Partition accessible to a new generation, both Butalia and Sidhwa acknowledged that shifting from masculinist historiographies—where the focus, Butalia asserted, seemed to be on "the politics of the situation rather than what happened to the common man and woman"—to methodologies that centered narratives of average citizens, and women in particular, is instrumental in rereading the Partition as precipitating massive social transformations experienced across different strata of society. There is a sense from their conversation that somewhere between the literary fiction of Sidhwa and the oral social historiography of Butalia, an alternate set of narratives can emerge, allowing for the Partition to be read and understood differently, more variedly.

With this need for alternative readings in mind, a similar set of questions can emerge about the way religion itself appears within the established histories of the Partition—to what extent does Partition historiography reduce religion to a political and demographic category while eliding the experience of religiosity or faith practices during this fraught moment in time? Is it possible then to also encounter within fiction, as stated by Sidhwa, a different image of religion than purely that of communal and identity conflict?

The representation of Islamic identity and religious practice coalescing out of the complex matrix of South Asia's multi-ethnic, multi-faith tapestry is perhaps depicted most intensely in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*, which dramatizes ethno-religious community in its pre-Partition incarnation and the immediate after-effects of Partition violence on these communities. Republished under the title *Cracking India*, the novel has long since been considered one of the best examples of Anglophone Partition literature that represents the experience from a Pakistani perspective. Set in Lahore during the years leading up to the "cracking" of India into two distinct nations and three geographic parts, the story follows the early life of Lenny and her Parsee family, the Sethis, as she catalogues and navigate the violent changes in their social and political environment.

Readings of religion as presented in the novel tend to focus on this communal dimension, bisecting the novel squarely between an earlier time of peaceful coexistence between characters of different religious affiliations and practices, and post-Partition transformation where religious identities and communal allegiances are intensified as a direct result of violence between different communities. The novel form, as a result, is invested with a temporal lens through which intensifying religious fervor becomes intertwined with the unraveling of a heretofore uneasy yet largely peaceful coexistence. Ritupurno Roy's analysis of the novel, for instance,

toggles between a series of before-after transformations detailed by Sidhwa, be it the city of Lahore, which is left unrecognizable to Lenny, or the character of Ayah, who is asserted by numerous scholars as a metaphor for India itself ravaged by the Partition. Especially the eponymous character of Ice-Candy Man is described as "transformed from someone who had almost never given a thought to religious affiliations to a man who is unapologetically communal" (70), with the term "communal" taking on the negative of weight of violence and national sundering. By parsing the experiences, agency, and consciousness of the female characters in the novel, her argument demonstrates that the nature of the conflict during the Partition is not just communal, religious, or political, but also gendered and patriarchal.

Sidhwa's novels, and *Ice Candy Man* in particular, are often gathered under the umbrella of "Partition literature" and considered representative in their literary mode and approach. The discursive framework around this novel considers it not only as a Partition novel, but also as one that is written by a Pakistani author who is sensitive to the Pakistani historical and political context of that era. Roy's analysis is preceded by the comprehensive study of Partition novels rendered by Niaz Zaman, whose work catalogues the tri-partite subcontinent's Anglophone, Bengali, and Urdu literature to examine Partition narratives as they appear in novelistic fiction. In Zaman's examination of *Ice-Candy Man*, she is particularly attentive to the nuances of Sidhwa's own political and communal allegiances, referencing statements and interviews by the author to contextualize the novel's attempt at providing a textured portrayal of Pakistani nationalism and communalism as it unfolded over the course of this decade. Sidhwa's portrayal of Jinnah for instance—whose Parsi wife is described by Lenny in the novel as an "astonishingly beautiful woman"—seeks to humanize him by pondering on his ill-fated marriage and the grief that proceeds from it rather than only considering his legacy in terms of its ideological or

political valences. This point, when considered together with Sidhwa's own statements about the novelistic depictions of the Partition serving to highlight its human dimension, forces readers to consider how the novel form can be instrumental in not only resisting the dominant discourses about the Partition as they stand within academic disciplines, but also institute parallel narratives which, in decoupling the people from the discursive construction of their persona, can use fictional novelistic narrative strategies to question the fixedness or overriding authority of those discourses.

Sidhwa's use of the child narrator is one such fictional novelistic narrative strategy which has been much discussed within literary discussions of the novel as a multi-valent device whose conscious employment by the author carves out pockets of ambiguity and collapse of meaning on several levels. Because the limitations of meaning and interpretation for the novel are filtered through a child's consciousness, the moments of ambiguity or collapse of meaning in the narration become an organic feature of the novel rather than only its limitation.

Sidhwa herself has claimed in numerous interviews that the use of a child narrator of Parsee creed was a deliberate choice meant to invest a specific communal neutrality to the narrative, insofar as a brand of "objectiveness" or "neutrality" is possible in a novel about the Partition. Her choice, she believed, reached outside the triad of Hindu-Muslim-Sikh communal identities centered by other Partition narratives, where the biases of their perspectives direct the narrative and characterization (Sidhwa, et al., 236). In the same conversation with Butalia quoted earlier, she insists that the neutrality of Lenny's (and Sidhwa's) communal positioning within Lahore at this crucial point in history was "because the Parsees were not directly involved in the struggle." She continues by saying that this choice was also motivated by a desire to "bring dispassion to the subject." To what extent a humanizing project can, or even should, aspire to

dispassion, and whether Sidhwa is comfortable with the seeming contradiction between those aims, is unclear. However, in making Lenny's the enforced primary perspective of the novel, the reader is also necessarily situated outside of the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh religious communal triad and only able to access or interpret its nuance in a partial yet curated manner.

As pointed out by Zaman in her own analysis of Lenny, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain whether or not—and if so, to what extent—the character is a self-insert for the author herself, who admits to basing Lenny's experiences on her own childhood in Lahore as a witness to the violence of the time. It is also clear in the narration of the novel that an organizational shape to Lenny's childlike view is provided by her own adult eye looking back at these events in hindsight. Sidhwa's own position as a Parsee and her self-proclaimed goal of providing an alternate "objective" view of the Partition in her works is rendered questionable in this regard, but not in terms of the religious politics of the novel. The position of her community being outside of the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh triangular does not remove their embeddedness and assimilation within the Indian culture. In fact, Lenny and the Sethis' depiction of Parsee life in Lahore, as well as the history of the Parsee community in India in general, positions them in a counterpoint to the Muslim "minority" in pre-Partition India, producing them in their "non-involvement" and "dispassion" as a politically conscious yet passive minority group whose religiosity and historically marginalized status must be read anew.

A clue to this emerges in the language, not only the Anglophone of the novel itself but the inflected nature of the English that Lenny, the Sethis, and their multi-ethnic circle are shown speaking. On the surface, the intermingling of languages in *Cracking India* represents the ethnic and communal diversity of Lahore. Savera Naheed's account of code switching in the novel trains a sociolinguistic eye on the characters' response to and navigation of their multilingual

environment. Sidhwa introduces a prodigious number of characters, all of whom employ mixed cant in their verbal communication. It certainly reflects the cosmopolitan nature of Lahore as experienced by Lenny in those pre-Independence years, where, regardless of class, ethnicity, or religion, everyone's communication is inflected with languages other than English. The novel in turn employs words from these vernaculars to inflect the dialogue, not only as a strategy to highlight the mixed tongues of the Parsee characters, but also to situate English as merely one of the languages that occupy this mixed linguistic landscape, very much an embedded part of that landscape after centuries of colonial administration and education. Naheed acknowledges that general explanations for codeswitching range from linguistic incapacity on the part of the speaker to lexical insufficiency arising out of specific rhetorical contexts, and those explanations mostly hold true for Sidhwa's purposes in this novel.

However, it does not entirely account for how the politico-cultural landscape in which the novel's examples of code switching takes place may overlay additional motivations and meanings to these linguistic choices. While this type of sociolinguistic analysis observes how codeswitching aids novelistic characterization and narrative development, the history of the Parsee community in the Indian subcontinent—the evolution of their customs, their connection to the other established linguistic, religious, or ethnic groups, the reasons for their displacement from Persia—adds dimension to their situatedness as depicted within the diegesis of the novel. English for the Parsee community in India does not hold the same colonial valence as it does for the other communities. The waning importance of Persian in Indian society throughout the centuries of British Imperial rule, coupled with the status of the Parsees as a tiny foreign minority group that sailed to India seeking religious asylum, immersed this immigrant group into an urgent process of assimilation from their very arrival. Their path to assimilation was paved by

their use of the British colonial education system, but also by their entry into a society where a notion of hierarchical social stratification on the basis of religious or faith practices allowed them to preserve those practices while simultaneously becoming an accepted part of their adopted nation (Writer 130). The Parsees could be made sense of by wider Hindu society as yet another religious denomination that occupied a strata within their caste arrangements.

Apart from the mediating factors of the child narrator's meticulous witnessing yet partial comprehension alongside the critical ambiguity of her Parsee positionality, the text is preceded by an intertextual reference whose signification is truncated by both partial reproduction and condensed translation. The novel begins with an epigraph in the first chapter, an excerpt from Sir Muhammad Iqbal's very famous poem *Shikwa* (Complaint to God). The lines of the epigraph compresses together verses from two different points of the long poem but captures its central ethos—the poet-narrator's complaints to God about the diminished circumstances and declining power of the Muslim ummah, as well as their dwindling status and standing in the world. While much of the poem lists in affecting detail the Muslim world's grievances against an unfeeling God, the chosen verses reflect the defiant tone of the poem which verges on the heretic:

> Shall I hear the lament of the nightingale, submissively lending my ear?
> Am I the rose to suffer its cry in silence year after year?
> The fire of verse gives me courage and bids me no more to be faint.
> With dust in my mouth, I am abject: to God I make my complaint.
> Sometimes You favor our rivals then sometimes with us You are free,
> I am sorry to say it so boldly. You are no less fickle than we.

The poem's initial reception by audiences (first recited in 1909, later published in 1924) were of shock at the open excoriation of God and the accusation of breaking His sacred oath with the

ummah that had been promised so much. The "complaint" the poet makes on behalf of his politically broken Muslims is near-heretical in its tone. This issue was resolved with the writing and publication of *Jawab-e-Shikwa*, "The Reply to the Complaint," where the poet-narrator is replaced by the voice of God, who responds with all the reasons why Muslims themselves have been the architect of their downfall. The two poems together comprise some of the best examples of why Iqbal is considered not only one of the best Pakistani poets of his time but is also called Allama Iqbal as the theological and philosophical strands within his works contributes to the exegetical valence of the poetic tradition in Islam.

What does it mean for a novel about communal violence and suffering in the wake of the Partition to begin with a reference to this poem? The translation Sidhwa uses is from a compilation published in 1985 by DJ Matthews, C. Shackle and Shahrukh Husain, but she selects certain nonconsecutive lines and arranges them consecutively together to form what looks like a single cohesive verse. The choice of Iqbal for this beginning seems trifold at the top. Firstly, he is a Pakistani poet, frequently cited as *the* Pakistani poet of the 20th century, materializing both a specific time and place as a referent for the novel to follow. Secondly, he writes in Urdu, but is heavily influenced by Persian poetic conventions (Matthew vii), encapsulating an interregional effect that reflects both the reality of the wider subcontinent as a whole as well as the history of the Parsees in particular. Thirdly, Iqbal's position as an imminent voice within Indian Muslim philosophy lends an additional weight to his declaration that God is fickle in his favors towards Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Even so, the extent to which its intertextual meaning emerges out of this epigraph is limited and ambiguous. Considering *Shikwa* within the matrix of its own Islamic philosophical dialectic, in conjunction with *Jawab-e-Shikwa*, allows for it to stand as a performance of spiritual questioning, existential doubt, and religious dissent through a literary

form that has been legitimated to hold such a purpose and can be literally performed. Outside of this structure in excerpting the poem, while the main themes in the content of the poem still precipitate within the novel that follows it, the extratextual exegetical potential of Iqbal's verses largely recede.

When religion does appear in the novel in the form of outwardly performance of ritual behavior, it remains intertwined with the communal and political. Lenny's family attends the Jashan service at their Zoroastrian fire temple to celebrate the British victory in World War II, a prayer service that serves not only a devotional purpose but also functions as a community gathering. With meticulous descriptions of the temple space itself as well as the priests who chant and tend to the fire, even in the scorching summer heat, Lenny's experience of this is set through sensory details such as the smoke that stings the eyes, the corners of the temple that are cooler, or the scent of the fruit on the offering platters. As her narrative eye moves from cataloguing the various attendees, to the "inner sanctum" where the priests tend to the main fire through "a ritual established a millennium ago," Lenny's own participation in the ritual practices of devotees is described:

> I kneel before the altar and touch my forehead to the cool marble step beyond which I cannot go. Except for the priests who tend the fire and see that it never goes out, no one can enter the inner sanctum. Mother kneels beside me. I ask God to bless our family and Godmother and all our servants and Masseur and Ice-candy-man… until Mother says, "That's enough! The meeting's about to start. Hurry!"
>
> And Adi hisses, "Don't hog God!" (Sidhwa 43)

Lenny's obeisance and subsequent prayer is presented not in isolation or as an experience that is singular and internal but is constructed amidst impressions of both the internal and the external.

Even at this moment of conducting individual prayer, kneeling and feeling the "cool marble step," she notes too her mother's presence next to her. And just as she begins to articulate her inner thoughts into a specific prayer, she is interrupted by mother's haste to catch the meeting after the service. The ellipsis here holds a wealth of what the novel will not or cannot articulate of Lenny's relationship to her own religiosity in this moment. Her child's prayer of blessing for everyone in her world, including those she knows are not Zoroastrians, is unwittingly yet decisively interrupted, as if the religious and communal categories that exist to determine her external world penetrate as far into that "inner sanctum" of prayer itself as possible. It is only the span of this momentary ellipsis that serves as a buffer between the internal, half-expressed and what is explicit or externalized—only "until" her mother, and the meeting about the Parsee's political importance in soon-to-be decolonized Lahore, inserts itself into this moment. Adi's hiss of "Don't hog God," while hilarious, is also significant here as it posits the divine as a shared commodity that may run out if not employed sparingly and responsibly.

We see a different opaquer iteration of this overlap between religion, communal relations, and politics at Pir Pindo when Lenny accompanies Imam Din there, where the enforced perspective of Lenny-the-narrator limits access to the ritual religious space of the mosque. Similar to the Jashan, the purpose of Imam Din's visit to his village is motivated by changes in the political terrain and current affairs—murmurs of rising tensions and violence in the hinterlands between Sikhs and Muslims prompt him to visit the village which neighbors the Sikh village of Derra Tek Singh. Even though the two communities have been friendly for many generations, as a number of Sikh villagers arrive at Pir Pindo to discuss news of violence in various urban centers, they confirm their common lineage as Jats and reaffirm their commitment to protecting each other in the face of ethno-religious attacks. Lenny takes clear notice here of

the outwardly apparent differences between the Sikh and Muslim villagers, including the former's beards and topknots or refusal to smoke that marks their religious identity differently from the Muslim residents of Pir Pindo. After their discussion is over, the section ends abruptly: "Later, when the mullah's voice calls the evening prayer, and the Sikhs have begun to saunter across the fields to their village, Dost Muhammad carries his son to a small brick mosque with a green dome in the center of Pir Pindo. I stay back with the women" (65). Lenny's position as the first-person participant-narrator is reinforced here, where her position as a woman, but more importantly as a non-Muslim, means that she is unable to access or witness the inner sphere of Muslim communal prayer. The text therefore creates its own limit through the opacity of Muslim religious performance.

This limit is notable mainly because elsewhere in the novel, the text breaks its own narrative convention, especially in service to depicting the violence that is soon visited upon Pir Pindo. Lenny's visit to the village introduces her to Ranna, the son of the village leader Dost Muhammad and great-grandson of Imam Din. It is through his experiences that readers are exposed to the death and destruction perpetrated on his village by Akali Sikh mobs, despite the agreement between the two villages to protect each other. This shift in narrative viewpoint happens mid-chapter, with the details of the violence at Pir Pindo rendered for the readers as witnessed by him. This section titled "Ranna's Story" presents a departure from the narrative conceit of the rest of the novel, balancing the centrality of Lenny's urban privileged perspective with Ranna's rural experience as a Muslim village boy. The very neutrality that Sidhwa means to convey through Lenny's Parsee positionality encounters their limit here in Ranna's account of his Muslim family's extermination at the hands of Sikh mobs. It can even be said that the text brackets its claims towards neutrality in this moment where the perspective shifts to Ranna

because it centers the violence perpetrated on the Muslim village, with the crescent shaped scar on his head marking his body no less than Hari's is marked latter in the novel. Even though Lenny's third party witnessing, conveyed through a first person narration, is flipped through Ranna, whose first person account is delivered through a third person narration, the substitution of a primary narrator with a character whose embedded experience of the violence due to his ethnoreligious identity allows the reader to encounter that violence from a vantage point within that identity rather than from the "objective" distance Lenny is meant to impose.

There is a marked escalation in the perceptible religious differences of identity and allegiance as more time passes into the post-Partition period, when the separate enclaves or spaces where the performance of these religious rites commence begin to spill out into greater visibility. As everyone's outward religious practice and ritual actions increases, partly to assert the newly critical political import of their religious identities, but partly out of fear for their lives and the uncertain times ahead, the increase in political tensions is reflected by increase in narrative tension. Lenny begins to notice religious differences because all the characters around her begin to become more entrenched in their religious identities, cataloguing the increase in their respective devotional practices. The novel frames these increases in religious observance for us after the political significance of these religious identities have been established. Ayah's Hindu prayers and Imam Din's frequent Muslim prayers seem to come to Lenny's attention as an undesirable and uncomfortable development, whereas the differences in more casual religious observance she (i.e. the narrative) has noted before—such as the Muslims in Pir Pindo smoking hookah while their Sikh counterparts in Dera Tek Singh do not, or that Sikhs such as Mr. Singh do not cut their hair, etc.—were merely understood as benign markers of communal identity and difference. Lenny's childlike understanding of her world, coupled with what she has absorbed

from her surroundings, results in an almost anthropological cataloguing of the characters around her, whose individual actions, quirks, and minute differences do not always register to her as directly related to their faiths. This naïve narrative eye is meant to create a counterpoint to the ways in which differences in ethnoreligious identity translated into demographics and political categories during this time.

The scene where a Muslim mob breaks into the Sethi's home in search of Hindu individuals to abduct remains at the heart of the novel's moral quandary. As the mob forces its way into the home and interrogates the occupants' religious identities, the Muslim cook Imam Din's attempts to convince them that there are no longer any Hindu retainers in the household are undermined by Lenny who, in trusting the ice-candy man, reveals that her ayah is still in the house and hiding. As a result of this tragic misjudgment on young Lenny's part, Shanta the ayah is dragged off by the mob and forced into prostitution. Lenny's inability to lie in this moment represents how a simplistic moral outlook of honesty and deceit falls short in a time of complicated and contradictory allegiances. As a child, she does not understand that lying at this juncture is the incorrect moral choice and chooses instead to place her faith in someone who is not a stranger to her. Telling the truth, in this instance, becomes an act of betrayal.

This scene has been analyzed from several angles, with particular attention being paid to the representations of religious identity and conflict depicted in the interactions between the mob and the members of the Sethi household. In considering the intimate relationship between religious identity and bodily violence, Kavita Daiya chooses to focus on the character of Hari, whose conversion from Hindu to Muslim is not accepted by the Muslim mob until they are presented physical proof of it. While this scene of public humiliation and avowal of religious faith is familiar from other Partition media, Daiya notes the assurance of Muslim identity being

demonstrated through violent mutilation on Hari's body operates as marking an ethnic transformation rather than a strictly religious one, given that it indicates the breaching of the sanctity of Hari's Brahmin body rather than any internal change in "faith" or inner conviction:

> This production of new intimate identities occurs not through the conversion of faith and belief that have to do with the transformation of the modern subject's interiority. Instead, it materializes through "proper" bodily mutilation and the accurate performance of religious practice in everyday life. Hari's conversion probably constitutes the humiliating, symbolic emasculation of Hindu men for the mob, as well as legitimizes his presence in the new nation-state, Pakistan. (69)

Her analysis focuses on the body of Hari the gardener as the site where his communal identity is displayed, with the mob's insistence on viewing the results of circumcision as well as hearing him recite the Kalima, i.e. the Islamic declaration of faith, being taken as externalized expressions of a change of faith where that need not necessarily be the case. Her analysis treats the bodily as an exterior upon which religious identity is performed, but also as a shell past which religious convictions might not necessarily penetrate.

In contrast to Lenny's truthfulness is Imam Din's choice to lie. He goes so far as to swear on the name of the Prophet that Shanta is no longer at the Sethi residence, making him guilty of bearing false witness. On the surface, this act of sheltering a hunted woman from a mob intent on perpetrating violence may read as a privileging of simple humanity over following the more rigid religious edicts against lying and bearing false witness or a disavowal of Imam Din's categorical communally acknowledged identity as a Muslim through his refusal to prioritize one's allegiance to one's communal group above the lives or safety of those outside of that group. In reading it thus, a binary forms between what reads as moral (lying to shelter Shanta) and what reads as

religiously sanctioned (telling the truth to the mob and allowing Shanta to be detained by them), allowing the machinery of the novel to occupy a place of moral correctness apart from what simple religiosity seems to permit. Alternately, reading Imam Din's action in light of debates within Islam about lying under duress and in times of mortal danger reveals a more complicated set of considerations.

There are several competing conceptualizations that refract the question of lying as an act of self-preservation in Islam. The Qur'an itself addresses lying and deception as major sins, not only prohibiting the act itself but also using "lying" and "liars" as categories negating those of "Muslim," "believer," and "righteous." Many verses identify habitual lying and hypocrisy (Quran 2:10, 9:77) as egregious, but most verses reference lying in the context of denying the message of the Qur'an as revelation, i.e. lying about Allah (Qur'an 3:94, 4:50, 7:37, 10:69, 16:105, 23:38) and as a result perpetrating a type of self-deception (6:24, 5:41, 5:103). Similarly, there are injunctions against false testimony (25:72), breaking of oaths (2:225), and the expiation for broken oaths (5:89). The Qur'an does, however, highlight instances of harm, conflict, or fear for life as important exemptions to the injunction against lying, particularly utterances against Islam made under compulsion or duress (3:28, 16:106). These verses became the basis for the scriptural justification and usage of *taqiyya*.

