

## (Re)Reading Fawzia Afzal-Khan's *Lahore With Love*: Class and the Ethics of Memoir

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*Unfortunately, the positive attention [the book] was garnering upset a well-known theatre personality in Pakistan, who sent a letter threatening legal action against the publishers and myself for libel, unless the book were immediately removed from the market. ... Without looking into the merits of her claims, and instead of standing by me, their author, Syracuse chose to cave in to her demands, on the basis of claims that by any reasonable judgement are both frivolous and unprovable (sic). ... ORDER MY BOOK IF YOU BELIEVE IN FREE SPEECH!! Support my labor of love--which is how I see my memoir, a love-letter to a Pakistan that has sadly vanished... (emphasis in original)*

Thus, on her personal website, the postcolonial scholar Fawzia Afzal-Khan explains the reasons for Syracuse University Press's cancellation of her contract, just months after the publication in March 2010 of her memoir, *Lahore With Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends, Pakistani-Style*.<sup>1</sup> Her book, as the website also informs readers, will henceforth be self-published and sold via internet booksellers such as Amazon.com. To counter what she describes as a violation of her freedom of speech, she has made freely available on her website the entire "offending chapter" (the fifth in her book, entitled "Mad/medea") which apparently occasioned these difficulties (though Afzal-Khan also implies that her unnamed antagonist was more "jealous of the "positive attention" the book was receiving than "upset" by negative revelations about herself). This memoir of the author's middle-class girlhood in the 1960's and 70's in Lahore, Pakistan, as recollected from the perspective of a middle-aged American academic, comprises an introduction, an epilogue, and five chapters. Each chapter, with the exception of the fourth, revolves around a different female friend. The chapter "Mad/medea" is mostly concerned with a friend/rival turned Lahore theater luminary (re)named in the memoir as "Mad/medea," "Madina," or "Maddy."

Without knowing the real identity of this Pakistani "theatre personality" who threatened the press with a law-suit, or what may be her reasons for so doing, unfounded or otherwise, I would begin by noting that the urgent exhortation I quote above (a) somewhat coercively demands Afzal-Khan's readers' material support if they support "free speech" and civil liberties, and (b) attempts to cast

this undoubtedly startling event (both the action on the part of the publisher and the threats from the offended personage) somewhat exclusively in terms of silencing, censorship and abrogation of fundamental (writer's) rights, pushing upon readers a certain kind of reading of the book. I obviously cannot adjudicate or comment on the press' decision or on the merits of the offended person's claims. However in response to the journal *Pakistaniaat* Editor's call for a response to this event I would like, in this essay, to complicate the reading of this memoir directed by its writer above, and to propose some alternative ways of approaching this text. (I can note here only briefly the obvious irony that the threatened lawsuit and the press's response have hence brought this memoir more attention and readers than its own merits may otherwise have done.)

I will begin with a consideration of some of the questions raised by and for memoirists regarding memoir writing and the tension between the need to tell the truth as one sees it and the obligation to protect the privacy of others whose lives have intersected with one's own. With the help of some theorists of autobiography and life-writing who have recently troubled over the ethics of exposing friends and family, and of negotiating thorny issues of truth and betrayal, I will pose some questions that thereby guide my reading of the memoir *Lahore With Love* (henceforth *LWL*), though matters of aesthetics and form remain integral to my approach.<sup>2</sup> I will conclude by asking some other questions that emerge for me in relation to this problem of ethics and responsibility to others in memoir-writing. As myself a scholar and teacher of Anglophone postcolonial literature and autobiography, literary theory, gender and women's studies, and an American woman academic originally from Pakistan, I read this memoir with multiple sets of lenses, some of which include: an interest in a narrative of a life not dissimilar to my own (though I grew up in Karachi not Lahore), referencing scenes, experiences and concerns both deeply familiar and now distant; a comparative scholarly understanding of various other memoirs, particularly South Asian and American; and a theoretical framework in ethics provided by an early philosophical training.