A term that has begun to receive renewed attention in the West under the current political climate, *taqiyya* is the use of deception, dissimulation, or even acts of apostacy, for the prevention of harm or discrimination against Muslim minorities. It is easy to see why the term engenders controversy. Primarily seen in literature about Muslim sects in Sunni majority societies that face political and religious discrimination, such as Twelver Shi'i traditions or Ismaili Muslim groups, *taqiyya* has been established in specific Islamic scholarly discourse as a

legitimate tactic of survival and defense for these religious minorities within a hostile political climate. It is important to note the context of the usage of *taqiyya* and its evolution, which emerged initially as a strategy to be employed by besieged and outnumbered Muslims in the early days of Islam, only to develop in later periods into a necessary measure for non-Sunni Muslims in societies where Sunni Muslims comprise the political majority. More recent discussions of *taqiyya*, however, disregard this context and have deployed the term in right-wing media bubbles to exemplify the inherent dishonesty and untrustworthiness of Islam and Muslims to justify the rising anti-immigrant and Islamophobic rhetoric in the West.

Apart from *taqiyya*, lying in self-defense appears in theological writing by other prominent Islamic scholars and philosophers as far back as the early days of Islam due to the prevalence of discrimination and overt hostility against new Muslims. 11th century Islamic scholar Imam al-Ghazali, in his influential book of Islamic thought and practice *The Revival of Religious Sciences*, decries the sin of lying while detailing the reasons for it, but also suggests conditions of bodily danger and harm under which lying to save a life may well become an obligatory act for a Muslim. In the section titled "Harms of the Tongue," the scholar meticulously lists the many hadith where lying and false utterances have been prohibited, using exemplifying stories that illustrate the specific reasons for their prohibition in each case. By precisely discussing the rationale behind these instances, there is an aperture created for the consideration of exceptions to these cases. As a result, following the discussion of these stories, al-Ghazali also reasons out situations where lying is the only ethical choice and as a result, the obligatory choice. Quoting the Sahabi Thaoban, he writes "There is sin in every falsehood, but there is no sin in that falsehood which benefits a Muslim or removes a harm from him" (109).

Taking this as a guideline, Imam Din's lying and perjuring himself while confronting a mob can also be read as a Muslim, in fear of his own life, lying to protect himself and others.

The point of contention in the interpretation of these sections from "Harms of the Tongues" seems to hinge on the importance of Muslim life in comparison to non-Muslim life. Some of the assumptions undergirding Imam al-Ghazali's reasoning is that the situation of the bodily precipitates from a confrontation between Muslims and non-Muslims, where the latter potentially faces mortal harm at the hands of the latter. The moral quandary facing Imam Din, therefore, is one for which there is specific religious framework, accounted for within the body of scholarly and juridical scholarship. This nuance however escapes not only the novel's own gaze—either due to the parameters of using a child protagonist and the boundaries of her understanding as the limits of the text itself—as well as the critical readings of the text that seek to mine such nuances. Lenny's self-loathing for her impulsive choice to tell the truth in a moment where a different action might have been ethically appropriate pervades the rest of the novel, while Imam Din's choice to lie, and its necessary negotiation of his own religious identity, beliefs, or allegiances, do not find purchase in the either the novelistic structure or its critical discourse.

Both these novels, in their attempts to depict the periods of geopolitical upheaval and the social transformations they precipitate, contend with the limitations of form and the incomplete legibility of this region's entangled ethnoreligious reality. Religiosity as a representable reality is more readily translated as a perceptible outward performance of its actions and rituals while much of what might also be directed by a notion of religious observance hides behind inaccessible or partially rendered interiorities, or even slippages of language and meaning. In identifying and analyzing these moments, it becomes clear that what coalesces as religion within

the confines of the literary novel form is also reliant on the literary, and often times secularist, reading practices. Even as Sidhwa and Anam use the novel as an arena where the region's communal and political conflicts can be humanized through fictionalization and narrativization alternate to those in dominant historical accounts, religiosity often exceeds and extends beyond what these literary modes are able to index.

Chapter 2

The Religious Self in the Poetry of Fariha Roisin and Mohja Kahf: "Believing Women" in Contemporary Times

The relationship between religiosity and form unfolds differently in poetry than in the novel, owing in part to poetry's long and established history as the primary vehicle for expression of Islamic devotional and mystical experience. Given that the verses of the Qur'an were initially dismissed by its detractors as poetry rather than revelation—a fact that the Qur'an refutes in the oft-recited Sūrat Yā Sīn (36:69)—it may seem paradoxical that so much of what has come to be designated as "Islamic" literature has been consolidated within the poetic tradition[6]. Elsewhere, in Sūrat al-Shuʿarāʾ (26:224-227), poets are admonished but also distinguished according to their commitment to faith, truthfulness, and righteous action[7]. In this formulation, poetry is not merely rejected as a rival to revelation. Instead, it is directly invested with Qur'anic guidance and tasked with a sacred purpose, becoming a literary form capable of participating in and transmitting religious truths. Poetry holds a distinctive position within Islamic literary history, situated simultaneously in proximity to revelation and at a critical distance from it.

Two key poets, Roisin and Kahf model significant yet differing strategies through which women's religious subjectivity, specific to Islamic identity and practices, finds expression in the

[6] "We did not teach him (the Holy Prophet) poetry, and it is not proper for him. It is nothing (of that sort,) but (it is) an advice and a readable book that explains (the Truth)."

[7] After verses that describe and condemn the poets who use their words to construct or suppose false narratives about the Prophet, Sūrat al-Shuʿarāʾ follows by noting that poets become an exception when they "believe, do good, remember Allah often, and poetically avenge the believers after being wrongfully slandered."

poetic form. Roisin, who uses the confessional mode to process her lived experiences, situates her experience of religiosity within the matrix of her queerness, her racial otherness within Western society, and its Islamophobia. By putting her religious observances in conversation with the other facets of her life, she reaches for a depiction of religiosity that stands apart from or in excess of the usual identifiers applied to her as an immigrant queer Muslim woman of color. By reimagining Qur'anic figures within different sociohistorical contexts, Kahf provokes a reexamination of how contemporary Muslim women might relate to the Qur'an or situate themselves within the exemplars of Islamic womanhood. Through the frequent use of epigraphs, Kahf's poems also engage with Islamic textuality, operating as exegetical work that focuses on reconstructing the female subjects within Qur'anic narratives.

Both poets, however, are engaged in an act of translation whereby their habitation of Islam in the 21st century secular West must be articulated in conjunction with the overlapping systems of oppression that create them as female racialized Muslim bodies. This articulation is not only the means through which these processes of becoming are made distinct from one another but also reframes their experience of religion within networks of identity politics on an ever-shifting landscape. Their religiosity, as a result, is simultaneously depicted as an experience of losing power as well as an expression of where and how it helps them (re)gain power, (re)claim identity from these overlapping systems that produce their identities unilaterally or misshapenly. The poetic and the literary works here in conjunction with the religious in a redressing or recuperative capacity.

Religiosity as a Violent Embodiment in Fariha Roisin's Poetry

Fariha Roisin's poetry sits at the crux of several poetic and aesthetic strains that inform its content and thematics. At a glance, her poems operate in the confessional mode, their subject matter narrating in first-person perspective very personal, often-times traumatic and painful events from her life. The term "confessional poetry" itself remains contested by its subjects, even as it gained traction as a category within literary circles in the mid-to-late-20th century. WD Snodgrass, one of the earliest developers of the style, has disavowed it as he expresses his dissatisfaction with its Christian connotations: "M.L. Rosenthal came up with that term—he was a friend—but I hated it because it suggested either that you were writing something religious and were confessing something of that sort, or that you were writing bedroom memoirs." He refers, of course, to Rosenthal's 1959 essay on Robert Lowell where he coins the term and labels Lowell's poetry "confessional" because it sets forth "a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal." Snodgrass' observation about the Christian valence of this term, however, largely receded before the oeuvre of the best known female confessional poets, such as Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton, whose experiences of emotional, psychological, marital, and bodily breakdowns are brutally depicted in their writing, not with some view towards soliciting a traditional Christian absolution or resolution, but perhaps as a way to deal with the absence of such.

In her own acknowledgement and examination of her Muslim identity, to the extent that Roisin's relationship to Islam and religiosity takes center stage in her verses, it is possible to see a connection to the centuries long and varied tradition of Islamic Sufi poetry. Annemarie Schimmel, for example, considered it crucial to provide an in-depth survey of Sufi poetry from different nations and linguistic traditions across Asia in her seminal work on Sufi Islam. Even as

her work compiles a comprehensive survey of the Sufi theological concepts and practices, constructing it as a cohesive tradition across North Africa, Central and South Asia, her analysis of Sufi poetic form identifies its earliest structural influences as largely Arabic and Persianate, with the local variations on these forms appearing in vernacular languages of North India. Her observations about the ability of Persian poetry in particular—which is then extrapolated towards the Sufi poetic tradition—cite its tendency to balance within it seemingly opposing binaries and referents. To this end she states:

> It is typical of Persian lyrics that certain religious ideas that form the center of Islamic theology, certain images taken from the Koran and the Prophetic tradition, or whole sentences from the Holy Writ or the hadith can turn into symbols of a purely aesthetic character. Thus poetry provides almost unlimited possibilities for creating new relations between worldly and otherworldly images, between religious and profane ideas; the talented poet may reach a perfect interplay of both levels and make even the most profane poem bear a distinct 'religious' flavor. (288)

The duality of the Sufi poem highlighted by Schimmel is very much present in Roisin's anthology, where ruminations about her religious identity and beliefs inhabit the same textual space as the poems about queer eroticism and bodily pleasures. The same body that is marked by violence, both physical and discursive, can also be marked by pleasure.

While seeking knowledge and proximity to the divine independently is very much a purpose and foundation of Sufism, and can be traced through its articulation poetry, how it characterizes forms of "knowing" is a matter of formal analysis and debate. Shahab Ahmed, for example, distinguishes between a knowing-by-the-heart versus a knowing-by-the-mind as it occurs in Sufi poetry, admitting that the general perception of Sufism is that it leans towards the

former (91). In his arguments about the perception and understanding of Sufi poetry, specifically the Indic region's Sufi poetic form of the *kafi*, Ahmed analyzes "Husn-e-Haqiqi" by Khwaja Ghulam Farid to refute claims of anti-intellectual or anti-cerebral bias in Sufi poems. As a poem form meant to be sung, the *kafi* is often composed to highlight the emotive aspect of religious and divine love or ecstasies. Ahmed's evaluation of this poem, one which seeks to pinpoint God as a set of expressions, forms, genres, qualities, and names, highlights several philosophical and ontological questions about Islam and Muslim-ness being raised and negotiated in the poem (88).

Roisin's work, however, pivots to a form of knowing that supplements this knowing-in-the-mind and knowing-in-the-heart. As her poetry centers the sensory and the bodily, it suggests a form of knowing-in-the-body that considers embodiment as a conduit to both knowing the self and knowing the divine. As a result, her poetry proceeds from the body as a way to not only catalogue the fractals of her own identity but to also outline her religiosity through it as well.

Even though positive embodiment and selfcare is a stated intention winding through the works of Fariha Roisin, the lived experiences that inspired her writing are rooted in racialized and heteropatriarchal violence. Both her prose and poetry are guided by her experiences with trauma-induced dysphoria, which has resulted in the themes of violence and survivorhood becoming central to her writing. As her anthology *How to Cure a Ghost* engages with the ever-shifting facets of her identity, there emerges within it a sharp contestation of the prevailing image of Muslim womanhood, instituting in its stead a newer set of formations, affects, and sensorium that delineates the contemporary immigrant female habitus of Islam as something that cannot be disentwined from the forces that act upon the brown immigrant body.

Born in Australia to Bangladeshi Muslim immigrant parents, her early years were plagued by physical and psychological abuse within the family, compounded by racism and

Islamophobia within a predominantly white society. It is especially in Roisin's confessional poetry that the events of her childhood, familial relationships, and personal life are mined to project a vivid panoply of the many intertwined modes of identity-based oppression that leave their mark primarily on the body. That religion also occupies a prominent and oftentimes positive space in her confessional writing becomes a surprising yet much needed added dimension to this picture. The concurrence, even persistence, of her own faith-based practices with expressions of queer desires within these overlapping systems of hegemony means that religion is not only portrayed as a trigger for conflict and violence, but also as a potential source of healing and restoration.

While religiosity, for Roisin, populates the same field as experiences of heteropatriarchal violence and Islamophobia, it is at the same time distinct from it and is not always determined by it. I analyse the instances in Roisin's poetry where the forces of Western colonialism and American neocolonialism mediate her understanding of herself as a Muslim in the world. In doing so, I argue that the poems present her relationship with religious structures and religious practices not only as sources of anxiety, violence, and conflict but also as a pathway towards an ever-evolving legitimate subject-position.

Much of Roisin's collection directly reacts to how American neocolonialism and Islamophobia unwillingly mediates her relationship to her faith, shaping her religious identity from the outside in. In the poem "what 9/11 did to us" she deftly connects the post-2001 characterization of the Muslim world using images and numbers that demonstrate its effect on the immigrant Muslim identity:

but dare a mother

cry in a black hijab

& not look like a broken threat,

a pending question mark of violence,

as cnn takes those shots, captioning it with

“a mother cries for a suicide bomber,”

or “muslim woman angry at america.”

never telling our scattered truths,

never asking why—

why are we angry? (78)

The image bracketed by this verse is ever familiar to audiences of post-9/11 visual and news media, for which the figure of the hijab shrouded brown woman became a lightning rod of questions and commentary about women’s subjectivity within politically or socially repressive societies. For Fariha Roisin, whose formative years included such images encountered in the process of migrations from Bangladesh and Australia to Canada and the US, this verse parses how the image signifies a threshold between an external perception of this volatile shrouded figure and the internal experience of institutionalized violence indexed by the crying of the woman. Roisin asserts that the captions highlighted in quotation marks denote only the former, and that the latter escapes legibility in existing systems of meaning through which this figure is apprehended. When this latter experience is missing from discourses and media representations where the figure itself continues to feature prominently as a symbol of social gendered oppression as well as radical political insurgency, several crucial problematic convergences between the problems of identity politics and the critique of imperialist systems recede from the discourse.

The poems are, therefore, complex and layered in the subjective experiences they depict. Instead of using any one aspect of her identity as a lens through which to examine a particular experience, Roisin chooses to highlight how the same event, concept, memory, or occurrence can become a source for discrimination, suffering or pain multiple times over as it is refracted through the many facets of her identity in varying ways. The poem "state of exhaustion" is a prime example of this technique. The opening lines of "i'm tired/for all the lives i've lived" acknowledge at the outset the main themes of the poem—the different facets of her identity, the distinctions between the structural oppression that corresponds to each, alongside the exhaustion that appears as its aftereffect (39). The poem moves on to catalogue how this exhaustion presents as a bodily experience, making the violence of this oppression physically manifest through physiological metaphors. References to blood, cartilage, and bone in the middle of the poem carves the body grotesquely open for the reader, exposing the corporeal results of living as subject under multiple regulatory structures.

The representation of such points of overlap appears in several other poems, where the affect precipitated by the oppressive weight of several subject positions are explored. Racism, a recurring theme across many poems in the collection, is often explored in its intersection with Islamophobia, such as in "how to cure a ghost ii." The beginning of the poem immediately establishes the narrator's otherness by using mosques and the *azaan* (the Muslim call to prayer) to describe the experience of eating a Western fruit, the strawberry, indicating that the narrator's point of reference and relation to her environment is mixed and hybrid. In describing how this otherness is compounded by the active othering one experiences as a brown Muslim in a predominantly white Western society, where its chief association is with terrorism and war-torn countries, the two aspects of race and religion are shown to be inextricably intertwined:

dirty terrorists, dirty.

i've always felt so dirty, like I could wash

off my skin, raw

ravaged cold and bloody

the color of the soil

the color of shit

the color of the ground beneath

white people's

feet (45)

That the primary associations tying together the appellation of "terrorist" and the physical feeling of "color" is "dirty" becomes telling in the associations between these modes of being and feeling that Roisin investigates. Even though distinct, for Roisin these are not separate categories for they coincide in her body. It presents the brown body as inextricably, visibly, affectively, and always racially, tied to a specific form of Islamophobic identifier. It is significant in this sense that her otherness is symbolized through classically Islamic references to prayer rather than her appearance alone.

To this, the anthology adds an additional political complexity—a condemnation of US neocolonialism by associating the violence perpetrated upon the racialized Muslim body with the historical military activities in the Middle-East and Asia. The nexus of brownness and religious affiliation is further elaborated in "two of swords," where religion is shown to be as much a part of the "brown girl" identity and power as it is a source of their anxiety, oppression, and suffering. In this sense, Roisin's poetry acknowledges the complicity of religion in as much as its

patriarchal organization and regulation acts upon the femme queer body, but this is not the only dimension to religion that her poetry dwells on. The term "brown girl" is repeated in this poem to highlight the racialized cant of the appellation but more so to initiate a decisive reappropriation of the term. Instituting a redefinition of this term, for Roisin, means intertwining it with Islamic references such as "zam zam water," "*muezzin*," and "*azaan*," each of which she owns as contributing to her "brown girl" identity.

Islamic references are threaded through several other poems, with comparisons and metaphors that center Qur'anic verses, prayer, and objects important to Islamic practice. That the lexicon of metaphors and similes used are of South Asian religious origin amplify the importance of this particular intersection of identities. The poem "Allahu akbar" revels in the uncomplicated comfort and solace the narrator derives from her faith through meticulous description of prayer and the verses oft-recited during it[8]. Beginning with the Arabic line "La'ilaha'ilAllah" (i.e. there is no god but Allah), the poem chooses to focus on the internal experience of prayer, relating it not just as a series of actions that can be outwardly perceived but as a set of emotions and evocations that can be felt from within the body. The comparison of prayer and closeness to God is brought together with the feeling of flying, which highlights the weightlessness of movement during the prayer, but the chanting and recitation is articulated in less abstract terms through the bodily:

> the saliva, on my lips,
>
> my tongue like cursive,
>
> licking across my

[8] The title of this poem is fully in lower-case in the anthology, to maintain consistency with all the other poems.

chalky teeth, i am alive (82)

Moving from sensation to recitation, the poem also incorporates within it the entirety of Sūrat al-Ikhlās, one of the shortest, easiest, yet most significant sections of the Qur'an. In leaving it untranslated, Roisin invites the reader to participate in a phonetic recitation that aurally coincides with the recitation within prayer.

Even as Islam affirms the other dimensions of her identity, it also presents a point of tension with her experience of her queerness[9]. Two poems in particular form a crucial dyad to this end. Beginning with the line "i want forgiveness, oh Allah," the poem "how to cure a ghost" states her worries about being the "bad muslim" who struggles with desires and actions she feels are at tension with her religious devotion. Wishing to "repent my patheticness," she describes how she performed the Hajj early in her life and actively prayed to leave behind "desiring desire like an oracle's/pledge." The poem resolves in atonement attained from within "in these folds of my deep pockets," but divine validation and love is confirmed at the end of the poem, affirming the continued coexistence of the poet's religiosity alongside her queer desires. The love poem "responsibility is not a burden," on the other hand, shows that her expressions and experience of faith are concurrent with her experience of falling in love with a woman. The fact that she invokes Allah again as an exclamation and solace from within that experience, and prays that she can find peace through attainment of and reveling in her desire, dispel some of the ambivalence between these two nodes of her subjectivity. It simultaneously affirms and unsettles her positionality as a brown Muslim queer by contesting the impression that she must always experience her religiosity in a fraught manner.

[9] Roisin discusses at length about her ambivalence, resentment, and later acceptance of her Muslim identity as a queer person of color whose relationship to religion is heavily mediated by experiences of ethno-cultural oppression and discrimination. (Roisin)

Because Islam is such a vital facet of Roisin's ethnic immigrant identity, Islamophobia and its impact on the Muslim immigrant psyche is an important theme for this collection and a source of persistent trauma for the poet. While "how to cure a ghost ii" specifically identifies US neoliberalism and its jingoist foreign policies as one major problem, "what 9/11 did to us" presents a prolonged and pointed condemnation of the violence perpetrated on brown Muslim bodies across the world as direct retaliation for the September 11th attacks. The opening lines of "they say that/two thousand nine hundred and seventy-six/americans died on that day" are juxtaposed against the staggering numbers of Afghan, Iraqi, and Pakistanis listed by Roisin to highlight the fact that contemporary American foreign policy targets and marks brown subjectivity and corporeality:

> forty-eight thousand six hundred and forty-four
>
> afghans have died since the war on terror.
>
> (and still counting)
>
> one million six hundred and ninety-nine thousand iraqis have died since the war on terror.
>
> (and still counting)
>
> thirty-five thousand pakistanis, too, dead since 9/11 by the american assault machine.
>
> (and still counting)
>
> Who sings a sweet lamentation of our bones? (77)

The choice to write out the number in words to slow their reading and absorption works in conjunction with the stark contrast between the numbers to shock but also acts as a macabre accounting of the toll of American imperialism exported under the guise of justice. The repetition of "and still counting" clearly illustrates violence as a continuing paradigm within which non-white bodies are dehumanized and rendered into voiceless numbers for which there can only be

numerical accounting ("uncounted/unaccounted"). The poem's physical descriptions try to resist that pull towards abstraction, resisting it through graphic bodily descriptions. The body is not left whole through language in this poem—violence is vividly enacted on it. Similarly, the poem "cointelpro" also addresses how Western warmongering in Central Asia is cloaked by the common misperception that the people in these countries suffer and die as a result of conflicts originating from their own internal factional disputes and cultural deficits. The poem's refrain of "listen to me" is used by Roisin counters the silencing of these people by demanding to be heard.

Roisin's depiction of how these interlocking systems of oppression interrupt the process of recovery and healing pivot around the central metaphor of haunting. In her own words, "The ghost is colonization, my mother, white supremacy, abuse, ancestral trauma. Even though all of these themes are broad, they really come back to human pain. We're all suffering in a way, so how do we heal? We heal by naming the ghost" (Allaire). The process of healing, therefore, depends upon depicting these "ghosts" as both the source of intergenerational racial and colonial trauma and as well as necessary intermediaries that must be invoked to precipitate recovery. The poems in her anthology employ haunting as a signifier to depict existence as a survivor within the overlapping systems of oppression that are responsible for the continuation of remembered trauma even during the process of recovery. The figure of the ghost is an intriguing one since it simultaneously denotes the in-between transitional nature of recovery while setting up the process as one that looks for a path out of debilitating disembodiment into a healthier embodiment. This process, as a result, is depicted as a prolonged and continuous contention with those systems and categories. The anthology itself, as a result, represents this act of "naming" that can spark recovery.

This overarching theme notwithstanding, the anthology is pieced together unevenly with a distorted chronology, projecting the non-linearity of healing and survivorhood. Even though the first poem is titled “after the loss” and ends with “this one’s for me,” suggesting a forward movement in healing, the poems are not sequenced in a progression that depicts the narrator moving from a state of injury and trauma through recovery and into a state of complete wellness. In fact, it underscores this movement as a fantasy through a sequence that moves back and forth in both time, setting, and the narrator’s mental state. Poems such as “after the loss” and “after the loss, take 2” are titled in sequence, but appear separately in the anthology, with “how to cure a ghost” and “how to cure a ghost ii” appearing even further apart. The speaker moves between events in the past and present, often doubling back to certain moments to reassess and relive them, which projects a much more honest account counter to the normative conception of recovery. It simultaneously makes relapse and regression a part of the narrative of healing, while asserting the importance of remembrance as a therapeutic move.

One extremely important event with which Roisin wrestles in the anthology is the abortion she was forced to undergo as a teenager. References to this event are scattered throughout the collection, starting with the very first poem titled “after the loss.” It begins with the narrator assessing her choice to have an abortion and the reasons for it, deciding that she is the better for her choice, a moment that does not correspond to a typical understanding of the beginnings of healing because it already projects an attitude of inner strength even when it depicts the state of woundedness:

> my skin surfaced with crusty sores
>
> i said to them: so what?
>
> i am bigger than

this pain (8)

The poem itself brings together feelings of personal power and agency with hurt and powerlessness with a series of images at the beginning that symbolize the scattered or dehumanized state—her self is characterized alternately as a marionette on strings, or a pile of bricks—but is paired with the animating action that emphasizes agency and mobility through the words “i built,” “i lifted” and “i rose.”

Even with a beginning that assumes a posture of resilience, subsequent poems contain repeated references to notion of survival, using the term “just survive” (9. 10) or “had to survive” (28), or “trying to survive” (56) to denote the different modes of difficulty faced in navigating towards healing. Further references to her abortion in other poems, for instance, alternate between shame, reassurance, anger, defeat, and acceptance. In “after the loss, take 2,” the narrator cycles between these emotions directed at herself and her embodiment. She alternately describes herself as ravenous, monstrous, and an incarnation of the destructive goddess Kali—strong images that signify both power and self-loathing—but then uses the common Bengali invective “*haram jati*” which literally translates to “child of sin” and indicates illegitimacy. “body solecism” touches on how regret for aborted possibilities and the acceptance of a difficult choice can be experienced simultaneously, as Roisin parallels the wound of her mother’s pregnancy carrying her with the wound of her own abortion. Power and resilience is frequently coupled with doubt and self-blame, at times interrupting and at times motivating healing.

The non-linearity of recovery also proliferates Roisin’s contentious relationship with her mother, whose mental illness and abusive behavior towards the poet is the subject of several poems in the collection. Reconciliation with abuse is depicted an uneven process, with certain poems portraying what Roisin suffered through the eyes of a survivor cataloguing the events that

induced trauma while in others she identifies her suffering as an effect of intergenerational patriarchal violence and her mother as a survivor-perpetrator with her own wounds. “ammu, after the smoke” details her mother’s manic episodes where her emotional and psychological instability was expressed as physical and verbal abuse of her children. The poem is unflinching in its imagery, describing her mother’s attempt to burn down their house and comparing her mother to a despotic ruler. Nuance is added to this characterization in other poems such as “mothers,” a prose-poem where the fraught role of mothers under patriarchy is addressed with poignant empathy. Despite the abuse Roisin has suffered at her hands, that she and her mother are tied together as fellow survivors of heteropatriarchal trauma is underscored as well, with injunction that naming the source of one’s suffering is crucial to a resolution or recovery: "how can you move/forward if you’ve never been able to utter the trauma that haunts you?” (38). Later in the anthology, she also portrays how the movement from conflict to harmony is never straightforward in the form of “time means everything,” where Roisin relates a brief moment of solidarity between mother and daughter, but ends with, “In that moment she understood me vastly. But soon—oh, soon—she would forget” (43). The cycle of love and abuse that this depicts projects the repetitive and ongoing nature of both trauma and healing—the former always ready to return and the latter arduous, incomplete and in-progress.

Heteropatriarchal violence is a recurring theme that complicates the trajectory of healing, with several poems exploring in depth how it is responsible for trauma and violence. The clearest example of how misogyny intersects with racism and ethnic discrimination occurs in “mansplain nation,” where toxic white masculinity is taken to task while simultaneously emphasizing the distance Roisin feels from white feminism (Roisin’s own experiences with queer spaces in North America were marked by exactly such exclusions. (Lad)). The result is a kind of double

subjection where the narrator, in her vocalized lack of association with feminism, is seen as even more marginal to the ebbs and flows of gender politics. The illegibility of her racial exclusion from the dominant narrative in the face of white male privilege is central to Roisin's subjective experience of both whiteness and masculinity within the Western context.

However, the multi-layered sources of discriminatory trauma are complemented by poems that envision an other to both suffering and violent embodiment. Poems such as "utopia" and "island home" use a softer tone and reimagine aspirational spaces and futures where an alternate embodiment is possible. The former is a purely imagined reality and the latter memorializes her childhood in her hometown of Sydney, Australia, her connection to this place emphasized in the poem using vivid island imagery. It underscores that memory is not always a source of pain and trauma but sometimes recenters one's idea of home and happiness. In "utopia," by suggesting a utopian temporal destination "where everybody is beautiful and every body/is beautiful," (30) Roisin does the heavy labor of envisioning an externity to her current manifold subjection. The vision of this externity is not just out-of-reach and aspirational but a source of healing and recovery as well. They present spaces that are sometimes concurrent with and oftentimes complementary to those spaces where both oppression and violence have been perpetrated, yet are addressed separately to make clear the movement between the many modes of being enacting on her body.

Mohja Kahf's Feminist Intervention into Poetry and Exegesis

Perhaps the best source through which the problem of women and scripture can be parsed is through the works of the writer of the foreword for *Hagar Poems*, Dr Amina Wadud. In her seminal work *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, she

explores the deliberate absence (one might even say systematic erasure) of the female voice in traditional Qur'anic hermeneutics and exegetical work. By working along three interconnected registers— the linguistic, the cultural, and the epistemic—she asserts that androcentric readings and explications of the Qur'an are contributing to existing patriarchal structures that seek to coopt religion and the study of religion towards relegating women to secondary and sub-human positions. The absence of gynocentric scholarly works and female voices in those scholarly circles, she argues, contributes to the real-life injustices and inequities in Islamic societies and communities. Her book meticulously traces gendering in Qur'anic Arabic, and even goes so far as to say that the act of translating the Qur'an, when done with concerted attention to such gendering, has the potential to amplify the egalitarian ethos of the Qur'an which is often times discarded in the process of translating from Arabic.

Under all of this, as the grounds of her argument, is the understanding and acceptance of a just God (with the Qur'an being God's Word, and therefore an expression of gender justice in itself), which is why her attention is squarely focused on the methods, tools, and machinery through which exegetical writing and hermeneutical works that interpret that Word create the conditions of an androcentric experience of religion. Countering this can only happen through the exploration of alternate modes of exegesis and forms that can exist either parallel to or apart from traditional types of religious textualities:

> This method of restricting the particulars to a specific context, extracting the principles intended by the Qur'an through that particular, and then applying those principles to other particulars in various cultural contexts, forms a major variation from previous exegetical methodologies. The movement from principles to particulars can only be

done by the members of whatever particular context a principle is to be applied. Therefore, interpretation of the Qur'an can never be final. (10)

Her suggestion therefore, for ways to devise new methodologies for exegetical and explicative religious work identifies the grafting together of the broad ideals and schemas derived from the Qur'an with the specificities of regional cultural settings as a productive force through which a new set of textual formulations for religious writing can be devised.

So the fact that a gynocentric vision of Islam, the Qur'an, and of Muslim women emerges in poetry is not perhaps too surprising. Kahf takes up this challenge of reimagining the Qur'an and its stories as projecting a vision of gender justice, without forgetting or papering over the existing structures through which that justice is violated, delayed, misunderstood, or pushed to the side. In her engagement with Qur'anic stories, and especially her recontextualization of the female figures within Islamic history and theology, her poetry takes on the character of a feminist intervention into exegesis.

Kahf's characterization of the problem of androcentrism within Islam and Islamic scholarship is best illustrated in two poems reflecting upon the life and work of the famous Imam al-Ghazali, who is known across the Muslim world for his works on Islamic jurisprudence and logic. Their unique structure hinges upon two main features—the deliberate incorporation of silence within the performance aspect of poetry, and the distinction between title and body of the poem in its written form. Each poem consists entirely of a long descriptive title, with no actual poem to follow it. The long descriptive titles, as a result, form the main (or even only) spoken elements of the poems, and are meant to be recited with a 45 second silence to stand in for the poem itself. This structure firstly breaks the general understanding of a titled poem having its contents appear separately or distinct from its title. The incorporation of silence as the body of

the poem also breaks with this understanding, seeking to reorient the poem as a form. In aligning the silence with this type of formal absence (of the body of the poem), Kahf manages ironically to highlight not just the absence of the female voices within Islamic scholarly traditions and exegetical works but to also hold space for the lack of sources and knowledge of al-Ghazali's abandoned family. The sparse consensus on this abandonment is that it precipitated a decade of dense spiritual and religious reflection through which he produced some of his best and most well-regarded juridical works. These two poems center the silence of the women in his life and make visible how a decentering of the female lives and voices in his circle was necessary; it was in fact the foundation upon which the great works of his life rested. It is humorous, ironic, but dramatizes the problem that Kahf then begins to address through her poetics.

Kahf's exegetical aspirations are the clearest in her poem "Not the Same," which is one of a series of poems where the figure of Mary is explored and reimagined from varying perspectives and for the modern age. Many of her poems seek to establish a connection with the women in the Qur'an or in the hadith and the women of today—"Among the Midianites on US 31," for example, rewrites the initial encounter between Moses and Zipporah/Saffura in Madian as taking place at a gas station on route 31, or "Hajar in America" portrays Hagar as a single mother abandoned by a deadbeat husband. "Not the Same" is in direct conversation with the Qur'anic portrayal of Mary, and it is the birth of Mary, as described in the Qur'an, that is contextualized through a group of stanzas bookended by the relevant Qur'anic verses. The poem begins with an epigraph from Sūrat Āl ʿImrān, where Maryam's mother, upon her birth, laments the gender of the child, but addresses God directly for her protection: "Oh my Lord, I have delivered her a girl, and God knows best what I have delivered, and a girl is not the same as a boy. And I have named her Mary, and I commend her and her posterity to Thy protection…"

(Kahf, 72). The ayaat that directly follows in the Qur'an states, "Right graciously did God welcome Mary." Within these two consecutive lines is both an acknowledgement of the realities of gender in Mary's natal community, as well as an indication of her own special status in God's eyes. It is clear that "a girl is not the same as a boy," while painting the cultural conditions of Mary's life, becomes in the sequence of these two ayaat secondary or incidental to the fact of God's own "gracious welcome" of her[10].

The poem that follows that epigraph takes as its starting point the disappointment expressed by Mary's mother but chooses to counter it with scenes of divine rejoicing. Kahf's poetry depicts the spectacle of such a "welcome" by detailing how God "threw a party", using figurative language to describe the food and drink with which He chooses to celebrate the birth of girlchild Mary. There is a sharp difference outlined in it between what boys that have garnered divine attention tend to receive from God. For the male chosen God serves "lightning and thunder," "scrabbling among the sheep," "carpenter's nails," i.e. hardships, and manual labor, rigidity and the threat of his anger, but for the girl-child Mary there is reserved softness and light and provision, as indicated through "linens luminous," "comfort and joy," etc. These lines of description precede the verse on a "gracious welcome," but this retranslation is not without its purpose, meant to not only hold the Qur'an's term "*qabūlīn ḥasanī*" (i.e. "good acceptance" or "goodly acceptance" in most established translations) but also the rest of the verse in Arabic, where her source of nourishment and sustenance (literally in the form of food/provision/"*rizq*") comes directly from God. As a result, the poem itself, through both retranslation and its

[10] The English translations of these ayaats as they appear in the poem are truncated versions of what appears in most established translations of the Qur'an. While Kahf acknowledges working with Adullah Yusuf Ali's translation, the lines as they appear in the poem have been modified and retranslated by her, which does mean that the poem presents her own interpretation and understanding of the text as well as its meaning even on the level of language and syntax.

descriptive figurative language, stands to model an exegesis that engages directly with the question of gender, difference and divine favor.

The structure of the poem also mimics that of written and published translations or tafsir texts, which are the primary modes of religious learning and explication for many educated Muslims who are not formally a part of the *ulema* but consider the reading of Qur'anic translations and exegesis as a vital religious practice. Widely available translations of the Qur'an and tafsir often take a verse-by-verse approach to exegesis and explication, with each verse being translated and contextualized before moving on to the next. The poem structurally refers to this aesthetic, while also seeking to break with that tradition by stitching together references to the following verses within it. By its end, even though it began with an acknowledgment of cultural and embodied difference, there is a recharacterization of what that difference might mean through the figure of Mary, perhaps one of the most well regarded, and the only named woman, in the Qur'an.

Kahf's engagement with Mary transforms with her continuing treatment of verse 3:37 in a subsequent poem that can simultaneously be considered an extension of the exegetical direction from "Not the Same" while establishing a more contemporary and material approach to its content. In "The Food of Mary," Mary is depicted as a municipal urban planner who observes and narrates in the poem, using first person perspective, the unremarkable and mundane actions of her long joyless work hours as a contrast to the scriptural depictions of Mary's days at the temple. Beginning with an epigraph that details Zekariah's discovery of Mary's divinely sourced sustenance, the body of the poem is broken into verses where there is pointed comparison between a contemporary Mary-in-the-world with an ancient/scriptural Mary-in-the-Qur'an in terms of their "provisions." In it, Mary laments the impoverished nature of her life—the lack of

food, conversation, mentorship, etc.—by looking to the example of Mary's experience of divine favor, highlighting her alienation from scripture and its distance from the material circumstances of her contemporary life.

This poem departs from the abstract and cosmological metaphors in "Not the Same" to situate itself within the detritus of everyday living. Mary-in-the-world, who is portrayed as an independent and educated working woman, describes her life as "the blank blue screen," even as she finds similarity with her scriptural counterpart "alone like Mary high in her temple." In centering these descriptions of contemporary work-life, Mary-in-the-Qur'an types on her "holy keyboard" and is served "fully microwaveable meals," while the Mary of the poem is left with a malfunctioning candy machine that steals her change and leaves her hungry. The worlding of this poem provides a sharp contrast to the joyous celebratory tone of "Not the Same" while replicating the ethos of that title—Mary-in-the-world is also "not the same" as the Mary of scripture, scrounging for "crumbs" in a bleak urban landscape bereft of substantial support or sustenance. It produces an alternate context for Mary-in-the-world that exposes how the material reality experienced by women in contemporary Western setting may well be reinterpreted away from one of freedom, equality, and independence, exposing layers of impoverishment, abandonment, and isolation.

That the poem references not just Mary but also Zekariah and the angel Gabriel models for us the embeddedness of scriptural Mary within a system of relations organized to promote her goals and purpose. While the epigraph of "The Food of Mary" from Sūrat Āl ʿImrān references Zekariah's observation of Mary's divine favor, the body of the poem takes pains to elaborate on the meaning of his mentorship and education of the young Mary, whose isolation in the holy temple does not preclude her teacher's presence and access to her.

Mary had a mentor in Zekariah,

who dropped in and taught her divine wisdom

whenever he wasn't on a vow of silence

but only burned-out Bill from computer services,

styrofoam cup loosely in hand with a little cold coffee left in it,

comes by my door, to mutter about the weather. (Kahf 75)

Kahf uses the relationship between male mentor and female mentee to overwrite the established Qur'anic discourse of Mary's strict *purdah* from men, making clear that her modesty practices—or even Zekariah's own temporary inability to speak—did not deprive her of either training, or educational contact with men through whom she is able to cultivate her spiritual and religious self. Their collaboration is sharply contrasted in the poem by contemporary Mary's dearth of human or professional connections in her life, as described by Bill from computing's frustrating small talk.

The following verse highlights a similar distinction while encapsulating within it a different but more pointed critique of the labor in which the modern Mary is engaged—a counterpoint to the labor that Mary-of-scripture eventually anticipates. The verse describes a lack of Gabriel's divine portents in her life, replaced instead by the bike messenger delivering blueprints, i.e. more work that she then must "study religiously." A displacement is indicated here in terms of what "religious" devotion is directed towards in this contemporary context, alongside a crucial transformation of the notion of labor:

Mary got a visitation from Gabriel

which helped clarify things like her task in the world

I get the cross-town courier in bicycle shorts, panting,

not so much to announce a virgin birth unto me

as carrying a roll of blueprints under his arm

which I study religiously[…] (Kahf 75-6)

The poem's comparative arrangement collapses together critique of several systems that manufacture the narrator Mary's melancholy, with this verse in particular depicting a crucial transformation in the idea of labor. On one level, the poem projects a modernist mood of isolation and alienation experienced within cluttered yet sterile urban spaces designed as a professional setting. It's analysis of the narrator's present-day positioning as a dedicated but ultimately insignificant cog in the workplace machinery contains within it implicit critique of Mary's labor as a municipal worker, even of labor in general as a reductive qualifier in human life. The labor expected and anticipated of Mary-in-the-Qur'an relates to that of pregnancy and birth, a strictly gendered, female task that invested her with a legacy and significance beyond her time and society, specific and inimitable to her. The poem's juxtaposition of this with the labor the bike messenger brings Mary, which she then toils over "religiously," reinterprets it as ungendered and homogenized, ensconced within a system that privileges work over human relations or interactions, and unlikely to elevate, add, or improve her life beyond the mundane. The extractive nature of this system Mary finds herself in, whose returns are sparse and marked by her physical and social deprivation, is indexed by the poem as a literal hunger that remains unappeased.

The final resounding lament of "Oh Mary, Mary, whence cometh my divine crumb?" emphasizes the divide between the scriptural and the real world through the Mary-of-the-poem addressing directly the Mary-of-the-Qur'an—the latter's brand of egalitarian justice missing

from the former's patriarchally determined capitalist world. The support, care, and network of knowledge that are part and parcel of Mary's *rizq* (i.e. divine provisions) are not available to Mary of the poem, revealing that certain systems of gender and economic justice promised, ensured, and maintained within the Qur'an have receded from the world as we know it.

Mary becomes a bridging mechanism within Kahf's poems, not only between heavens and earth, past and present, abstract and material, but also between distinct and seemingly conflicting religious traditions. In the case of the poem "Our Lady of Sorrows," Kahf uses figurative and visual motifs often used to describe or illustrate Mary within the Christian tradition to describe Fatima (RA), the daughter of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), presenting an alternate figure of a grieving mother from within the Islamic tradition to create yet another instance of collapsing time, space, and context.

The title of the poem, "Our Lady of the Sorrows," directly references one of the monikers of the Virgin Mary within the Christian tradition, where she is also known as the Sorrowful Mother. This aspect is derived from Biblical scripture, specifically the prediction of her sorrow and Jesus' suffering in Luke 2:34-35, and its completion in John 19:26-27[11]. The connection drawn between Mary and Fatima is by no means arbitrary. The Virgin Mary is also known in the Hispanophone Catholic world as "Our Lady of Fatima," referencing a miracle in the town of Fatima in Portugal, but the name of that town is derived from the Arabic name Fatima. These overlaps allow for a simultaneous convergence and contrast, instituting Fatima as *our* Lady of

[11] Luke 2:34-35 contain verses predicting Jesus' ultimate destiny and end with Mary being told that "a sword will pierce your heart," formally acknowledging her loss. John 19:26-27 visualize Mary at the foot of a crucified Jesus, another iconic image that proliferates across the Christian tradition, signifying the maternal loss.

Sorrows, emblematic of maternal loss and grief on par with the more universally acknowledged Christendom-sanctioned Mary.

The poem begins with "It is hard to find Fatima. Fatima's face/is always averted from the crowd"—an immediate and hard contrast with the more established Lady of Sorrows in Christianity. Icons of Mary depict a very recognizable and consistent set of aesthetics across many artistic styles and traditions—the image of a mother, seated facing the viewer, son in lap or in arms, with a cloak covering her head and sweeping down. The beginning highlights Fatima escaping the kind of iconoclasm that anchors Mary so strongly within the Christian tradition. Described as "always receding to another place," Fatima as a sign is in flux and unstable, but as such amenable to the kind of overlapping signification Kahf attempts in this poem. Even as the poem acknowledges Fatima's difference from Mary in her simultaneous position within Islamic tradition as the daughter of the Prophet and the mother of his grandsons, the impression of her maternal loss is figured in the poem through a rhetorical questioning outlining her ultimate place in Islamic history[12]:

> Did she carry in her pelvic floor
> the knowledge that her son Hussain
> would die at Karbala, his body gored,
> my Lady of the Sorrows, of the shroud? (78)

The reference to the events of Karbala form the connective node between Mary and Fatima as mothers that violently lost their children in the name of religion and were venerated as a result of

[12] Reminiscent to me, personally, of the song "Mary Did You Know," even as its tone is in marked departure from that song—what did Fatima know of her son's or her own fate?

it. With “his body gored” and “of the shroud,” the two mother’s experiences meet across two different and seemingly conflicting religious epistemes to find a point of contiguity.

Kahf further condenses the sign of the sorrowful mother by evoking what produced for our contemporary age the iconic image of the bereaved mother—the extrajudicial murder of Trayvon Martin, the shooting in Ferguson, Missouri, and the Black Lives Matter movement are referenced to underscore the institutional racism and state violence that continues to generate more sonless mothers: “bereft/little mother even as a little daughter,/she appears at Trayvon’s killer’s trial,/shadows the crowd at Ferguson.” Fatima, in her slipperiness and anxious fleeing, presents a sign that is accessible not only across religious boundaries but also across space and time to the maternal anxieties of our times. The poem ends by refusing to only abstract Fatima’s pain but almost invests her with a Christ-like responsibility of bearing the weight of the world’s inequities: “Fatima, shuddering, shouldering the pain/of every mother’s son who will be slaughtered.” Her pain is visualized as one that is felt in the body, much like Mary’s heart being pierced with a sword in the Bible. Just as Jesus is enshrined within the Christian tradition as having died to absolve the world of its sins, Fatima becomes Lady of the Sorrows not just for the Islamic tradition, or in her experiential proximity to Mary, but for a much wider set of subjects and referents. Kahf’s re-envisioning of Fatima enacts what is implied and assumed within Islamic exegesis—that what lies within Islam, as texts or images or stories or examples, project a universal and inclusive vision.