In my understanding of ethics for the purposes of this essay I draw upon the work of recent scholars who have troubled over the relation between ethics and literature in a contemporary global context. Shameem Black notes, for instance: "As articulated in the recent revival of ethical criticism, ethics connotes not behavioral codes, dogma, or a singular idea of the good but instead illuminates how literary works grapple with problems that pervade a world of competing values" (3). For Black, literary "ethics" signals "the workings of an ethos of responsibility to one's object of inquiry, a responsibility opposed to hegemonic domination and representational violence" (3). Similarly, Gita Rajan

defines ethics in “our contemporary globalized frame [as] ... conducting oneself responsibly in one’s areas of interaction... [Ethics] spans that indeterminable space between communal responsibility and individual sovereignty with a spoken or silent injunction to act *correctly*” (125; emphasis in original). Both scholars suggest that ethics connotes responsibility towards others that involves acting justly, and literary ethics in particular is concerned with representational ethics, how a text negotiates the often conflicting claims of self and other.<sup>3</sup>

### **I. Reading *Lahore with Love* Via Some Questions of Ethics from Autobiography Theory**

As theorists and scholars of autobiography as well as memoirists have long acknowledged, writing about one’s own life necessarily involves writing about the lives of others with whom one’s own has intersected. Our seemingly individual identities are *relational*, not autonomous or separable from others.<sup>4</sup> The degree to which one may then expose the privacy of others, in the process of excavating the layers of one’s own life, becomes a tricky question. “Because we live our lives in relation to others, our privacies are largely shared, making it hard to demarcate the boundary where one life leaves off and another begins,” writes Paul John Eakin, one of the pioneers of autobiography studies, in his introduction to his recent edited essay collection *The Ethics of Life-Writing* (8-9). In her contribution to that volume, Claudia Mills, American professor of philosophy and children’s book author, reflects on the question of how to balance a (fiction or memoir) writer’s need to tell the truth as s/he knows it, to “draw on” the “relationships with friends and family” that are her source (102) versus the obligation to avoid the “public betrayal of trust” and the violation of an individual’s ability to control the information circulated about her (104, 111). In the same volume, American literary critic and memoirist Nancy K. Miller similarly asks, “What is the truth in the name of which I choose to betray another person by revealing intimate details about his life?” (157). Here I want to outline briefly the arguments of three critics in order to pose analogous questions for *Lahore With Love*, which I read not as an inanimate object, but as a textual act.

The ethical problem or “tension” that Mills investigates in her essay is succinctly put: “to be a friend is to stand to another in a relationship of trust, for the sake of one’s friend; to be a writer is to stand ready to violate that trust for the sake of one’s story” (105). How to resolve this? Are writers necessarily amoral opportunists who instrumentalize, even cannibalize, the lives of friends and family for the sake of fame or fortune? Mills discourages an easy affirmative to the last question by making the following propositions:

- (1) There is nothing wrong with “deriving some external benefit for myself from my intimate relationships, so long as that benefit is not the dominant goal of the intimate relationship, and so long as I continue to value the loved one appropriately” (103-104)
- (2) The telling of stories provides therapeutic benefits to the teller other than monetary gain because the sharing or processing of life experience enables us to deal with life’s challenges better (106-110)
- (3) The telling of stories is of benefit to others who read those stories and who are thereby enabled in their own lives in coping with similar challenges or in breaking silences around similar secrets (107, 111)

Using both a utilitarian and a Kantian approach, Mills concludes: “*our goal must be to achieve the great benefits of the sharing of stories while minimizing the costs to those whose stories are shared*” (111; my emphasis). She adds important provisos: that shared stories should not be “glib and shallow” or “sensational,” but allow time for both telling and listening” (112); that she rejects “storytelling that violates professional codes of confidentiality, ... [or that is] motivated by malice, ... [or that] fails to exhibit appropriate care and respect for the stories” (111-14); and perhaps most surprisingly, that “bad people [do not] deserve the protections that good people do” (118).

Unfortunately, however, this opens up many more questions than it answers. Who would determine (and how) whether something is “glib and shallow,” or adequately respectful of others, or if the writer continues to love the loved one “appropriately,” or whether a writer’s intentions (notoriously unknowable) are rooted in “malice”? Or whether those written about are in fact “good” or “bad” people? And what is to be done when there is a contestation of an author’s revelations by those exposed? And most importantly, how can we measure the benefits to the storyteller and reader/audience against the costs to those exposed?