The most major form of re-envisioning takes form in the anthology through Kahf’s extended and fractured treatment of Hagar. As foreshadowed by the title, *Hagar Poems* takes as its central material the story of Hagar, one which encompasses the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Within the scriptural texts of these traditions, the story of Hagar’s relationship with

Ibraham and Sarah, her eventual banishment away from them into the desert with her son Ismail, and her survival in that harsh environment against great odds serves as a demonstration of resilience in the face of fated hardships. While accounts vary among different texts, and the Qur'an does not mention Hagar by name, Kahf uses as her referent a combination of story threads from across the different traditions, as well as the Hadith. The story resonates with themes of exile, displacement, and migration, portraying the triumph of faith over adversity. What is sparse or even altogether missing from these scriptural depictions is the expression of female consciousness, one through which an acutely female experience of religiosity and encounter with divinity can be perceived. Kahf's poems not only take pains to highlight this egregious erasure but also aim to suggest what might recuperate those elisions in the scriptural body.

Kahf's works tend to index how experiences of migration, acts of faith or religiosity, and the conflicts internal or external produced by them, collapse together, thereby transcending their individual place and time coordinates. Her Sarah or Hagar, or Asiya, or Zuleikha, are every Sarah or Hagar or Asiya or Zuleikha, and the movement between the specifics of context, time, and place of the former to the latter recreates the timelessness of religious texts. Various aspects of Hagar's story are showcased by Kahf through recontextualization of time and place. Hagar becomes a participant in the AIDS march, the wife of an international graduate student who abandons her to marry another, the reason why a social worker visits Abraham and Sarah. In "Hajar Writes a Letter to Sarah as a Cathartic Exercise Suggested by Her Therapist," she writes a letter to Sarah wishing to settle their differences and circumstances. Then in the immediate next poem "Page Found Crumpled in the Wastebasket by Hajar's Writing Desk" is a breathless unrelenting excoriation of Sarah, who is accused of betraying women to side with the forces of

patriarchal domination with their religious set. Through the specificity of these situations and events, her poetry highlights certain universal themes and experiences, thereby reintroducing the religious, the scriptural, and the divine as relatable, relevant, timely rather than old-fashioned or something that has been outgrown.

For Kahf, however, Hagar emerges as a powerful and malleable sign, her resilience manifesting in her ability to hold and convey a slew of valences, meanings, affirmations, and contestations, across time and place. "Hagar Dreamwork: The Therapist's Notes" seems to hold an outline of her reasons for engaging with this figure and this story repeatedly in different poems, a story she declares "mythic" in its potential. Her intense focus on the specifics of the story is transformed in these verses as the epiphanic notes jotted down by a therapist trying to conduct dreamwork style analysis on a patient:

> What is the Hajar function in the psyche?
>
> Here we have the angel and the baby;
>
> here, two wives, two brothers,
>
> a doppelganger story.
>
> […]
>
> Take it away from history;
>
> Wake up and jot down the latest jigsaw clue:
>
> All the characters in the Hagar dream are you. (26)

This poem suggests the story of Hagar as the blueprint of an originary conflict, one that continues to haunt not just history but our collective psyche. The clash between two women (Sarah and Hagar), or two brothers (Isaac and Ismail), of patriarchal banishment, all lends itself to metaphor, refracting the idea of a family feud to explain the heart of historical conflicts. To

reflect the psychoanalyst's cant adopted in this poem, "the Hagar dream" holds up a mirror to all of us, to history, to current affairs, to conflict across time, prompting a set of recognitions across categories and borders, rendering us all a character in it. As the mother to Abraham's elder son, Hagar is later taken away (or pushed out, depending on the perspective or poem in the anthology) from the security of Abraham's home with her son Ismail to settle elsewhere. Hagar is at once a scorned wife, a wronged woman, a single mother, an immigrant, a survivor, a pioneer. But so are the other characters, each's perspective revealing something new about the ways in which we narrativize the sources of discord in our world.

In the context of the United States, Hagar comes to represents to Kahf the racialized Muslim other and its perception within the region, posing questions of culpability, responsibility, and reckoning. In "Isaac Wakes Up to Ismail and Hagar Terrorizing the House," while the narrator Isaac's family is being harassed by "this crazy black woman banging on our door" and "her glowering bearded brown son," we receive from him a picture of Hagar and Ismail that explicitly connect the historical estrangement between the brothers to the current faultlines in religious and race relations in the US. Kahf's use of an epilogue from civil rights giant James Baldwin's ground-shifting essay "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" quite succinctly establishes this particular direction for the poem's allegorical meaning. With the quote, "But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime," Baldwin's inclusion of the innocent and the ignorant into the circle of accountability for acts of racial violence or discrimination past and present becomes superimposed onto the poem, where Isaac's lack of knowledge about his family's fraught past generates a tense confrontation he is unable to understand or navigate. Both Islamophobia and anti-Black racism are encapsulated by the twin

threats of the hysterical Black woman and the angry brown man, images quintessential to the two discriminatory modes.

The action of the poem is fashioned out of Isaac's encounter with this mother-son duo, and his father's explanation to him of who they are. This explanation conveys not only the dismissive or revisionist attitude in some quarters towards the more violent and problematic events in history—be it US revolutionary history, the Civil Rights movement, or the more contemporary post-9/11 xenophobia—but also seeks to erase the connection between those events and the volatile present:

> "Son, there's a trifling thing we haven't told you.
>
> There was no room for it in our curriculum
>
> … so you see, this woman was—just a blip in our story.
>
> No pledges were made that needed keeping.
>
> What they say's not true; do not believe it." (19)

With "no room for it in our curriculum" and "a blip in our story" underscoring deliberate discursive erasure, combined with the father's description of the woman and son as liars who are not to be believed, who are owed nothing, the story of Hagar and Ismail's estrangement from Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac becomes an allegory for the expurgated history to current US politics and foreign policy. Isaac's ignorance of who this woman at the door is or what she wants, together with his father's tailored explanation, contributes to the fear and confusion he feels in his own home. The allegory extends towards a negative characterization of those at the door—qualifiers of "crafty," "taught from birth to lie," "incapable of modern life" refer to the ways in which Muslim immigrant communities have often been described to justify their exclusion from and otherness to what is understood as American civic life and identity.

Centering Isaac's character in this poem is a notably distinct choice considering that this anthology focuses for the most part on filling in the female voices from scripture. Its importance lies in its illustration of why certain relations and dynamics with respect to people of color, or women, or immigrants, etc. exist in present day America. An exploration of the situation from the subjective position of Isaac—who stands here for the perspective of the contemporary, possibly white or white-passing citizen, whose estrangement from history results in an inability to comprehend this mother-son duo and their demands—allows Kahf to dramatize and map the creation and perception of the "other" as it iterates in US culture and politics. The poem presents the intersecting nodes of American, immigrant, Muslim, and POC, from the outside rather than the inside, instituting empathy where otherwise there can only be condemnation or judgement. Even though the context created for poem by the epigraph enjoins responsibility and accountability, actions and inequities long forgotten or misunderstood, Kahf's project is, ultimately, an exercise in compassion and reconciliation, between Hagar and Sarah, Isaac and Ismail, past and present, scripture and the world.

Chapter 3

A Tale of Two Playwrights:

Performing Moral Injury, as Staged by Ayad Akhtar and Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti

The relationship between religion and literature is often framed as antagonistic, shaped largely by debates over the reception of literary and artistic works by specific religious communities. The controversies surrounding texts such as Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and visual representations such as the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in recent years have brought into sharp relief competing assumptions about the place of religion in relation to literary expression, artistic freedom, and public critique. This chapter examines three plays that dramatize the reception of religiously controversial literary works: Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's *Behzti* and *Behud* and Ayad Akhtar's *The Who and The What.* By staging fictionalized accounts of religious controversies surrounding literary production, these plays provide a unique opportunity to analyze the interpretive practices through which texts come to be understood as either literary objects or religiously consequential interventions. Through their dramatization of censorship and public controversies, Bhatti and Akhtar shift attention from the text itself to the discursive and interpretive frameworks through which texts are read. In doing so, they offer a clearer view of the grounds upon which textuality, literariness, and religiosity are established.

These plays, while produced and staged in two different Western countries, and written about two very different diasporic religious communities, have much in common with respect to their subject matter—the extent to which a literary text that discusses religious groups and practices can anticipate, manage, or make legible the elements that direct or determine its

reception. Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's two plays, now irreversibly interconnected in their history and inception, raise important questions about relationship between religious or moral injury versus artistic freedom and protected speech, one through its reception, and the other using its narrative and structure. *Behzti* was never staged due to its portrayal of a young British Sikh woman Min whose mother is hopeful of arranging a match for her but is instead assaulted in the *gurdwara* by a Sikh elder. Bhatti's subsequent play *Behud* follows a female British Sikh playwright as she struggles to wrangle her increasingly unruly characters through the process of writing a new play that depicts the events of why her previous play—portraying a sexual assault in a *gurdwara*—faced aggressive resistance from Sikh religious protesters. Ayad Akhtar's play *The Who and The What* focuses on an Ivy League educated Muslim American writer whose fictionalized account of the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab and the revelations her project engenders corrodes her familial relationships, especially the one with her traditional pious patriarch.

For both playwrights, using the nestling mechanism of a text within the play allows the play itself to stage a specific kind of fraught reception that brings into relief several crucial points regarding the reading practices directing such a reception. For Bhatti, the events that resulted in *Behzti*'s shelving and ultimate textual shift from stage-play to playwritten text become the text and context within *Behud*, constructing a mediated story and narrative structure making distinct the various agents, factors, motivations, and nuances that refract the literary text as well as determining the responses to it. For Akhtar, the text-within-a-text strategy creates a similar kind of mediation between text and audience, confining theatrical provocation to the stage.

Provocation and the Playwright—The Case of *Behzti*

Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's third play could have been another family drama written by a British Asian playwright about a diasporic community and its struggles within the British cultural arena. Instead, *Behzti* is a dark play that exposed the fault lines within a community and explored the situation of women at the grim intersection between religion, civil society, and patriarchy. The content is certainly incendiary. The story follows Min, a young dumpy Sikh woman who cares for her verbally abusive invalid mother Balbir. The two visit the *gurdwara* (the Sikh house of worship) after many years of isolation from the community because Balbir has decided to speak to the head of the *gurdwara* renovation committee, Mr. Sandhu, about choosing a groom for Min from his list of eligible men. This decision leads to a string of events that reveal the hidden abuses, violence, and duplicity festering in religious and conservative communities. Min's rape by Mr. Sandhu in the *gurdwara*, his subsequent murder, and middle-aged Teetee's revelation about her own rape and marriage, shock both Balbir and the audience out of any sanitized ideas of honor, piety, and honesty.

On a more general scale, the play is about appearances and hypocrisy. Characters such as Balbir and Teetee wax nostalgic about their youthful friendship forged out of the hardships of first-generation immigrant life. These reminiscences belie their actual long-term detachment from each other and their actual lack of knowledge of each other's current lives. They are concerned about their image and about being "seen and noticed and invited by people." Their sense of self and accomplishment is informed by communal expectation, acceptability and approval rather than just happiness or fun. This breeds an obsession with exhibiting the perfect façade of uprightness. Min's character, with her love of dancing at home by herself and passive contentment, exists as a counterpoint to this. The play also tracks Min's transformation from this

simple naiveté to the harsh knowledge of experience. Min's experience of community is not acceptance or love but violence and brutality—she is raped by Mr. Sandhu in his office at the *gurdwara*, with the implication that he uses "the list" as an excuse to rape young unmarried girls. The play seeks to uncover what lies underneath the outward appearance of peace, prosperity and success.

None of these nuances, however, were allowed to register in the public consciousness by the events that followed. For an entire week before the play could be staged, there were persistent protests and picketing outside the theatre, demanding changes in the setting of the play. Alongside these peaceful yet increasingly agitated demonstrations there were meetings between theatre representatives, government representatives, and Sikh community leaders, in attempts to come to some resolution. The protesters, including Sikh religious leaders, community associations, and local politicians in Birmingham, wanted the play to be either be changed or shelved, because of what they considered the depiction of obscenity in their sacred place of worship. The chairman of the Council of Sikh Gurdwaras in Birmingham, Sewa Singh Mandha, commented, "In a Sikh temple, sexual abuse does not take place, kissing and dancing don't take place, rape doesn't take place, homosexual activity doesn't take place, murders do not take place."[13] Not only does he vocalize outrage at the play but also demonstrates the exact kind of denial critiqued in the play. One councilor emphasized that their objections were clearly as much about the image and reputation of the Sikh community as about religious disrespect: "The way the Sikh community is portrayed in this play is outrageous. To set this in any place of worship, be it a church, temple or mosque, would be an insult to that religion. If it was set in a church I

[13] Left, Sarah. "Play axed after Sikh protests." *The Guardian,* 20 Dec. 2004.

would still be here protesting."[14] The playwright, who was present in the initial meetings, declined to amend what she considered an important aspect of the drama's message. The theatre management, however, claim that some rewriting did take place: "The theatre has taken the lead in consulting with community members about the play over the last few months and, as a result, several changes were made to the show before it went into production."[15] Alternately, the theatre management suggested the Sikh representatives draft a statement summarizing the Sikh community's objections to the play, to be read out to the audience before the performance[16].

The tensions boiled over on Saturday, 18th December, when hundreds of Sikh rioters stormed the theatre, causing thousands of pounds of damage to the site and injuring policemen stationed to keep the crowd under control. The violence resulted in the cancellation of the performances for that night. After further meetings with Sikh representatives the next Monday, the Birmingham Rep came to the decision that continuing to stage the play would endanger lives and property. This decision appalled Bhatti and dismayed the theatre and art community. While hundreds of artists, writers, and poets wrote an open letter condemning the action of the protestors, Bhatti received death threats, was forced to leave home and go into hiding. She even discouraged public group readings of the play for fear of violent reprisals or bloodshed.[17]

From the very beginning, the question was whether certain commentary could be presented on stage in a certain manner, and sensitivity to religious sentiment of the Sikh

[14] "Sikhs upset over play, say it offends religion." *Indo-Asian News Service*, 19 Dec. 2004.

[15] Cooper, Matthew. "Sikh Anger Over Play Turns to Violence." *Press Association*, 19 Dec. 2004.

[16] McDonough, Michael. "Hundreds of protesters damage theater in protest over Sikh play." *Associated Press International*, 19 Dec. 2004.

[17] Iverne, James. "Scared Behzti Author Pleads for Cancellation of Further Readings." *Playbill*, 27 Dec. 2004.

community came into clumsy conflict with the pragmatics of theatre production. The commissioners of the play were not as confident about staging the play as the playwright and cast. Artistic Director of the Soho Theatre Lisa Goldman believes that theatres and repertories tend to be quite conservative and expedient rather than needlessly daring or radical. "There's a lot of right-wing people in theatre… And it's very rare that theatre stands up to the authorities. It tends to be satisfied picking up the crumbs thrown down to it. Its attitude is: let's not rock the boat; let's be pragmatic; let's make this work."[18] The management of Birmingham Repertory Theatre decided to contact leaders within the Sikh community, in order to test the waters and assess how much of a storm would result during the run of the play. Bhatti has opined, in retrospect, that the move to enter into discussions with the community was not well thought out and backfired mainly because she never intended to alter the details in the play[19]. In her own words, "I cannot think of many other instances of new plays being offered to non-theatre readers for comment. How did anyone expect non-theatre-going Sikh elders to react to reading the play?" (45)[20] Bhatti's characterization of the Sikh religious elders who read as "non-theatre readers" indicate two key factors in its disastrous reception. Firstly, it indicates that the playwright herself envisioned for her play an audience more attuned to literary reading practices that allow for the play's subject matter to be framed within acceptable literary parameters. In having to present the play and its controversial subject matter to an audience for whom the play's contents perhaps read differently than to audiences whose reading practices are more familiar to

[18] Logan, Brian. "All the World's a Stage." *New Statesman*, 12 Mar. 2009.

[19] "Making an Entrance - Asian Theatre in Britain." Manzoor, Sarfraz, director. *Sunday Feature*, BBC Radio 3, Nov. 2015.

[20] Farrington, Julia, and Natasha Lehrer, editors. *Beyond Belief: Theatre, Freedom of Expression and Public Order – A Case Study*. Sage Publications.

Bhatti, playwright and theatre management grossly misjudged the power and role of the literary text as a transferable translatable force. Secondly, it reveals Bhatti's unwitting privileging of those literary reading practices at the expense of creating a more accessible translatable play. Opening a dialogue, while sensible and diplomatic in theory, gave the Sikh community leaders the impression that they could suggest amendments that would be accepted, when there was no intention to change anything. When those amendments were respectfully declined, the pointlessness (and one-sidedness) of the exercise was apparent.

On the other hand, Bhatti has been accused of being deliberately provocative and writing a drama she knew would inflame her community. The question of intention is a slippery one. It is difficult to defend her against this allegation as she has mentioned in multiple places that she considers the stage "an arena of provocation."[21] While she claims that she did not mean to be intentionally sensational, in her defense of the play, published in the Index on Censorship, she explains that her duty as a playwright is to offend and to render the theatre a place of discomfort;

> The writers I admire are courageous. They present their truths and dare to take risks whilst living with their fears. They tell us life is ferocious and terrifying, that we are imperfect and only when we embrace our imperfections honestly, can we have hope. Such writers sometimes cause offence. But perhaps those who are affronted by the menace of dialogue and discussion need to be offended.[22]

[21] "Venus in Fur; Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti; The Normal Heart; Michael Cunningham." *FrontRow*, performance by Kirsty Lang, BBC Radio 4, 27 May 2014.

[22] Bhatti, Gurpreet Kaur. "The Courage To Offend." *Index on Censorship*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1 May 2005, pp. 124–142. *Sage Publication*.

In subsequent interviews, she has echoed this notion, admitting that she put herself "in the firing-line" and it is in keeping with her choice not to change the objectionable setting of *Behzti*. While she admits that she meant to stoke some sort of intellectual reaction or dialogue, she never imagined it would escalate to violence, or that the theatre's response would be to cancel the play. Her assertion that she wished to portray "extreme events in an extreme setting" unsurprisingly triggered extreme reactions.

The contradictions in term between "provocation" and "dialogue and discussion" becomes apparent immediately, reinstituting a hackneyed binary between the too emotional religious masses whose overreaction to a play makes little to no sense to the religiously tolerant or indifferent public, and the sober cerebral artists and writers whose works anticipate and target audiences that are prepared to be intellectually challenged. This rhetoric once again organizes the discourse around the question of theatre as a literary form that ought to generate a specific kind of objective intellectual response seeking to analyze and parley with its contents, themes, and representations, overlooking completely the emotional and affective dimension of the play as an aesthetic form. At the same time, if the theatre is to be rendered into a place of discomfort, then it begs the question whose discomfort. In dismissing the possibility of alternate readings, reactions, or experiences of her play by audiences inclusive of "non-theatre going" groups such as the Sikh elders of her own community, the full measure of the "discomfort" and "provocation" being incited by the play was underestimated. The playwright's assertion of seeking "provocation" or offense, only to later state that the play's eventual violent reception was unexpected, demonstrates the illegibility of moral and religious injury, especially within discussions of literary reception and censorship.

The reception history of *Behzti*, and the corresponding literary or journalistic discourse around it, discuss the incidence in terms that center liberal secular perspectives on theatre and literature while overlooking the possibility that for religious communities like the Birmingham Sikhs, the play and its production might take on other significations or effects. As made clear in Helen Freshwater's assessment of several high-profile British cases from recent decades in which religious, political and sexual orthodoxies have undermined the notion that censorship is a "historical curiosity", to speak of these cases only in terms of their rhetorical similarity—the conflicting assertion of rights on both sides—is to foreclose the legibility of what lies beyond the incidence of these rights. In her case study of *Behzti*, she explains the incident as an instance of successful censorship in which tensions between "competing fundamentalisms" play out in the wake of the attempted production of the play. She characterizes the dispute by way of an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object—both sides are equally unyielding in their convictions, using curiously identical language to demonstrate this. As difficult as it might be to navigate the cultural and ideological differences on such a fundamental level, it becomes doubly difficult when both sides are determined to be uncompromising in their approach to mediation, as happened in this instance:

> Commentators on the opposite side of the argument presented the right to freedom of expression as a similarly inflexible point of principle and began to adopt the language of religious belief in order to demonstrate the strength of their commitment to this concept. Journalists described freedom of speech as 'sacred'; the artist's right to freedom of expression as a 'question of honor.' (145)

Freshwater's argument contextualizes the difficulties of fully categorizing the ways in which factors such as multiculturalism, liberalism, politics and art overlap in an issue such as censorship.

Freshwater's own observations, however, reveal the ways in which discourse about the incident continues to privilege liberal secular perspectives on the rights to freedom of religion and free speech, while overlooking the fact that the same liberal secular framework determines what does or does not register as the former or latter. The conservative religious groups that are referred to as speaking of the violation of sacred rights and beliefs, are also described as utterly baffling to their detractors. Freshwater's assertion of this incoherence on the part of the Sikh protesters of the play is accompanied by a most telling quote by one of the art directors for the Rep, who states, "There was a fascinating culture clash when one of the Sikh leaders came to talk to our board. His view was that fiction is essentially a lie and therefore should not exist. It's a stand-off."[23] This quote encapsulates several of the key layers beneath Freshwater's analysis. It reveals that the very understanding of presumably "universal" or agreed upon terms such as "culture," "fiction," "literature," and "religion" remain contestable within frameworks other than the liberal secular ones that are the primary point of reference for both Freshwater and for the art director.

The story of the play, therefore, is no longer only of religious hypocrisy, patriarchal violence, and abuse, but also about freedom of speech, artistic expression, and the limits of literary form or reading practices. The protests and cancellation of the play changed the way in which this play was initially and will continue to be perceived. The fact that every news article

[23] Nathan, John. "Censorship in the Theatre." *The Telegraph*, 14 Apr. 2010.

on the rioting and subsequent shutdown of the play included the phrase "depicts rape and murder in a *gurdwara*" considerably narrowed the discourse around the play and delimited the scope of its reading. The reception of *Behzti* has created an inescapable signification for the play, one which is likely to follow Bhatti for the rest of her career. Apart from this, the magnitude of the dispute and the media attention engendered by the protests has rendered it unstageable. Even though it exists in the wider world as a written text which can be read and disseminated, it remains uncertain if it will be performed as a publicized stage production any time in the future. When asked about the stageability of *Behzti*, Bhatti herself was unable to give the most concrete answer. Referring to the French translation of the play, which went on tour in France and Belgium without making any waves, she made it clear that the play has had a tremendous effect as a written text than it maybe ever could have as a performance—it is now taught in schools and discussed in scholarly circles. But she says that her enthusiasm for her current projects and place in life make her reluctant and doubtful about returning to *Behzti*.

The Playwright Within the Text: The Case of *Behud*

That the censorship of *Behzti* became the primary signification of the play is evident when we look at Bhatti's subsequent play, *Behud*. The public was of course on tenterhooks before the play began its run—they wanted to know if there would be another incident ala *Behzti*. Despite massive media coverage, there was no such incident for *Behud*, thanks to the meticulous planning on the part of administration of Belgrade Theatre Coventry where the play was staged before moving to Soho Theatre in London. A report generated by Index on Censorship after the run of the play analyzed the strengths of their strategy, with one administrator commenting that they prepared as though they were "going into siege."

Behud has been widely acknowledged as an undisguised creative representation and response to the stormy debate arising from *Behzti*. The story centers on a Sikh playwright Tarlochan who is under police protection because of death threats received from Sikh protesters who demand that she change aspects of the play. She writes the story into being—all the characters in it begin by doing her bidding—but she soon loses control of them and of what she has written and is forced to become a character in the play herself. What begins as a visual representation of the process of writing where different possibilities, dialogues, and encounters are suggested, and then approved or stricken from the page, gradually develops into more charged moments where the characters begin to independently decide what to say or do, no longer willing to answer to their orchestrator. Tarlochan repeats "you're not saying my words" multiple times in the play—which is what happens when disciplined art finds itself challenged by confused reality—underscoring the difficulty for both playwrights of having to write and represent people who are quite literally resisting being represented according to a preconceived script.

Herein lies the crux of the issue. Bhatti's misunderstanding of who and what was being represented in *Behzti* finds full expression through Tarlochan in *Behud*, with the latter play taking pains to depict the ideas and affects that mobilize certain elements within the Sikh ethnic and religious community. Through the characters of Amrik and Sidhu, the play vocalizes the gaps in representation and persistent alienation experienced by subsections of this community. Even though neither character has read Tarlochan's work, their sense that this play does not imagine them as its audience, or its fully realized subjects, but only perhaps as its objects, is not without merit. They represent the anxieties of belonging to an ethnic community in a Western society under the white gaze, which Amrik makes explicit by saying, "They love thinking they're more

human than us." The bitterness of his position bleeds into his view of Tarlochan as well, whom he calls "the exotic ethnic who makes them feel multicultural." On the other hand, Andrew the director in the play and Joanne the politician are both interested in the fame and glory—one artistic, one political—that might result from a particular form of resolution to this issue. Amid these conflicting motivations, Tarlochan finds herself increasingly lost and trapped.

In their negotiation meeting with Joanne and Andrew, Amrik and Sindhu express their hurt in relation to being erased from consideration in a play that centers a place (the *gurdwara*) and the people that frequent it (practicing Sikhs) over which they claim ownership. While Sidhu finds it unbearable to "have such hurt inflicted on me in my own home is wrong" and therefore insists that the setting of the play be changed from a *gurdwara* to a community center, Amrik feels more keenly his exclusion from not just the narrative that a Sikh playwright writing about Sikh spaces might construct, but also about their alienation from theatre as an artform: "We're the lifeblood of this city, it's us you should be entertaining. Why can't I bring my mum and dad and mates into this building to see a show that means something to us?" In highlighting these forms of artistic and representational erasures, *Behud* is able to overcome the impulse to demonize one side of this debate and instead to consider in its fullness the experience of the artform from the other side of the theatre and maybe even from outside of it.

There are those for whom *Behud* continues to be largely an allegory for the *Behzti* experience rather than an attempt at rapprochement and amendment—that it depicts the Sikh community's refusal to accept its representation as a society with its own secret shames and hypocrisies, fighting tooth and nail to erase that representation if possible. This interpretation projects the play as a surreal exploration of the place of the artist amid controversy—she is at the center and powerful, in the sense that she makes choices that have impact, and she is also

marginalized and pushed to the side by the tide of public opinion and institutional action. The play also conveys the playwright's bewilderment at how quickly and irrepressibly the focus of the story, the point of the drama and her writing itself, shifts from the story of lost innocence and abuse of power and authority to politics, censorship, and artistic integrity. In most of the scenes she is asked about the ending of the play, which she does not seem to have written, as though she herself is figuring out the story as it develops. It underscores the limits of the reading practices that she anticipates will construct the meaning of the play, resulting in the steady fragmentation of the textness of the play. Reality and fantasy merge as the play goes on as everyone's lines begin to spiral from Tarlochan's control, and she becomes a player in her own play.

Within this reading, the play is a satirical yet merciless indictment of society. It showcases how each character approaches the problems posed by Tarlochan's divisive play *Gund*[24] in light of his or her own set of agendas[25]. Her representation of the events has a flavor of frantic bewilderment to them. At the same time, she weaves together a surprisingly empathetic portrayal which take into account the conflicting emotional, social, and racial positionality of the characters. Director Lisa Goldman explains, "It is not an angry rant about what happened, but it does have a satirical edge." In hearing from all the characters at various points in the play, the whole gamut of opinions about the controversy and its attendant repercussions is rendered transparent. What could potentially have been a diatribe against censorship actually explores the issue from multiple standpoints to dissect how issues of race, class, and religion all work

[24] *Gund* is Punjabi for dirt or filth. In Hindi it might also mean anus. The play, which is treated as filth by the Sikh protestors, is also named filth.

[25] This is made clear in the short trailer for the *Behud* posted on YouTube, where "talking head" style interview clips are used to present the spectrum of opinions and motivations of the characters involved in the play.

together to create a landscape within which the artist and her art can only exist in certain ways and not in others.

To read *Behud* and its textual organization with reference to *Behzti*'s own aborted performance aspiration offers a slightly different set of considerations. In making the textness of the play a visible and unavoidable aspect of its content or staging, provocation and its response are placed on stage as the subject matter rather than a precipitate reaction that is allowed to determine the textuality of the play. Tarlochan the playwright is a presence on stage visible to the audience alongside the characters she is writing and rewriting, weaving and walking around them as they initially do her bidding. Insomuch as she is herself a character in a play, she is also from the very start a character in her own play, whether she apprehends this or not. The illusion of her separateness from the text of her play slowly dissipates as her characters begin to interact with her directly, some displaying awareness of being in a playing and needing to follow her script and other treating her as part of the play. At one point, when Tarlochan states that she is "just putting these scenes, your scenes from *Gund* into a new play", it becomes clear that the textual (re)construction she is attempting is spinning a new narrative world around her in which she herself must become an unwilling participant.

While Tarlochan's arc is fascinating as a potential mirror into Bhatti's experience with *Behzti*, the latter has stated very clearly that *Behud* is "absolutely a work of imagination" and "absolutely not documentary, docudrama, account of what happened. What happened was far more surreal and weird and odd." Yet, there is not too much that is different between their experiences. Just as it does for Bhatti and *Behzti*, Tarlochan's *Gund* also becomes derailed by the controversy surrounding it. As a result of this, the story Tarlochan wants to tell—correspondingly, the story Bhatti told in her play—becomes overshadowed by the debates

relating to censorship, politics, death threats, police protection with one reviewer saying that *Behud* "like the events it parodies, struggles to be heard above the political and religious cacophony surrounding its performance" (Glanville 8). The attempts at censorship are not treated as distant or objective, but as deeply personal.

> The drama of the playwright Tarlochan's personal life – and the suppression of that drama on stage and within the community – is the heart of darkness in a skillfully constructed satire. Censorship is not just about the play that is cancelled or the book that is banned, it is about the wrongdoings that are buried in a society and which can destroy the lives of individuals… Until *Behzti* receives a proper staging in the UK, it will only be remembered as the play that was censored and not as the brilliant black comedy that exposes the consequences of repression. (Glanville 9)

The character's despair at the cancellation of her play reflects Bhatti's own devastation back then. In a sense, Bhatti is still trying to tell the story of *Behzti*, just as Tarlochan's play, which is burnt at the end, has to be rewritten. However, that is perhaps easier said than done—in choosing to write about the incident around *Behzti*'s cancellation, Bhatti resurrects a story and a situation with which she had not fully interacted even when it was actually happening[26]. This inaction manifests in the play for one reviewer, who laments Tarlochan's non-engagement with many of the stronger characters in the play thusly:

> I longed to see her fictional deputy engage with the Sikh elder who argues that the sacred temple is a long-cherished challenge to racist abuse. I also yearn for her to really take on the young militant who says she will be used by whites to make them feel multicultural.

[26] Other than releasing a statement, Bhatti did not appear in the media after the closure of *Behzti*. She went into hiding for an indeterminate period of time, then returned to writing for television and radio.

> There are big issues lurking within the play but the tricksy structure never gives them sufficient room to breathe.[27]

These observations sidesteps what the play actually manages to do through its "tricksy structure"—deconstruct the textuality of the play, making visible not only its own machinery but also the machinery of culture, religious and communal identity, and literary reception. While Tarlochan's plans in writing a play, and her reticence towards selecting a definitive ending for *Gund* might make her appear non-confrontational in the face of a play (and a cast of characters) who are set on forcing one, Bhatti's careful treatment of scenes from *Gund*—which appear separately but within which Tarlochan again becomes a participant—builds the context for its reception and reading from within her work.

To engage with them on the matter of censorship, religion, or race had the potential to devolve once more into the same protracted and futile discursive merry-go-round that was boarded with *Behzti*. Ignoring those pressing yet worn cues allowed the light to shine more clearly on the surrealism and strangeness of being in the position of writing one set of words only to realize another set of words keep replacing them. Tarlochan's creeping awareness that she herself is another character within the play very much reflects the authorial fear of misapprehending the text that is perhaps always already in progress.

Religious Pain and Feminist Resistance in *The Who and The What*

This question of confrontation and provocation appears again in the reception of Ayad Akhtar's play *The Who and The What*, the generally favorable reviews of which belie its potentially controversial subject matter. In fact, reviewers have commented on the choice of a comic tone

[27] Billington, Michael. "Behud: Beyond Belief." *The Guardian*, 30 Mar. 2010.

for a play about blasphemous writings on the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), wondering at how the choice diffuses some of the sharper commentary of the play. One such review, which in its title declares that this play "taps into an ancient conflict," the reviewer's summation of the play's subject matter reduces it to the following binaries that comprise the relationship between a traditionally religious father and the Harvard-educated intellectually charged daughter: "Old World versus New, sacred versus secular, and, particularly, a woman's place in the world—or, as he sees it, "What place?"" A Washington Post review of the Maryland staging identifies the portrayal of Afzal, the most conservative and traditionalist of the Muslim characters on stage, as the focus of most of the hilarity and lightness of the play: "Mirrcandani deftly conveys the adventurousness and exuberance that temper Afzal's conservatism: This character's complex personality—which sometimes bemuses his daughters—supplies many of the play's laughs and much of its considerable poignancy." It's as if Afzal's primary role in the conflict of the play required that his character be rendered less "dangerous" and "volatile" by his antics as a father embarrassingly involved his daughters' love lives.

The crux of this issue is demonstrated by Bill Marx on Art Fuse, who seems to imply that Akhtar did not do justice to a potentially explosive subject, opting instead to cloak a provocative premise in the cotton wool of family disfunction and humor in order to tread some safer middle ground away from the tough questions about religion and the intellectual. Instead of writing a play that begins a "discussion of how the values of Muslim immigrants challenge our Enlightenment belief in human rights" or questions the wisdom of "tolerating the intolerable," Marx claims Akhtar's play "softens up patriarchal authoritarianism by plugging it into a family comedy structure." The reviewer's language is quite derogatory towards Islam (finding no difference between the culturally patriarchal dimension of the play's Pakistani family setting and

its representation of religious difference within that setting) and refuses to see why a play with "no non-believing characters" with which to "provide perspective" presents a setting where competing understandings of Islam and its fractal points can take center stage. He seemed to be expecting some version of the liberal secular fantasy where female liberation and socio-cultural reformation can be incepted through the self-same characterization of religion in general and Islam in particular as (in his own words) "barbaric [in its] attitudes about women."

Setting aside the extremely regressive impression of Islam that underlies the reviewers' assessment of the play, they are not wrong in perceiving a muffled quality to the provocation attempted in this play. To read this text only through the prism of civilizational and generational conflict, or to solely imagine its questions to be centered around a brand of resistance to religiously sanctioned patriarchal domination overlooks the nuances and degrees of religious belief, practice, dissent, and exegetical engagement depicted by the play's slate of Muslim characters. For Ayad Akhtar, the question of staging or performing moral injury is raised, debated, and managed by and from within this community of Muslim characters, without sacrificing the political implications for religious hermeneutics, literary representation, or the patriarchal forces that dominate the former. That this mammoth task, as expressed through this play, did not find adequate legibility with its Western viewing audience, as evidenced by its lukewarm reception, confirms the need to consider closely the patterns of reading and interpretation that serve to maintain a lack of depth to understanding the religious dimensions explored in such texts.

The action of the play is organized around the dysfunctional dynamics within a Muslim family consisting of a widowed father Afzal with two daughters, Zarina and Mahwish. Each character presents a different thread through which the family's varying expressions and

understanding of their cultural and religious identity are relayed. Afzal's worries about Zarina, unmarried still at age 32, expresses itself through catfishing prospective husbands via an online dating profile. Meanwhile, Zarina is having difficulty completing her novel on what she tells her family is "gender politics," but is later revealed to be a fictionalized account of the Prophet's wedding to Zaynab bint Jahsh and the subsequent revelation of the veil. The much younger engaged Mahwish is shown to be struggling with the pressures of sexual fidelity and Islamic morality, appeasing her fiancé with premarital anal sex while continuing an increasingly intimate friendship with tutor Manuel. In the course of the play, Afzal introduces Zarina to a white revert imam named Eli, a gentle but steadfast man attracted to Zarina's passion for her intellectual subject matter, and they eventually marry. As the real subject matter of Zarina's novel becomes known to the family, the differences and fault lines between these characters explode in an ugly confrontation.

The playwright's commentary on his work provides some explicit primary threads along which the meaning and interpretation of its content can be approached. The author's note included with the text of the play highlights several key motivations that incept and direct the play's significance—a contemplation of the place of women in Islam and Muslim societies, the religious and patriarchal forces that mediate their experience as Muslims, and the choice of a comedic tone for a play that portrays these unfunny realities. Akhtar's initial idea of a Pakistani American take on *The Taming of the Shrew*—a comic representation of the gender politics within a conservative immigrant family—quickly merged with deeper more serious questions regarding religion, writing, and dissent. He observes that the choice of comedy for this play, while puzzling to some, seeks to infuse what might otherwise come across as bleak and joyless with "a key of hope." For Akhtar, the family setting and the conflicts described therein do not run counter to the

other less funny undercurrents of the play but are necessary to his project as a whole. This motivation resonates with at least some of the audience, as a review of the DC staging observes that the play "is a gentler sort, more interested in the possibility of his flawed characters finding a little bit of grace."

He is also deeply aware, though, that, on its own, Zarina's book is "no laughing matter." He describes it as "a humanizing, historically revisionist novel," which, within the drama of the family, operates for Zarina as "her instrument of rebellion" against her father's domineering personality and religiosity. But this instrument is one which, for Akhtar, inaugurates a different mode through which to consider, and perhaps even contest, what he sees as the "received portrait" of the figure of the Prophet as opposed to the man himself, a real representational distinction Akhtar is keenly interested in, but also wary of excavating. About the prospect of writing on the Prophet Muhammad in this vein, he states, "But any challenge to the received portrait we Muslims have of the Prophet is certainly not yet as primary a matter as the conflict that the challenge itself represents, a conflict familiar to us from the Rushdie affair and other similar controversies, and hardly the subject of comedy." In Akhtar's opinion, the very act or attempt to write the Prophet differently—"literarily" as opposed to factually or historically—is in itself the more provocative move, far outstripping the details of any representation that may be produced from such an attempt. This play, therefore, with Zarina's hand at the pen, emerges as a compromise to the perils of writing about Muhammad-the-man or as a representational literary character. In handing this task to Zarina, Akhtar's own hesitations about the task become externalized and the potential consequences of such a move are clearly represented through the action in the play.

While Akhtar's interest in depicting the Prophet as a literary figure admittedly draws inspiration from the kinds of depiction seen in the Old and New Testament, it runs counter to the experience and interest of a vast number of pious Muslims for whom the Prophet represents a habitus beyond or apart from Muhammad as a mere man or historical character. The playwright accounts for this form of religious devoutness within his text through the traditional male conservative Muslim Afzal. Afzal's character and his religious devotion very much reflect Saba Mahmoud's description of the assimilative model by which a relational figure of the Prophet emerges, one which is able to inspire and explain the violently negative reactions to the Jyllands-Posten cartoons incident. In her work on critique and secularity, Mahmoud's discussion of religious pain and injury elevates it from an irrational response to an alternate mode of ethical and religious engagement.

In her discussion of the framework through which "religious pain" and moral injury operates for Muslims with respect to specific kinds of speech or representations of the Prophet, Mahmoud quite clearly indicates that the relationship between the Prophet and his followers cannot be understood as being merely symbolic. In her own words, "Muhammed is not simply a proper noun referring to a particular historical figure but marks a relation of similitude. In this economy of signification, he is a figure of immanence in his constant exemplariness and is therefore not a referential sign that stands apart from an essence that it denotes" (76). Using the Aristotelian term *schesis*, she describe the process by which the Prophet becomes not only a figure of religious authority to be obeyed from afar but also a set of actions, commands, and behaviors through which proximity and intimacy to him can be established. To be religiously devoted is to aspire to such proximity and intimacy, creating an ontological condition for Muslim piety that centers a certain relational figure in the Prophet. In trying to explain why the reaction

from certain Muslims over the Danish cartoons escalated beyond protest into violence—as well as the commentary from other Muslim, and non-Muslims, regarding the "irrationality" of such reactions—Mahmoud clarifies that rather than Islamic aniconism, it is this unique and embodied experience of the Prophet that is felt as "religious pain," processed as it is like an attack on the very basis of religious sentiment and affect. "For many Muslims," she states, "the offense the cartoons committed was not against a moral interdiction (thou shalt not make images of Muhammed) but against a structure of affect, a habitus, that feels wounded" (78).

The Who and the What addresses this exact phenomenon on several levels, beginning with the central and titular conceit of the play explained by the playwright in terms of the difference and distance between "the who" of a thing versus "the what" of the thing. Citing a bifurcated concept of love described by the philosopher Jacques Derrida in the documentary *Derrida* (2002), Akhtar defines love along two modalities: loving "the what" of a person, i.e. their qualities, characteristics, their attitudes, all the describable articulable qualifiers which appear as them in the world, versus "the who", i.e. the person as they are, their inimitable often inarticulable singularity lying past their outward appearance to the world. As Zarina herself elaborates in the play:

> I have this sense of Mohammad, of *who* he was. We know all these things about the Prophet. Or think we do, details: he was an Arab, Aisha was his favorite wife, he had a gap between his teeth, whatever. And all the stories we hear, that have gotten told for hundreds of years, don't point to a real person. It's all like this monument to *what* we have made of him. But *who* he really was?
>
> We don't know. (24)

This translates quite clearly to Akhtar's own interest in considering the Prophet not just in terms of the habitus he forms for Muslim devotees across the world but in excavating the person behind that layer of religious authority and affective structure. If "the what" of the Prophet is everything that Saba Mahmoud in her analysis claims mobilizes people in specific contexts—what Zarina names "the monument" of the Prophet—then Akhtar hopes, through literature, to find the inarticulable singularity of the Prophet that seems missing. This project, in the context of the play, he defines by describing Zarina's writing as "trying to get to "the who" of the Prophet through the various "whats"—she's trying to penetrate beyond that," establishing the alternate vision and relation to religiosity that the play wishes to explore.

This concept of "the who" and "the what" also creates an organizational mode for the play itself to an extent, where every character is projected as a list of qualities, features, or relations, but their interior selves remain fluid and open to whatever interpretive mechanisms are applied to the play. The promotional campaign for Lincoln Center Theatre's production of the play included several interview style videos vignettes featuring the playwright in conversation with the actors, who detail for the audience "the what" of their characters separate from "the who", both as a means of introducing the characters prior to opening night, and also providing a road map for interpreting the play along certain prescribed lines of literary comparison. The degree to which the production anticipates the necessity for this type of mediation in the reception of the play demonstrates an awareness of the sensitivities its subject matter is trying to navigate.

Within the text of the play, each character demonstrates a variation in terms of their understanding of and relation to not just the Prophet but also scripture and religious practice itself. The type of proximity and intimacy described by Mahmoud appears primarily through the

character of Afzal, who encapsulates this type of relational understanding of the Prophet. Afzal in this play represents the section of the Islamic world for whom representations of the Prophet are mediated by this sort of habitation and attachment through which they experience and practice their religion. In his first meeting with Eli, he qualifies Zarina's identity as a Muslim through her perceived attachment to the Prophet: "My daughter is a good Muslim. She has fifteen biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Fifteen! All lined up in her bedroom." However, in choosing to also explicitly render Afzal's misogyny and seemingly culturally specific patriarchal attitudes, the play also observes the inextricable links between the male-centric nature of the exegetical tradition and the patriarchal mores that are often dismissed as being of "cultural" origin as opposed to directing and curating both the day-to-day experience of religion within communities and households but also religious scriptural interpretations. For the Jatt household, Afzal is the point of contact for his daughters for this kind of religiosity, and it affects their lives quite clearly.

Zarina's choice to write a novel and not a biography, to write something that would reveal "the who" rather than "the what," runs exactly counter to the assimilative model that Afzal enacts. In choosing a creative fictional form such as the novel, she chooses to adopt a representational mode through which Muhammad-the-person can precipitate in her text rather than "the Prophet." This choice is also invested with a specific ethical valence in the play, one that is in active resistance to the patriarchal forces shaping the established avenues for religious practice and engagement. For Zarina especially, the framework of "the who" and "the what" is one grounded in secular and literary modes of thinking within which she finds refuge from the patriarchally infected modes of religiosity modeled by her father. As a Harvard trained academic and writer, her approach to both religion, religious scripture, and writing is steeped in the

institutionalized reading practices which display a different set of hermeneutics to that of her father. While Afzal is very traditional in his religious devotion—praying, quoting the hadith, enjoining specific modes of behavior, dress, and etiquette on his daughters—Zarina's approach to religion is critical and complicated. When asked by her sister Mahwish if she does not fear *dozakh* (i.e. hell), she states, "I can't be scared of something I don't believe in" and "It's a metaphor […] for the cycle of human suffering." Her approach towards the Qur'an abstracts its contents, assuming a "beyond" to its content rather than literalizing it the way Mahwish or Afzal are seen doing. Her malleable relationship with scripture is further indexed by her later comments about the Qur'an, where she opines, "In a lot of ways, I think it might make more sense to see the Qur'an more as coming from Muhammad than God." While not quite categorically denying the divine nature of the Qur'an, it superimposes an anthropocentric significance to it, one where its reading and interpretation must account for its mediation through the human person that has been known to communicate its content. She therefore makes visible the possible contradictions between the position of the Prophet as a messenger and his position as an exemplar of that message in her refusal belief that the message remained sealed away from the messiness of his humanity.