Mills’ perspective is certainly useful in helping obviate easy judgments of a memoir like *Lahore With Love*. Like Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days*, designed by its very structure to present the self as relational, *LWL* presents Fawzia’s story as a composite of her female friends’ stories: each chapter focuses on a particular friend whose experience, either witnessed or shared by Fawzia (known to her friends as “Madame Sin”), becomes formative of who Fawzia becomes.<sup>5</sup> To signal the importance of each friend and her story, each chapter is entitled with the friend’s (pseudonymous) (nick)name--“Sam’s Secret,” “Hajira,” “Saira,” “Mad/media”--the only exception being the fourth chapter “Blood and Girls” which focuses on the narrator herself. Thus the effort to excavate the formation of

that self retrospectively, which is what the writing of this memoir is concerned with, an effort to recapture a past time and ethos, is therefore impossible without relating (in both senses of *relate*: to tell, and to connect or show connections to others) the stories of her school and college friends as inextricable from her own. The “benefits,” then, (to use Mills’ term) of writing and publishing this memoir accrue both to the *writer* (who can by so doing recreate her life, discovering with hindsight formative patterns, connections, or meanings that would then enable her own subsequent life), and to *readers*, both Pakistani and non-Pakistani (where the former can share and learn from experiences both similar and dissimilar to their own, and the latter can presumably acquire a more nuanced, non-stereotypical understanding of Pakistan and its people). At least those are some of the explicit goals of the memoir as articulated by the author: “And so I write this memoir, in hopes that by giving voice to a past, the future of a present [sic] need not be so blind, so deaf, so very dark. . . . It is through the writing of our shared herstories that I am finally learning the humility that could have saved that mythical flier [Icarus]. The question is, will it save me?” (Introduction to *LWL*, 5, 8). Or, as Afzal-Khan states in her acknowledgements: “I have crisscrossed these borders between East and West all my life, in the hopes of shattering stereotypes of the Other on both sides--to show that ‘bad’ and ‘good’ are relative terms” (xi-xii)

What, though, are the ethics and “costs” (to return to Mills’ terms) of such writing, and how are they to be assessed or “minimized”? What are the costs, for instance, in the particular context of Pakistan, to women whose private and sexual lives are exposed without their permission? What responsibility does the writer bear towards those whom she represents in her memoir? One problem I would note here with Mills’ philosophical discourse is its generality, its purported universality, its presumption that the “I” can apply to any “you,” its failure to consider the specificities of gender, sexuality, class, and especially cultural contexts where different notions of trust and betrayal, cost and benefit may be operative.

By contrast, Nancy Miller’s essay in both form and substance is more provisional and exploratory, more self-questioning and interrogative than declarative. Her conclusions, if they can be termed as such, are not universalistic and general aphorisms, but framed as specific to each situation. She makes two points that I find relevant here: (1) “Telling my story truthfully does not necessarily constitute a betrayal of the people who shared in it, even if in the telling I illuminate some of the darker moments from my point of view” (158); and (2) “When we expose the narratives of our lives to others through the forms of life-writing, do we not all become vulnerable subjects?” (159). The first point foregrounds the partiality of any truth-claims, reminding us that any story is

someone's story, that another might tell the same story differently, that no story should be read as claiming absolute or objective truth. This implies that telling one's version in some sense invites the possibility of others' versions, rather than overriding the other and therefore betraying him/her. To what extent this occurs in a particular memoir then, I would add, depends on *how* the story is told, and to what extent it opens up the possibility of other versions. Miller's second point, posed as a rhetorical question, takes the term "vulnerable subjects" (referring to memoirists who suffer from "grave and multiple medical disabilities" and who therefore arguably are more deserving of readers' care than memoirists who are healthy and possibly self-indulgent (159)), and turns it around: are we not all damaged, Miller suggests, psychically if not physically? I read this question moreover to mean both that writing about one's life is therapeutic in some way for the writer, and that it *makes* her vulnerable too, for it exposes the person writing to readers' judgments as much, if not more, than it exposes others.