The full thrust of Zarina's radical thinking is expressed on her first date with Eli, where he asks about her writing and she reluctantly reveals the real subject matter of her book. Her description of the Prophet as she explains her project clarifies not only her dissatisfaction with the existing modes of Islamic knowledge formation and transmission but also with the religious practices that proliferate as legitimate and enforced expressions of piety as a result of it. While Eli explains how he was drawn to Islam because of being exposed to it through inner city Black Muslims, reading of figures like Malcolm X, alongside gleaning a message of equality and

justice from scripture, Zarina expresses irritation at his perspective by saying, “All that stuff about Islam. Equality and all that bullshit. You didn’t have to grow up as a woman inside it” (22). Here she unequivocally contends that the ethos of the Qur’an and the religion as a whole, which the egalitarian Eli finds so attractive, does not reflect her material experience as a woman raised within a diasporic Islamic community.

Her objective in writing not yet another biography but a fictional novel instead stems from this need to counter the kinds of erasure she sees catalogued in the discourse about Islam, but especially within Islam. While there is no end to questions about the place of women in Islam being raised by parties for whom Islam poses some form of civilizational and existential threat, Zarina wishes to take that question seriously and institute an inquiry from within its foundational texts and exegetical materials[28]. She then relates the historical (and, let’s be clear, anecdotal) story around the Qur’anic verses revealing the command for women to use the hijab to make a case for its questionable nature. Beginning with citing a hadith from Tabari about the Prophet seeing Zaynab naked—which Eli is compelled to interject has been largely discredited within traditional Islamic scholarship—Zarina means to construct a narrative that can show “the different influences on the Prophet’s life. And how the Qur’an is the result of all these very human things that are happening to him. His problems with wives, his community, his anxieties…” (23). In response to Eli’s interjection she decries the selective curation of sources where certain contradictory, thorny, or potentially controversial aspects of early Muslim life may be depicted. Above the action of the play, at the center of its discourse, is the question of the

[28] Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who is one such figure who has been publicly and stridently critical of Islam, for many reasons alongside those related to a narrow understanding of women’s position and experience in Islamic communities, is directly mentioned in the play. Zarina and Eli both attended an event where she is the featured speaker.

Prophet as a man with flaws, desires, and doubts, versus the Prophet as an exemplary figure within Islam, fit only to be understood in the context of revelation and religious stricture. Zarina's fixation on unearthing the former through her fiction-writing, while reckoning with her disappointment and dissatisfaction with the latter, forms not only her character's central conflict, but even her external conflict with the other characters in the play.

Ultimately, the play engineers a confrontation between these varying practices, philosophies, and paradigms of religiosity attested by the different characters in a scene that simultaneously demonstrates the heterogeneity of belief within the Islamic community, even within the same family, while demarcating the points of intellectual and affective divergence that make an uncomplicated coexistence of those heterogenous beliefs impossible. The scene where Afzal confronts Zarina upon finally reading the finished manuscript of her novel is where the play sets aside its comedic tone to lay bare the charged secrets and familial resentments that underlie it. Even though the sharp contrast between each character's conceptualizations of religious practice and expression are made clear in bits and pieces in preceding scenes, here their views are organized around a single question—where is the line between the literary and the blasphemous and what is to be done when they overlap?

Afzal's shock at the contents of Zarina's novel stems from the excerpt he reads, the section of the work explicitly describing the moment the Prophet sees Zaynab and begins to struggle with sexual desire for a woman he cannot have:

> Mahwish: Do I still treat him like a boy? *he wonders as he pushes open the door to the courtyard.* Is that the cause of his strife with Zaynab? I know her feelings for me; I know my own for her. *He stops*. It is wrong for you to want her like this. There is something wrong with you.

Afzal *(Underneath): Tauba, Allah, Tauba…*

Mahwish *(Continuing without interruption): Approaching the door, he hears something inside. "Zayd?" he calls out to his son. There is no answer. He knocks. The door yawns open. There is Zaynab, Scurrying through the room, undressed.*

Mahwish stops. Looks up at her father, alarmed. Then goes on, suspiciously.

Mahwish (Cont'd): *"Come in, Father," she says. He has no words to reply. His stomach hurts with the pain of not having her. Through the window, he sees her, her breasts, full and startling…*

(Stopping)

Oh my God. (Akhtar 41)

Mahwish reading aloud this one portion of Zarina's writing is only the second of two excerpts of this novel's scandalous content that are read aloud in the play, i.e. it is the only access the audience receives to her novel as a text to be read and interpreted. Other than this, while the play takes pains to talk about the novel, its concept, its reception, its implications, the text of the novel is not made accessible to the audience any more than this. Truncating the novel's text in this manner to provide only a sampling is to an extent resulting from Akhtar's own awareness of the potentially inflammatory nature of this novel. This text-within-a-text nestled structure focuses the bulk of the attention towards the discourse created by the divisive novel and its reception by the different characters rather than the actual material of the text.

To say Mahwish and Afzal are both shocked by what they read is an understatement. Afzal's description of Zarina's manuscript ranges from "like that goddamn cancer" (particularly

hurtful as her mother died of said illness), “this darkness,” to “filth” (Akhtar, 46), while Mahwish laments the fact that she ever trusted her sister’s judgement when it is so obviously impaired for having written such a provocative text. That their commentary devolves into a shouting match full of insults and curses at both Eli and Zarina dramatizes the experience of religious pain, attempting to contain and project it from the play itself. Afzal reads the book as an attack on his beliefs and on a figure whom, through his faith practices, actions, and beliefs, he means to imitate/embody in his own life, from a person whom he believed experienced that figure with the same depth and in the same manner. To be confronted by even the possibility of the frailties of this figure is anathema to him, not just an act of blasphemy on Zarina’s part, but a wounding of his own religious practice.

It is Eli’s reaction that much more calmly and rationally yet insightfully articulates the dimension of Afzal’s reaction which the latter can only express in the most forceful terms. In his initial review of Zarina’s manuscript, he indicates how the legitimacy and primacy of the “what” of the Prophet, i.e. who has been in the lives and minds of Muslims all over the world, render the “who” of the Prophet well neigh illegible:

> Eli: Your portrayal of the Prophet is stunning, that searching quality, his constant self-questioning, his rich conflicted inner life. You really put me in the head of this man…
>
> Zarina: Which is what I was trying—
>
> Eli: But he’s nothing like the man I know. I didn’t recognize him, Zarina. I didn’t recognize the man I fell in love with when I became a Muslim. I mean the man in your book is overwhelmed. He’s not always clear if he’s hearing voices or going crazy or if it’s God speaking to him. He’s confused about his desires. We see him maneuvering for political advantage—

Zarina: And he's charismatic and inspiring and generous, too.

(Akhtar, 29)

If Afzal's is a reaction rooted in the emotional dimension of his relationship to the Prophet, Eli's highlights an intellectual premise behind that relationship as a kind of "knowing"—the presumed and enacted intimacy Mahmoud asserts that many devout Muslims feel towards him especially due to an impenetrable interiority created and maintained by traditional Islamic scholarship and hadith commentary. Zarina's rendering of that interiority in her creative fictionalization violates that knowledge and intimacy to the effect of inspiring not only an intense misrecognition but also anger and resentment. The divergence of Eli, Afzal, and Zarina's reading practices and forms of religious engagement become clear here—while for the former two, Zarina's novel threatens their religious engagement, for Zarina, the exploration of the Prophet's humanity and interiority is a form of recuperative religious engagement that she hopes can help reconcile herself to her faith, which she claims uses stories about the Prophet to hide and erase women.

The play takes great pains to frame Zarina's writing as a form of religious work and as an alternate expression of religiosity rather than merely a rejection of or resistance to religion itself, which becomes clear by the end of Act I. This last scene ends with Zarina and Afzal positioned on stage at the same time in two separate spaces, with her act of writing sharing the stage with Afzal's performance of his obligatory evening prayers (i.e. salat). As the lights rise up in transition from the previous section of the scene, Zarina is seated at the desk in her room writing on her computer:

Zarina (cont'd): How could he know if his thoughts were his own or his Lord's? Sometimes the voices he heard was soft—no, sometimes the voice he heard was *tender* and brought to mind his mother, the sweet long-missing comfort.

At times he could've sworn it was a woman speaking to him. He could have sworn the Lord was a woman.

(Pause)

Why did everyone need him to pretend he didn't have doubts? Why couldn't he show himself to them as he was?

As she continues…

Lights Up On—

Afzal. Laying out his prayer rug. For evening prayer. And as he begins praying,

Zarina, in her room, keeps writing:

Zarina (cont'd): If only he could forget the image of Zaynab's breasts. His desire for her was not to be avoided. For then they would all know what kind of man her truly was. Then they would know to turn not to him, a man, but to the Lord, their God.

Afzal bows and prostrates. (27)

This moment indicates the initial point at which the audience of the play first encounters the actual text of Zarina's novel—another moment where the audience's access to this seemingly transgressive text is being directed and curtailed by the text of Akhtar's play. The play-text intentionally frames the significance of her writing as well as what she is writing by presenting it in this partial, curated manner. By juxtaposing her creative, even speculative, engagement with established Prophetic history and Islamic narrational tradition with her father's more orthodox form of prayer and worship, the two are seemingly brought onto the same plane. While it is tempting to interpret this staging as projecting an oppositional or conflicting relationship between Zarina's writing and Afzal's praying, to do so is to read along the grain of frameworks that position the literary and the religious as contrasting approaches. The staging of this scene in

fact frames the literary as one more possible modality through which a kind of recuperative encounter with the religious can unfold.

Another axis of identity intersecting with that of the religious in this text, due especially to the diasporic context of the play's setting and background, is that of one's nationality or ethnicity. The characters' sense of who they are in relation to their beliefs is routed through their perception of themselves as shaped through their nationality. In a conversation with Eli, Afzal explains his understanding of his daughter in terms of her ethnic genealogy, her upbringing, and her education. He refers to his wife's rigidly conservative Pashtun family background, clarifying that while she never wore the veil, "the structure of that culture, the man at the center, that was in her bones." He declares that Zarina, while brilliant, educated in the US, independent in her thinking, had inherited in some sense her mother's need for a husband who would exert influence and power over her because she came from a cultural background where this was expected. This of course displays his own patriarchally constructed impressions of his daughter and her experience of her life. His assertion that "Zarina is not an American girl" is not only factually incorrect but also does not reflect Zarina's own estimation of her identity. Later during their confrontation, when he cites repeatedly that in places like Pakistan and the Frontier Province she would face violence and death for writing such a narrative, she counters by saying "we're not in the Frontier Province." Zarina is emboldened and empowered by her nationality and as an American ascribes to a particular ideology of free speech because of which her project is able to exist.

Akhtar confirms the importance of this dimension of the characters in an NPR interview, here he states that being American is also at the center of the identity politics of the play. To interviewer Qureshi's comment about how "the tension between tradition and evolution" is

central to Akhtar's works, the playwright responds, "The process of becoming American has to do with rupture and renewal. Rupture from the old world, renewal of the self in a New World. That self-creative capacity is what it means to be American in many ways. And I think that part of that rupture is the capacity to make fun of yourself. Is the capacity to criticize yourself." This rupture is a metaphor that works on several levels. In one sense, it institutes what reads as regressive binaries, where the "old world" is classified as morally rigid, patriarchally entrenched, and given to religious dogma, with the New World (i.e. America) provides an egalitarian and fluid landscape from where a break from that old world can be instituted. On an entirely different register, the idea of a rupture connotes a break with form and tradition, both in terms of Zarina's experiments with exegesis and form, as well as her work projecting an alternate expression of religiosity.

Ultimately, the diasporic immigrant identity of the writers in both these plays is crucial because it allows them to break out of old forms that constrain not only their own approach to their writing but also to invite controversy as the only path through which literary mediations of religiosity can unfold. Through Tarlochan's encounter with the intractability of the text she is writing, when considered alongside Zarina's reimagination of exegesis through fiction, both plays dramatize how these women reenvision the bounds of the text even as they reckon with the religious valence of their work. Bhatti and Akhtar, by curating their respective plays' engagement with religiosity, religious identity, and religious offense and staging them as a series of textual encounter—or even encounters with the limits of textuality—are similarly able to reframe the relationship between the religious and the literary as one of active negotiation and mutual advent.

Chapter 4

Religion and its Discontents:

Religiosity in Form and Space in *Khamosh Pani* and *Matir Moina*

The translation of religiosity for the cinematic screen relies upon visual and aural registers to bring together several conflicting, competing, or concurrent schemas of belief and practice. Even though film often appears to offer a mode of unmediated and complete representation, it remains equally susceptible to the absences and ambiguities through which religious experience exceeds dominant interpretative frameworks. This situation is particularly evident in the representation of women's religious practices, which often evade coherence within prevailing accounts. Sabiha Sumar's *Khamosh Pani* provides a compelling example. With its contrasting depiction of women's acts of devotion and male congregational prayer, the film reveals how Islamic nationalism and masculinist orthodoxy marginalize forms of women's religiosity grounded in private, domestic, and decentralized forms of religious participation, prayer, or observance. outside the visibility and comprehension of the dominant hegemonic mode of orthodox practice. Tareque Masud's *Matir Moyna* offers similar set of visual juxtapositions—spatial, formal, and cultural—transforming the film into a repository of performative art forms through which religion is encountered by a partially literate populace. As a result, film itself becomes a mediating form where the interplay between the religious and the literary can be visualized as a series of formal encounters and spatial mappings.

I connect *Khamosh Pani* and *Matir Moyna* in my analysis because their settings, while distinct and geographically disparate, populate the same political and historical plane,

experiencing from opposite directions the same rising tide of Islamic nationalism pre and post the Liberation War of 1971. Even as the former is set in West Pakistani Punjab while the latter is set in East Pakistan, they are each set during crucial periods of rising nationalist and Islamicist rhetoric at various tiers of politics and governance across these regions, with the films' action reflecting both Islamization and Islamicization as witnessed by its characters. Despite their geographical and cultural separation from each other, the events that unfold in both settings establish a continuity to the Islamic nationalism in Zia-ul-Haq era West Pakistan. By portraying its encroachment into the religious lives and practices of individual in the Punjabi village of Charki and an unnamed village in East Bengal, both filmmakers are able to trace the impact of politicization on a religious but communally diverse populace.

Both films present to its audience moments of social and political transformation through which the communities depicted in these films devolve from multi-religious, multicultural, and tolerant into a more orthodox, monocultural, and rigid society. While the texts do illustrate the role of a brand of state-sanctioned political Islam in promoting this transformation, they also raise questions of legitimacy and authenticity as it pertains to religious practice, instruction, and transmission against the backdrop of an unstable political climate. The problem is not just of a kind of politicized Islam that the perpetuates a "good religion"/"bad religion" model but rather the weaponization of Islam to satisfy the exclusionary impulses of nationalist identity formation through which one dominant orthodox mode of Islam erases and elides other more diffuse modes of religious transmission and participation. In fact, the binary of what constitutes legitimate religious practice versus what is "lesser" is bent to the service of that process of identity formation, and as a result delegitimizes forms and spaces that escape the regulatory machinery of a patriarchally inclined orthodoxy. These include, for instance, the kinds of rituals and activities

that take place within domestic and feminine spaces, as well as social and communal activities that become overridden with the label of "culture" and therefore can also be considered as separate from religion, irreligious, or accused of being "culturally contaminated". Film as a result becomes a form invested with the task of depicting these delegitimated modes of translation and transmission that face the delegitimating force of nationalist Islam in this time period.

In *Khamosh Pani*, Sabiha Sumar uses the characters of Ayesha and Salim to demonstrate the quiet existence of multiple, female-focused, spatially contained forms of religious observance and their slow elision by the rising state-sponsored male regulators. This transformation is threaded together with specific attention to the gendered quality of this transformation, focusing on the ways in which these periods of sociopolitical change contribute to the creation of specific gendered national subjects while indexing the erasure and ultimate non-subjectness of individuals that fall outside of a narrow nationalist paradigm. In *Matir Moina*, Tarek Masud showcases different types of folk and indigenous rural art forms in his film, to the extent that the film becomes a meditation on the relationship between performance or literary arts and religion as a set of performed and transmitted practices. Various scenes interspersed throughout the film that depict the intertwined nature of cultural and religious life in rural Bengal, juxtaposed against the spatial orthodoxing enclave of the madrasa, make a case for how religiosity in this region exists as a counterpoint to those that have been understood and legitimated as "Islamic" in certain discourses. The film poses the question of what counts as "authentic" when it comes to Islamic practices, texts, and modes of religious transmission or translation, but populates the plane with multiple spaces and agents through which religious instruction and habitus resists that question.

Set in the Pakistani border town of Charkhi, in 1979, *Khamosh Pani* traces how the violence and dislocation of the Partition reverberate across time through generations, placing the consequences of those events against the backdrop of rising religious nationalism. Through the film's central character, Ayesha, whose past as a Sikh woman in soon-to-be-split India and present as a Muslim mother in contemporary Pakistan comprise the primary conflict of the movie. Her life as a Muslim and an integrated member of the community is depicted not only through scenes where she is shown praying and teaching or reading the Qur'an but also through her interactions with the other women of the community during festivities and gatherings. The arrival of a particularly militant brand of religious nationalism, which takes hold after the arrival of two politically affiliated men from Lahore, seem to challenge this pattern of her life and renders her existence as a Muslim woman invisible and illegible for the townsfolk as well as for her own son.

This isn't to say that women's religiosity, such what is portrayed through Ayesha, did not already operate outside the reach of existing regulatory frameworks specifically because of the spaces where they operate and the individuals that participate in it. Ayesha's position in Charkhi is depicted in the film through her situatedness and connection to the social and religious fabric of the town. However, in keeping with the general mores of the time, she is shown to occupy specifically feminine and domestic spaces, where her activities and conversation are protected from masculine purview. There are two levels to this operation, both of which center on her family courtyard as a space interstitial to the workings of patriarchally influenced religious regulation. Firstly, as a widow, her guardianship and authority over her son remains largely unchallenged as it appears within the confines of their home. While this flipped gender dynamic (where the female elder holds guardianship of a younger male kin) is portrayed as unstable at

best and ineffective at worst, through Salim's general disregard of his mother's advice or admonishments, she is considered within her community as someone that speaks for her household and her son. Even though Salim's activities outside their home are not entirely within her control, she is apprised of his romantic relationship with Zubeida, his lay-about habits, and his lackluster prospects. It is within the courtyard, during meals and chores or at bedtime that she assumes the role of guardian over him and is able to dictate and shape certain aspects of his life.

On the second level, her courtyard and its gendered character facilitates specific forms of feminine religious practice and authority to operate parallel to its more general, visible, androcentric, and communal iterations. Her Arabic and Qur'an classes for the girlchildren of Charkhi take place within her family courtyard in the absence of her son, in a space that is hidden and protected from male eyes. The courtyard transforms from a space solely of the familial or the domestic to also that of alternate communal religious engagement that is gynocentric. Coupled with the fact that her own individual prayers are also visualized within the enclosed environs of the bedroom or yard, away from the sight of laypeople, Ayesha's home forms a new referent for the religious that collapses together the personal and the communal into the feminine. Her autonomy and movement within these spaces translates to a double authority that would traditionally be held in male hands—firstly over her son within the household as his sole guardian, and secondly over the girls she teaches as their intellectual and religious instructor. The latter situates her within the matrix of this community but also invests her with the power to interpret, translate, and transmit Qur'anic knowledge as well as curate its reception for a generation of young women. The very existence of her authority in these cases is contingent upon her evasion of patriarchal oversight—the death of Salim's father, and the setting of an *aangan* that her society acknowledges as existing outside of masculine influence. As the film

moves forward, these nodes of authority are shown to slowly erode, with her son's presence and jihadi indoctrination reasserting patriarchal oversight and masculine authority in that feminine space.

The main way in which the difference between Ayesha's piety and practice and the newer regime's orthodoxy is visually translated is through images and scenes of prayer. With female religiosity contained within the private domestic sphere, Ayesha's practices as a Muslim are not subjected to the scrutiny of the wider world or of traditional religious authorities, but the fact of her Muslimness is not contested until an express reason for it arrives. As the religious nationalist zeal of the town's male youth, including her son's, begin to rise, the scenes of male congregational prayer at the packed Charkhi mosque are juxtaposed against Ayesha's private and solitary praying, reinforcing her isolation in the face of a growing public conviction that her past as a Sikh woman makes her less of a Muslim. Her actions and practices over the span of decades before are erased in the face of a religious junta whose approach to women's Islamic behavior and practice center less around women's involvement in works of religious piety and more around ideologies of purity, protection, and female obedience. Ayesha's actual interpretive engagement with the Qur'an and its writings versus the image of the men's congregation—of uniformity and sameness in practice, belief, and action—create competing images of religiosity while highlighting their incommensurability.

The contrast is further delineated through the juxtaposition of scenes that take place in the mosque with one scene in particular at an open air outdoor dargah that creates a visual referent to women's religiosity, spaces of alternate religious authority, and worship activities. The dargah has long been studied as a site of gender fluid, egalitarian practice of religious authority and power, not only due to the disproportionate number of female devotees they attract, but also

because the spiritual leaders presiding over these places often tended to be women. The tradition of *pir-fakiri*, as well as the veneration of *pirzaade* lineages, while pushed firmly outside of what British colonial or orthodox Islamic discourses establish as "legitimate" worship, have been ubiquitous across the subcontinent, especially throughout North India and the Bengal. Scholars of religion who analyze these traditions, as a result, have raised questions about the "Islamic-ness" of these practices, expressing skepticism about the colonial consensus that these rituals are only a result of syncretization and proximity to Hindu ritual worship. This view has allowed them to discount the importance of these ritual practices and spaces, and as a result sideline the feminine agency and power that is accessible through the religious authority held by these practitioners. Carla Bellamy, for instance, categorizes these centers of religious practice and faith healing as "ambiguously Islamic," unable or unwilling to situate them squarely within the religion's central framework[29]. Shahab Ahmed, who cites Bellamy in his own evaluation of dargahs, considers them neither Islamic (i.e. conforming to Islamic theological and jurisprudential guidelines and edicts) nor Islamicate, (a term made popular by religious scholar Marshall Hodgson to indicate an origin from a society or culture that is predominantly Islamic), asserting how the existing definitions of Islam and the perceptions about it practices cannot fully encapsulate the dargah as a religiously relevant space[30]. Dargahs are, therefore, discursively on

[29] Bellamy, Carla. *The Powerful Ephemeral: Everyday Healing in an Ambiguously Islamic Place*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

[30] Historian of Islamic civilization Marshall Hodgeson in his seminal work *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* set forth a definition for the term "Islamicate" that has since been cited and debated within disciplines concerned with the history and development of Islam or Islamic cultures. He saw the need for an adjective that underscored the distinction between what is Islamic, i.e. pertaining to the religion itself, and that which "would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims" (59).

the edges of what coalesces coherently or legibly as being within Islam, whereas in practice, it is a part of many everyday Muslim lives across much of South Asia.

Scholars more attuned to the historical and sociological significance of these traditions, however, especially focus on them as practices that resist a host of dominant discourses and regulatory forces, including patriarchal masculinist gender biases, colonial understandings of religious power, as well as the traditional authoritarian prescriptive brand of Islam. The transgressive nature of these spaces, practices, and participants, as discussed in the anthropological works of Kelley Pemberton and Katherine Ewing, highlight how women in these spaces and through these ritual practices wield religious authority apart from those afforded them within the traditional orthodox frameworks. Pemberton's work specifically engages with the colonial discourse on *pir-muridi* and the figure of the *fakir*, which categorically defy many foundational concepts regarding how religious power and authority operate, but also outline how these early colonial discourses influenced later religious reformists to delegitimize *pir-fakiri* traditions. Pemberton asserts that Islamic reformers often identified women's participation in certain public acts of worship and veneration as the reason for the ambivalence towards if not outright rejection of these intercessory activities, explaining how female ritual agents are often seen as "operating outside of the "official" channels of negotiation between "source"... and supplicant" (144). In her words, "women's patronage of shrines and belief in intercession became for many Muslims reformers closely linked to the "legitimacy" of certain expressions of Sufism and the activities centered on Sufi shrines" (56).

The visualization of this space and its significance by the film reinforces these notions of the dargah as feminine, powerful in its oppositional positioning to the more traditional grand edifices of religious power, i.e. the mosque (or even the *gurdwara*). The simple small open

courtyard with crude whitewashed mud walls stands in clear contrast to the towering intricately etched and designed edifice of the mosque. With the tomb of the pir at its center under a shady tree, the courtyard is picturized as awash in sunlight. Ayesha and Zubeida's interaction in this dargah pictures them in an exposed yet protected public space outside the domestic sphere, an area that facilitates unmediated feminine engagement between the two women through a "homo-social space for worship and female bonding" (Kurain 112). The main purpose of the scene is to depict the two women in a scene of worship, expressing their desires through supplication at the *pir baba*'s tomb. The only other individual in the scene is a male caretaker who is disengaged from the proceedings, allowing the women's worship (ironically one that is based on saintly intercession) to ensue in a self-guided unstructured manner. The very last frame of this scene is also crucial—the dargah building and courtyard nestled in between green trees presents the structure as very much a part of the landscape rather than seeking to reorder it. It is a strong visual counterpoint to the clean and regimented lines of the mosque and *gurdwara*, both of

whose ideologies and spatial politics the film identifies as being hostile to women in general, and particularly to Ayesha.

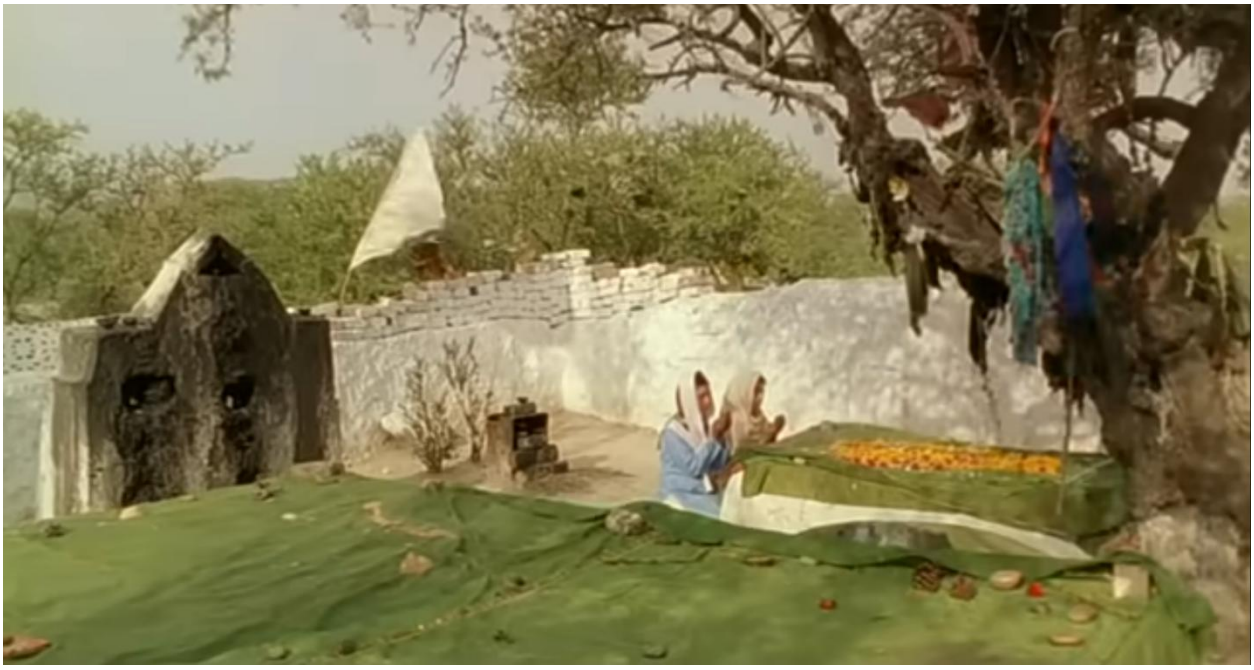


Figure 1. Ayesha and Zubeida praying at the dargah.

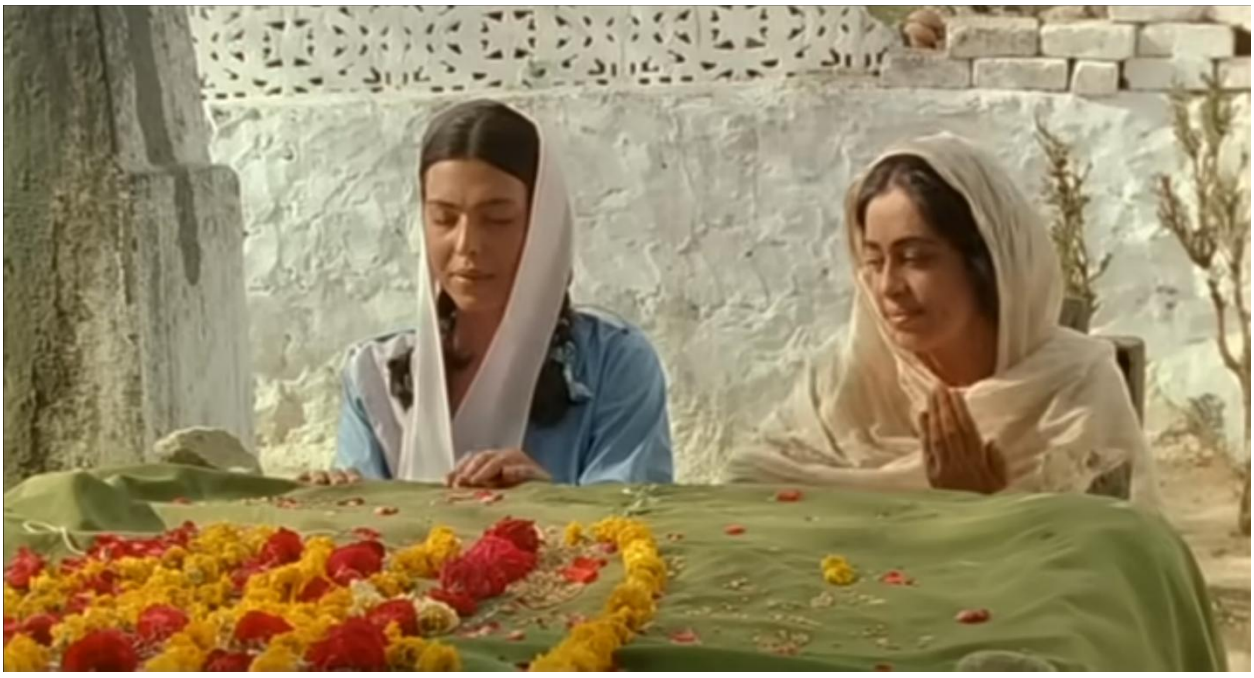


Figure 2. The dargah as a homo-social space.



Figure 3. The dargah as it stands amid the landscape.

In contrast to these spaces and buildings, the sanctioned houses of worship that symbolize the centers of orthodox religious authority appear within the visual field of the film differently. The *gurdwara* is only identified for the viewer through a set of associations that become clear in retrospect, with only a vaguely imposing white many-domed structure visible against the skyline at the beginning. It is only later, after the revelation of Ayesha's Sikh origins, that the preceding sepia-toned shot of a lone dusty well, voiced over by Ayesha describing the experience of the Partition and the violence directed towards women, helps to identify the building and its significance for Ayesha. Her statement, "*Tootiya yaada, adhoori khaab, rabb di ghar*" ("Broken memories, unfulfilled dreams, house of God") ends by panning up to the gilded white *gurdwara* that stands out amidst the panorama of worn and less well-maintained buildings. The structure of the mosque, however, is first picturized when the two Islamist revolutionaries from Lahore are introduced to the villagers by the Chaudhary of the village, harking the arrival of religious

nationalist ethos to this rural environment. The mosque's imposing front entrance becomes the backdrop against which the men make their case for a more Islamically directed nation-state, making explicit their support for General Zia's *Nizam-e-Mustapha* policies of Islamization. Even though there is initially resounding silence from the crowd of attendees, as they begin to chant the *takbīr* (i.e. the declaration of "Allah is great"), the crowd begins to galvanize and join in. While the political rhetoric is not solely able to mobilize the crowd's sympathies, their allegiance to this cause becomes easier in the face of a fundamental religious action such as reciting the *takbīr*. The final shot of the mosque with the chanting crowd arrayed before it is comparable to that of the *gurdwara* where it stands up and out from the landscape, with the aural field directing the meaning of the visual away from that of the straightforwardly religious to that of an aggressively politicized Islam.



Figure 4. The *gurdwara*, as it appears along the skyline.



Figure 5. The mosque as seen while the attendees chant the *takbīr*.

For Ayesha, who never enters either of these buildings and is not visualized in proximity to them, the *gurdwara* and the mosque present two distinct poles of identity. The former is a reminder of her life as Veero, a Sikh woman caught in the violence of the Partition, but also of the dominant ideology of honor within her Sikh community that required her female peers to jump into wells and die than be captured and raped by Muslim mobs. In her refusal to submit to this fate, she exercises a radical agency, braving rape and dislocation in order to survive and live on. At the other pole is the widowed Muslim mother Ayesha, whose transformation into an important integrated member of her Muslim community is challenged in the film by a growing religious orthodoxy whose predominantly androcentric ethos demands that she prove her allegiance to its patriarchally directed practices. In both cases, she finds herself at the mercy of religious structures whose patriarchal turn are enacted on her body.

The choice she is given by her newly radicalized son after her Sikh heritage is revealed raises the question of religious identity and authenticity and the authority that regulates this relationship. As stated by Salim, for the Islamist group he represents, the confirmation of an "authentic" Muslim identity necessitates a public declaration of belief (i.e. reciting the *al-shahāda* before witnesses) that can mitigate Ayesha's lack of Muslim lineage, something which makes her faith suspect in the eyes of Salim's peers. Ayesha's silence in the face of this demand is telling. The very question of confirming belief, becomes, in the newly radicalized environment of Islamicized Charkhi/Pakistan, a choice to become subject to a new form of religious nationalist patriarchy, one which will leave no space for the version of religiosity and practice that allowed a dislocated Veero to become a socially accepted communally assimilated Muslim Ayesha.

The scene where her form of religious practice and feminine religious authority begins to corrode, relegating it to the sphere of the heterodox and unacceptable, necessitates the incursion of the masculine and orthodox gaze—much more literally in the case of this scene, the earshot—into the space where Ayesha's authority has so far prevailed. Salim's initial interactions with the two proselytizers from Lahore ends with his arrival home, where his slight opening of the front door allows them all to overhear Ayesha's conversation with her students. During a session where Ayesha and the students recite the Arabic verses in order to memorize them, one student asks whether non-Muslims go to heaven, when another student interjects that they do not. Ayesha immediately corrects her misconception: "*Na beta. Jo bhi banda neki karega, woh Jannat vich javega. Allah di rehmat da koi hisaab nahi. Dil-a de haal Allah jaanda hai, jinu chahe baksh denda hai*." Translated, she says that any person that does good deeds (she uses the Urdu-influenced Indo-Persian term *neki*) will go to heaven, because God's mercy is endless and since

He knows what is in people's hearts, He forgives whoever He wishes. She renders what amounts to a theological judgement, settling a dispute between her *alem* about the finer interpretive nuances of scripture. Her opinion is not without basis in the scripture—the lines she and the students were reciting just prior to this discussion explicitly identify specific good deeds, such as aiding the poor, as actions that make one worthy of heaven. Her opinion actually reframes in a sense the category of Muslims by situating it not within the nationalist vision of *Nizam-e-Mustapha*, but within the text of the Qur'an with which she maintains close intimacy. This view of Islam, Muslims, and non-Muslims is of course against the politics of Salim's Islamist friends, who are invested in the transformation of what registers as Islamic devotion and religiosity. From the quieter, more diffuse, and feminine religious expressions that read as tolerant but are categorized as heterodoxical or delegitimized within this new paradigm, there is shift towards religious militancy (jihad) as the dominant notion of practice, a masculinist jingoist expression of religious identity encoded as participation in the religious nationalist patriarchy.



Figure 6. Ayesha with her students in her courtyard.

Matir Moina presents a similar rural landscape experiencing sociopolitical and religious transformations that pit certain forms of religiosity against each other in a bid to consolidate nationalist identity. The film follows the early life of Anu and his family, beginning with his sudden and forced enrollment into a madrasa by his devout father Kazi against the wishes of his mother Ayesha. As Anu slowly adjusts to living full time in an Islamic religious school, surrounded only by teachers and other boys his age, he bears witness to how the forces of nationalism and authoritarianism begin to encroach into the madrasa and his village, changing the established relationships between the individuals and the institutions that have governed his lifeworld.

The film is set during a crucial period of political and religious change in the history of Bengal, when the differences in the conceptualization of cultural and religious identity between East and West Pakistan incepted a struggle for political autonomy and national sovereignty. *Matir Moina* represents this struggle by qualifying it as a proposed binary between Bengaliness and Muslimness, with the characters in the film articulating their identities, practices, and political allegiances along these axes only for the film to underscore the binary as an arbitrary production which only partially describes the rural religious terrain (Haq). In fact, Masud's approach demonstrates not only that a vast majority of the population outside the metropoles experience what may be defined as both "cultural" and "religious," rather than one or the other, simultaneously through syncretized and mixed forms or activities, but that they are—at this turbulent time, but also extrapolating onwards from it—actively negotiating the debates regarding what qualifies as "*sahih tareekah*" (i.e. correct practice), what political conditions allow for Muslimness and Bengaliness to coexist, or for Bengaliness to even reshape the definitive structure and idea of Muslimness.

There are several conversations within the film that dramatize these nuances, allowing the film to become a cinematic addition to the discourse on Islam, Muslimness, practice, and politics. Anu's introduction to the environment of the madrasa delineates it as a space where the question of "correct practice" is central to its pedagogical model. Anu is given a haircut on his first day by one of the instructors who makes it a point to explain that the reason for it is closely tied to the dominant notion of what kind of personal habits visibly identify one as a Muslim as well as the perceived history of such habits. Initially he declares that the only people who keep their hair long are "*maiyya manush ar Hindu shadhu-ra*" (i.e. women folk and Hindu ascetics), separating the Muslim masculine from these distinctions in other categories. He then adds "*musolman fokir*" (i.e. Muslims that adopt a wandering ascetic life similar to that of Hindu sadhus but with a tradition that traces back across Central Asia) to the people who also keep long hair, but clarifies that they are influenced by the traditions followed by Hindu sadhus and have begun to follow a practice that goes against the Muslim creed. By asking "*taader lakhan najayaz torikha dhorsen naki?*" (i.e. "have you adopted illegitimate practices like them"), Anu is essentially informed not only that there exists a criteria through which one assumed the appearance and habits of a proper Muslim, but also that certain Muslims have absorbed the traits of other religious orders to the imperilment of their own religious identity.

In the way that the challenge posed by the prospect (and for certain characters in the film, the reality) of "cultural contamination" is particularly acute for a specific discrete vision of proper Muslimness, and the idea of Bengaliness, as it pertains to the politics of the time, also faces the specter in a sense of "intellectual contamination" precipitated by a history of colonialism and imperialism. In a moment when East Pakistan was slowly rousing to the necessity for secession from West Pakistan, under the need for a concrete national identity is the

recognition of a history of mixed nations and origins. While Milon and his friends, who are comprised of Bengalis but both Muslims and Hindus, are discussing the details of political and economic autonomy as demanded by the East Pakistanis in the months preceding the start of the war, one of them comments on the fact that Milon's Marxist sympathies and liberatory language is as much a Western import as the machinery of imperialism and fascism that they have aligned themselves against. BY identifying Milon's pious brother Kazi's homeopathic medical training as also of German origin, they point out the fact that Milon and Kazi, even in their differences, are steeped in traditions, ideologies, practices, and convictions whose origins most would label foreign. This comment perforates the seeming binary between Milon's secularist Marxist ethos and Kazi's orthodox Islamist world view by identifying them as inheritors of an evolving set of regional conditions where the confrontation and convergence of various political and ideological frameworks created traditions of belief and practice that often exceed their discursive categories.

In response to his friends' observations, Milon pronounces "Pure *deshal boley kono jinish nai, shob-ee meshal*" (i.e. "there is no such thing as purely indigenous, everything is mixed"), articulating the lived postcolonial reality which complicates a proposed binary between Muslimness and Bengaliness, or even a stable definition of the "Bangladeshiness" to come. Even though the scene is one of jovial debate between friends, it's important to note what it represents—a kind of political reflexivity that allows for a more complex understanding of the politically active youth of the time, their political investments, the sources of their ideological stances, and the pragmatics of employing such vocabulary to analyze and understand their existing political climate. At the same time, it also conveys an awareness of the incapacity of such markedly foreign discourses to fully encapsulate the mixed, heterogenous, fluid identities, practices, customs, and commitments in this region. Milon's proposed binary of "*deshal*" (native

to the region, or indigenous to a place) and "*meshal*" (mixed, diluted, or adulterated) is ironic in this sense as the dynamic of this group and their discourse as represented underscores that what is "*deshal*" about this region is the "*meshal*" characteristic to its identity politics, religious topography, formal landscape, cultural as well as linguistic spheres.

The entanglements between the linguistic, the religious, and the cultural can be traced quite clearly in a scene where Anu's good friend Rokon receives feedback from his instructor about his progress in class and is informed that his language skills are uneven and below expectations. Multilingualism and translation in Islamic religious scholarship is a necessary pedagogical mode given that much of the scriptural texts the students must memorize and learn are in Arabic, making translation and learning of the languages of scripture (Classical Arabic) and the exegetical works (sometimes in Classical Persian and Urdu) important to their training as experts in religious doctrine and practice. While one imagines that this outlines the madrasa space as itself an arena of "mixture," the scene not only demonstrates orthodoxy in praxis but also reveals the Arabocentrism this approach promotes, and the irony of the rhetoric of "pure practice" that has been attached to it. Because Rokon's Urdu, for instance, is riddled with Bengali words, there is an implication that his tongue is not pure. The mixture of Urdu and Bangla—a politically inflected metaphor for East Pakistan's ongoing struggle with West Pakistan as well as a direct reflection of the actual East Pakistani linguistic reality—is labeled egregious by the instructor, displaying a conflation between the purity of language and the correctness of religious practice as endorsed by the institution. The irony appears in the instructor's own mixed cant, where his sentences often include words of Arabic and Urdu origins instead of words from Bengali, betraying its own kind of "*meshal*" language. The inevitability of such mixture escapes his notice or understanding, but it presents Bengaliness as an unavoidable reality for the madrasa

to contend with, at the very least on the level of language. For even as the students are taught three different languages that are not their primary one, the language of instruction remains Bengali out of necessity. In this sense, *meshal* might be painted as undesirable and given to irreligiousness, but still very much a feature of the students' lives in the madrasa space.

This inexactitude of language is also used to expose the illegibility of the individual and of the lived realities outside its boundaries, not only within the madrasa as a rigid pedagogical space but as an institution that expresses a tendency towards orthodoxy. When Rokon is criticized for the terrible state of his Urdu lessons, as opposed to his much better Arabic grades, Rokon replies that he likes Arabic as a language much better than Urdu, using the words "*posondo*" and "*bhalo lagena*" to describe his feelings. In response, his instructor angrily discourages this line of thinking, stating "*konda bhalo, konda mondo, eida kowar tumi keda?*" which directly translates to "who are you to say what is good and what is bad?" The translation of this second sentence in English actually reveals a strange slippage in the meaning of the word "*bhalo*" (i.e. a word that connotes "good" or "well"), by showcasing the difference between "*bhalo lagena*" (i.e. to dislike something) and "*bhalo mondo*" (i.e. the judgement of what is good or bad). Rokon's comment about his linguistic preference does not find purchase with the instructor, who, as an agent of the institution, can only register "the good" within the definitions of correctness that form the ideological, pedagogical, and theological grounds on which both his authority and his episteme stand.

This question of Muslimness and "correct practice" of course brings to the fore the matter of orthodoxy as defined by Talal Asad and the complications it presents for a coherent vision of Islam within a landscape where the prevalent practices and religious topography is replete with such diverse customs and conventions attached to religiosity that the establishment or imposition

of orthodoxy is undermined by it. In the context of this region at this time, when the populace in East and West Pakistan are in the process of actively consolidating their identities separately from one another, the film depicts how the understanding of Muslimness threatens to shift from the axes of Muslim and not Muslim enough, to Muslim and not Muslim at all, but the geopolitics of the region are implicated in this transformation rather than it being a tendency that emerges organically within the populace. The *meshal* of the language that this orthodoxically inclined space of the madrasa, or even orthodoxy in general, cannot tolerate or does not allow to stand, but reflects the lived reality of its Muslim populace, shows exactly what Shahab Ahmed discusses as his critique of Talal Asad. This film does not so much depict a resistance to orthodoxy as it reflects what Ahmed believes is characteristic of the Balkans to Bengal complex that defies Asadian notions of orthodoxy in Islam— where "the prevalent Muslim notion of Islam was a discursive tendency that was simply not oriented to orthodoxy." (Ahmed 276). The linguistic complexities that intrude even into the orthodoxical enclave of the madrasa underscore Bengaliness less as a traceable discrete identity and more as a condition under which certain permeabilities between terms such as culture, religion, secularism (in its "religious tolerance" and "religious neutrality" definition) find its limits.

It is not surprising therefore that religiosity as it emanates from this condition must do so through forms that emerge out of the traditions outside of what the orthodoxically bound space of the madrasa have to offer. The film addresses the madrasa's spatiality through visuals that reinforce the paradoxes of hierarchy that overlay its theological and pedagogical goals. Classroom scenes are depicted through a shot reverse shot arrangement, where the instructor's positioning at the head of the room can be visualized from the perspective of the students' facing him, as well as from behind him, framing the view of the students from his perspective. This

movement between the shot angles, coupled with the fact that everyone in the room is seated on the floor at the same viewing level, visually project Islam's ethos of equality between believers. At the same time, the categorical divisions between student and instructor, *alem* and *hujur*, undermines this ethos through the interactions between the characters. The instructional mode reinforces this hierarchy, with the scenes where the details of Islamic knowledge and its attendant ideas are delivered by the instructor for the students to memorize, repeat, and replicate as exactly as possible. The scene where the story of the Miʿrāj is related to the students is one such scene which demonstrates the madrasa's instructional modality, describing the theological and scriptural basis for the rituals and actions that comprise their everyday religious life. It also models for the audience what "narration" may typically mean within the context of Islamic religious training. The entire scene comprises of Ibrahim *hujur* detailing the story of the Miʿrāj in order to explain the reason why Muslims are required to pray five times a day. The story as narrated does not serve too many details regarding the Miʿrāj itself, which is one of the most mysterious and mystical events written in the Qur'an and has been discussed within many scholarly circles. Instead, the mystical and spiritual dimensions of the story are sidestepped to emphasize one of the juridical effects of this visit, where the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is told his followers must pray five times a day. The parts of the story that tend towards the imaginative or the speculative—the night journey on a celestial creature, ascending through the seven heavens, being conducted into the Divine Presence, etc.—are carefully left out of the instructional space, with only the prescriptive dimension of the story and its importance to be impressed upon the students. Narration, especially as depicted within these madrasa classrooms, become utilitarian as modes of transmission of a particular brand of practice rather than of the kind of "discursive tradition" that Islam and its scholarship has been known to contain.

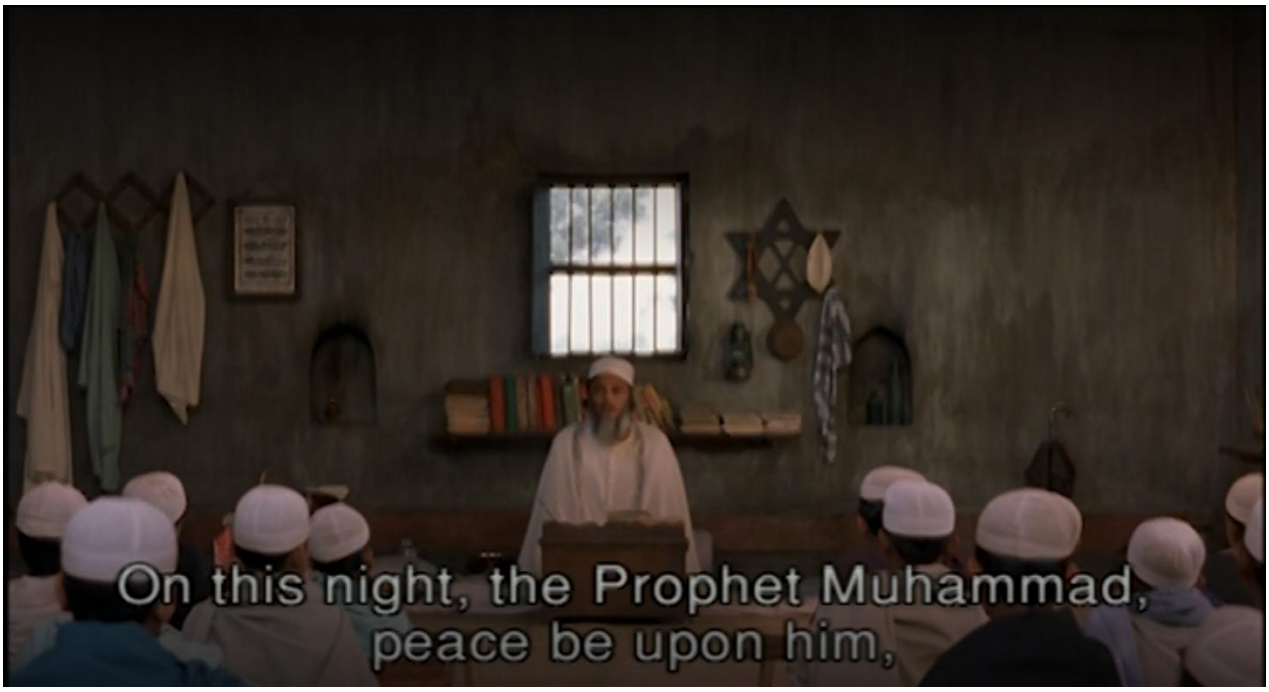


Figure 7. Ibrahim *hujur* at the head of the class speaking about the Miʿrāj.



Figure 8. The madrasa classroom shot from the students' perspective.



Figure 9. The students as seen by the instructor.

The sequence in the film where Anu is taken by his uncle Milon to attend a *puthi* reading offers an alternate setting through which the transmission of Islam can take place, exemplifying the film's meditation on religiosity, literariness, and form. While "*puthi*" literally translates to "manuscript" or "book", it also refers to a type of folk literary form from the Bengal region, dating as far back as the 15th century, which portrays traditional folk and religious stories in vernacular languages and dialects such as Bangla, using lyrical or poetic meter with the intention of being performed or recited for an audience. Although academic scholarship on *puthi* manuscripts have been largely confined within the discipline of history, anthropology, and folk culture, where they have been analyzed more often as historized artefacts of cultural significance for specific periods in the Bengal rather than as organized literary texts, in more recent years, with the compilation, publication, and translation of older *puthi* texts into more organized collections, they find themselves situated uncomfortably at the intersection of several

disciplinary and scholarly lines of inquiry[31]. The earliest *puthi* texts provide vital clues to pre-colonial popular print culture, the development of syncretized literary forms, and as well as important modes of transmission for Islamic belief and practices across Bengal. Masud's inclusion of a *puthi-paath* performance in this film nestles it into the fabric of village life as well as emphasizing the religious character of its themes and subject matter.

The religious character of the performance is quite subtly yet clearly intertwined in the scene. On the eve of Eid-ul-Adha (i.e. the sacrificial Eid), a number of villagers are shown gathering to listen to a *puthi* reader narrating the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, the foundational story commemorated by the imminent religious holiday. The scene is conspicuous in its parallels to the classroom tableaus from the madrasa. Even as the reader of the *puthi* is seated on the floor facing the audience mirroring the madrasa classes, the performance aspect of the setting is made clearer by the diffused lighting, where a single candle illuminates the reader and his manuscript drawing the audience's focus. As the reading proceeds, the reader relates the story of Abraham's realization that he must take his son away from home in order to sacrifice him as dictated by God. Recited in a musical rhythmic tone, the rhyming couplets linger on the emotions of the characters in the story as they prepare to do what they see as their religious duty using nature metaphors and imagery to reflect these emotions.

The *puthi* itself exists as a text on two planes. Firstly, it is a written text in a vernacular language, accessible to anyone able to read the Bangla script. Secondly, it exists on the aural

[31] Its position within performance and music studies has been cemented by Karunamaya Goswami's inclusion of *puthi-paath* in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, where it is situated within the corpus of musical forms. However, ethnomusicologist David M. Kane's work on *puthi-pora* identifies it as a form of performance distinct from music, song, or recitation, describing it as "melodic reading", carrying the qualities of chanting, melody, meter, and rhythm into the act of reading.

plane, as a recited text, accessible to any speaker of Bangla, regardless of their literacy. In putting the recitation to film as a performance before an assembled audience, the performance and its effects are rendered through the visual plane, adding, identifying, and documenting a third dimension to the *puthi*'s textuality. The film catalogues a particular set of reactions and experiences that are important in framing the literary and the religious character of the *puthi* as a text. The sequence edits together quick medium shots of the reader with close-up shots of the audience listening as the story is narrated, focusing closely enough to be able to see specific attendees nodding along, tearing up, or even swaying with the words. This choice reinforces the oral-aural dimension of the *puthi*-reading performance form, but by turning the camera towards the audience, the film does not situate its own viewers squarely with the audience for the *puthi-paath*, but prompts them to witness the performance as an affecting event experienced by its attendees. This visual arrangement maintains the melodic aural attribute of the *puthi* as a recited

text—with the verses being read over the shots of the audience absorbing and reacting to the lines—while drawing visual focus to the text's eventness.

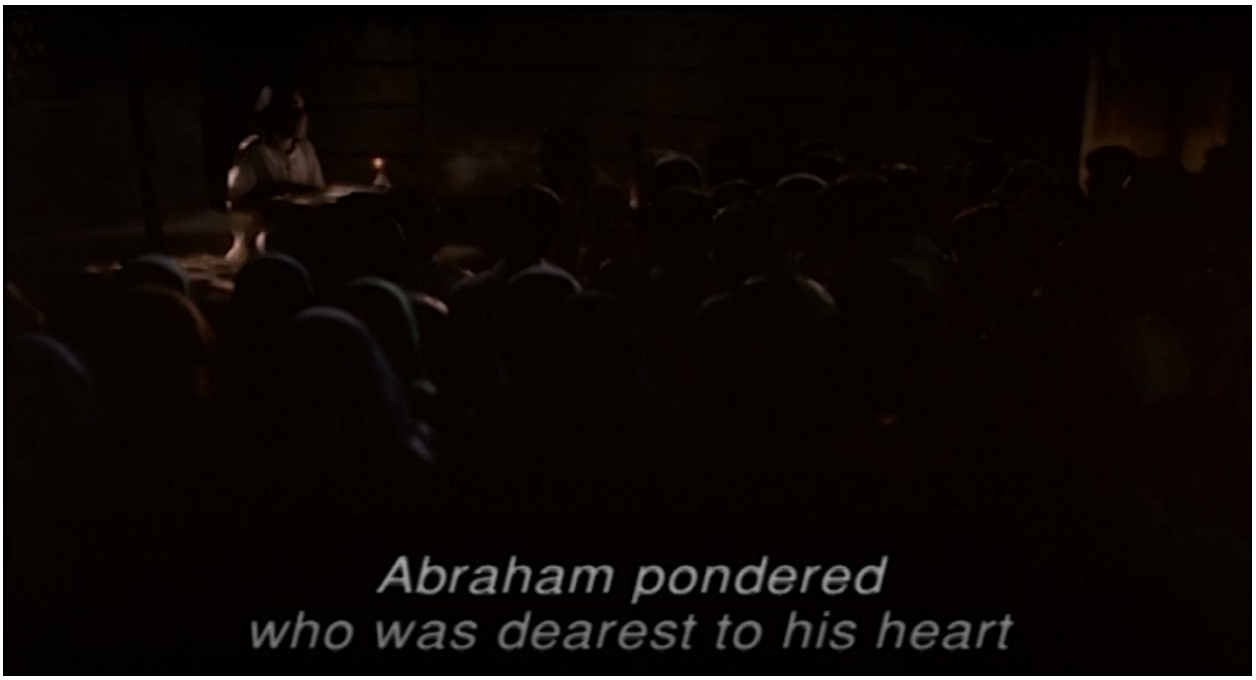


Figure 10. The *puthi* reader and his audience.

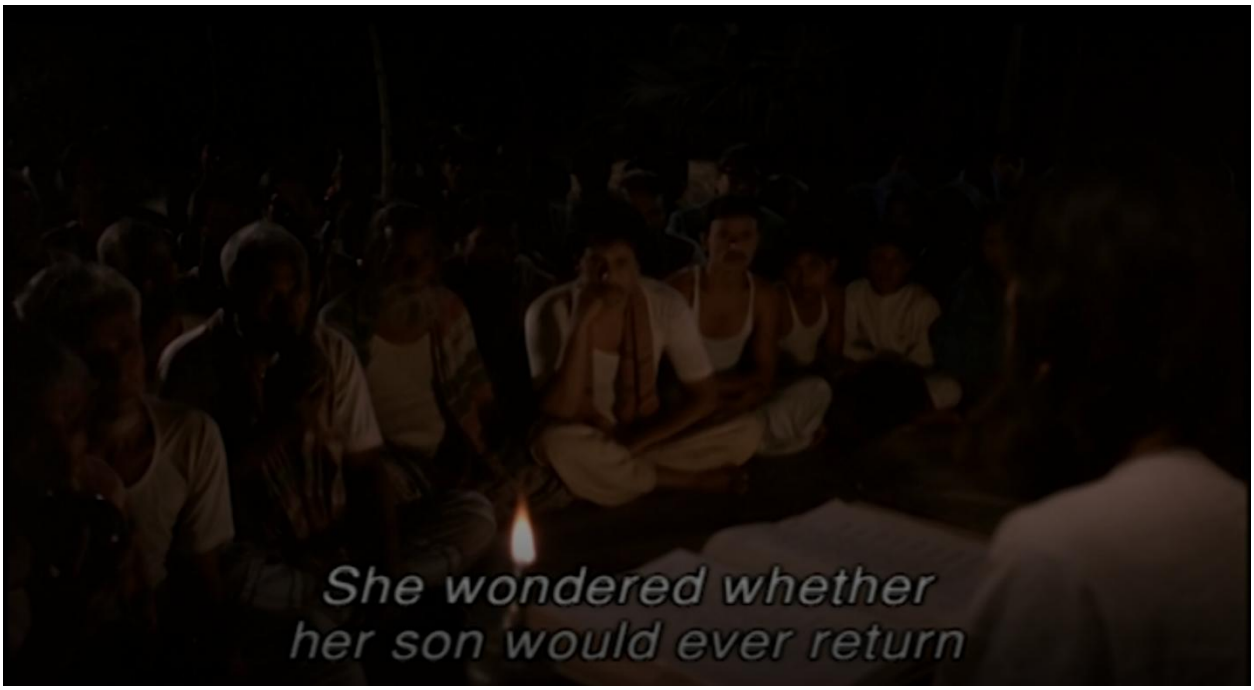


Figure 11. Medium shot framing the audience and their expressions.



Figure 12. Close up shot of a female audience member.

The story as related by this particular *puthi* itself produces several counterpoints to the way in which the story of Abraham's sacrifice usually appears in scriptural texts. The scene begins with the reader narrating Abraham's realization that God's edict to sacrifice his "*praan priyo dhon*" (i.e. "his dearest one") referred to his son, who remains unnamed in the recitation. Apart from this initial naming of Abraham, the rest of the recitation refers to the characters within it through their kinship connection to each other —*pita*, *chhele*, *ma*, *abba-jan*, *putro*, *ma-jononi*, etc. heighten the emotional effect of the story by underscoring the familial relationships that are stake in the story. It takes the specifics of this story from the Islamic corpus and translates it for a broader audience by enhancing the universally accessible nodes of family, sacrifice, loss, and duty. A character added to this version of the story that reinforces this idea is the figure of the mother whose son is being taken away to be sacrificed. While most references to and analysis of the story of Abraham within scriptural text centers the father-son pair (with God as a third masculine presence), the *puthi*-text consciously introduces the mother into the

narrative, inserting the feminine into the male-centric tale. Her anxiety about the fate of her son is explicitly outlined by the reader, with the lines about the mother's fear and grief paired with close-up dimly illuminated shots of *ghumta*-clad teary-eyed women in the audience. The *puthi* verses create a space for feminine interiority by describing the inner turmoil of a mother separated from her son, with the film stressing this point through its visualization of an audience being invited into that interiority within the context of an oft-told, but now recast, religious tale.

The parallel created here between the unnamed mother in the *puthi* narrative and Anu's mother Ayesha in the film is also notable for its simultaneous reflection and foreshadowing of the ongoing narrative within the film. Ayesha's depiction as a mother whose lack of power and autonomy within her family and home is peppered with the departure of her children from her side. Anu is taken by Kazi from their family home to be enrolled into a madrasa, in disregard of Ayesha's feelings or desires, while her daughter Asma dies of prolonged illness due to Kazi's eschewing of modern medicine in preference for homeopathic and faith-based healing. The unnamed mother in the *puthi* story represents to an extent Ayesha's own helplessness against structures of religion and family, as well as the patriarchal forces that engineer her loss.

Both films' visual juxtaposition of spaces, ritual observance and performance forms allows diverse, often times conflicting or seemingly incompatible modalities of religious participation and expression to coexist on the same place, even as the films' plot and subject matter highlight religion remains a problem reducible to its iterations within regional political and nationalist discourses. It is the simultaneity of these two frictioning registers that generates religiosity in excess of its categorical dimension within dominant discourses.

Conclusion

Religiosity at the Limit of Aesthetic Form

A striking detail from Deepa Mehta's famous and controversial, film *Water* brings the illegibility of religiosity, especially women's religiosity, within nationalist discourses to the fore through a seemingly romantic scene between the idealistic Gandhian Narayan and the widowed but sexually exploited Kalyani. In response to Narayan's observation of the difficulties and deprivations of Kalyani's scripturally imposed ascetism, she quotes Krishna from the Bhagavad-gītā: "padma-patram ivāmbhasā" (like a lotus leaf untouched by the water). That Kalyani can claim to remain untouched by the hardships of her life—some due to extreme religious edicts, some due to patriarchal and class corruption, all of which are outside of her control—is unfathomable to Narayan, who responds by saying, "Krishna was a God, Kalyani. Not everyone can live like a lotus leaf."

Narayan's fundamental misunderstanding of Kalyani's piety in this moment is overshadowed by the romantic tone cinematically encoded into the scene. The close confines of a carriage where they illicitly meet, their hushed voices, and the swelling lute music as he promises to eventually take her away from her difficult life allow Kalyani's religious conviction and practice to be subsumed by Narayan's Gandhi-inspired vision of righteous reform and the possibilities of a new nation. In this scene, the film deploys its formal machinery to push forth this notion of hope for the couple, downplaying what appears later in the film to be the irreconcilable problem Kalyani faces. There is no space, consideration, or visibility for someone like Kalyani within the liberatory discourses Narayan proudly and naively endorses, a realization

which later in the film drives Kalyani to drown herself in the holy Ganges. Her complete silence in her final sequences within the film highlights but ultimately preserves her opacity. The film's indictment of the religious, patriarchal, and economic forces that engineer brutal lives for abandoned widows in such ashrams also underscore the inability of these discourses—and even of the film itself—to conceive of Kalyani as a subject whose interiority as a pious individual can be coherently represented.

Mehta's treatment of the complicated relationships between religious orthodoxy, nationalism, and women's religiosity reinforces the central preoccupation of this dissertation with the place of aesthetic form in rendering these relationships. Reading religion within a text means relying on established vocabulary that allow the specific aesthetics of that form to become perceptible. However, to what extent those very features can help illuminate religiosity in its experiential and lived dimension, or at the very least highlight the moments of its obscurity within a given aesthetic structure depends on adopting a double vision by which the existing epistemes and methodologies used to read the religious and the literary must expand to consider



Figure 13. Narayan and Kalyani meet in secret in the carriage.

the religious itself as an epistemic frame that can help mitigate some of the eliding impulses of prevalent reading practices.

In its examination of religiosity as it pervades through several aesthetic forms, this dissertation has tried to investigate what happens to literary and visual forms when they attempt to accommodate religiosity or religious identity in ways that challenge dominant discourses that have a hand in shaping these categories. With each chapter it becomes apparent that considering religion as an episteme while being attentive to how language and structure of literary criticism and form address these texts, is crucial to the reading of these texts. It is through this double vision that the moments of formal distortion and the intertextual permeabilities within them can be explained both as the struggle of different aesthetic forms to construct religiosity as a literary experience, as well as to highlight in what ways the literary is unequal to the task.

The collaboration between literary and religious epistemologies and methodologies is necessary because each on its own remains inadequate in holding the many ways in which religiosity can refracts within aesthetic forms. While the literary tends to be implicated and directed by liberal secular frameworks that often delimit the ways in which religiosity can be apprehended within a text, the religious as an episteme on its own also practices its own elisions, especially when it comes to Islam, due to its focus on the prescriptive and juridical structures that characterize Islam within religious anthropology and Islamic studies discourses. In primarily seeking to categorize what does or does not constitute as legitimate or sanctioned practice or belief, definitions of Islamic religiosity become much too closely tied to a notion of the orthodox, rendering many crucial and embedded expressions of religious piety in different regions heterodoxical or even heretical. The function of the literary as a set of forms, methods, and structures that can hold multiplicity of meanings, paradoxes of thought, and overlapping

registers, can become a space where the orthodoxical operations of a religion such as Islam can be examined anew without diminishing the embedded and embodied practices that at times challenge and at times supplement those operations. The literary therefore has the potential to recuperate these practices from being trapped in that orthodox-heterodox binary because it is able to carry and project multiplicity through different aesthetic forms, variations on forms, or even contrivances and breaks within forms.

The formal strategies adopted by these writers, poets, and filmmakers across these specific texts model potential ways that textuality itself is molded and altered through its conversation with religiosity. We see how the novel struggled to create a fully accessible interiority for the religious, using slippage and overlap of language or perspectives in order to gesture to what lies beyond the novel's indexicality. Poetry, however, as a form classically intertwined with the Islamic tradition, is able to not only highlight the missing female voices and consciousnesses within its religious and scriptural scholarship, but also stitch together what appear to be contradictory or conflicting dimensions of Islamic diasporic identity in the anthology format, to validate and showcase its fractured fragmented nature. Even as the play dramatizes certain literary questions regarding the relationship between religious identity and literary representations, alongside how the two are read, can be read, and sometimes resist being read under liberal secularist paradigms, the stage also serves as a ground for negotiation between the writer and the text, especially when the latter's literary and religious import are at odds with each other. Film mediates religiosity through formal and spatial encounters put together using visual juxtaposition and framing, allowing multiple and seemingly incommensurate religious practices to inhabit the same plane without diminishing or redirecting the erasures and obliquity perpetrated on them by dominant discourses of nation, nationalism, and women's agency.

Examination of each aesthetic form separately, but by keeping this reciprocal relationship between the religious and the literary as it appears in these forms at the forefront of that analysis, allows different dimensions of religious experience to find purchase in the language and structure of literary criticism. Aesthetic form constructs religiosity as a literary experience that serves as an alternate one to what coalesces as religion within dominant discourses that seek to define it. But this construction does not occur uniformly across these different forms, but only through formal distortions specific to each form.

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