In accordance with Miller's first point, we may read *Lahore With Love* as a similarly self-knowingly partial and subjective account, not as a claim to any complete truth. Indeed, it begins with such a disclaimer, with a quotation from Lauren Slater's memoir *Lying* on the "blurry line between novels and memoirs," and with an explicit acknowledgement from Afzal-Khan that her memoir unfolds the "layering of emotional and literal truths" (*LWL*, 1). At the same time, however, while acknowledging that fiction is often autobiographical and "memoirs have made-up scenes" (Slater, quoted in *LWL*, 1), I would add that it is necessary also to recall important differences between memoir and fiction. Through paratexts (titles, blurbs, prefaces, disclaimers) fiction announces its fictionality, and builds a different contract with its readers, asking for a suspension of disbelief, suggesting the truth of what *could* have happened rather than what *did* happen; whereas autobiography and memoir depend on what Philippe Lejeune has called "the autobiographical pact," the assurance through the author's signature that though events described are subject to the vagaries of memory and perspective, they do refer to real events, real people, and carry some literal truth (19-21). *LWL* may present its truths as filtered through the writer's perspective, but by its very form, the memoir also assures the reader that the events it describes really happened, and that the people it refers to really exist(ed). Furthermore, unlike other memoirs that include others' stories *in their own voices* (as for instance the Australian writer Sally Morgan's *My Place*, which includes the recorded stories of her aboriginal ancestors as told by them), *LWL* is told exclusively in one narrator's overriding voice. Thus, though it includes dialogue (as selected and reconstructed by the author for her own purposes), the admittedly

partial narrative of *LWL* does not allow in its very formal choices for other versions to contest the version the memoirist provides.

Miller's second point might help us see that Afzal-Khan surely knows that she makes herself vulnerable too, for example via such self-exposure as her confession of her betrayal of her friend Mad/medea in having sex with that friend's husband (111, 114). However, I would point out that an asymmetry remains between the representation of self and others, for as the writer, Afzal-Khan has control over what and how much she divulges about her self, and therefore can assess the risks to herself of the extent she *chooses* to make herself vulnerable, whereas others who are made vulnerable subjects of her narrative do not have that control.<sup>6</sup>

In a third essay in the same volume, writing about his writing about his deceased father's life (as it shadowed his own life) as "relational auto/biography" (128), the Australian literary critic Richard Freadman poses the same basic ethical question as Mills and Miller: "Writers have a right to write. But how far into the privacy of others does that right extend?" (123). He continues: "Self-revelation ... does entail revelations about others. The moral issue is where to draw the line" (128). Like Freadman, my concern here too is with how writers may make ethical choices and how readers may evaluate them, not with how to adjudicate legal consequences. But Freadman's approach is distinctive because of its emphasis on specificities of *context*:

There is, I believe, no single or general answer to that question. There are some rough guidelines, and philosophical analysis can help to discern and elaborate these; *but each case has to be taken on its own merits, has to be considered in context* and with respect to the rights, wishes, and feelings of those involved. (123-24; my emphasis)

After examining various notions of loyalty and trust such as "relativized trust" versus "blanket trust" as established in relationships between the writer and the subjects of auto/biographical narrative (131), Freadman concludes with an imagined scenario in which his deceased father returns to life for a day, and in which the writer-son asks the father's *permission* to publish what he has written (134-41). It is only after such considered and harrowing self-scrutiny, which effectively models the care of others that Mills recommends, and which involves negotiation, consultation and persuasion before the father gives his (imagined) permission, that Freadman gives himself permission to make public what he has written.

By extension, we might ask, what are the *contexts* of Afzal-Khan's writing of *LWL*? Does her memoir enact the same kind of responsibility towards or care

of the others whose stories it tells or on whose presence her own story depends? Certainly one context is Afzal-Khan's location in the American academy in 2009-2010, less than a decade after 9/11, writing as a Muslim woman and postcolonial scholar, addressing American readers, educating them about the complexities and varieties of Islamic cultures, histories, and gendered oppressions and privileges in a multi-dimensional Pakistan otherwise usually represented in dominant media almost exclusively in terms of its unfortunate links with terrorism and the Taliban. It is clearly of benefit to all to learn of opposition and resistance within Pakistan to the waves of Islamization that have bedeviled the nation in recent years, or of the struggles of (some) women against the curtailment of their rights, as well as of the freedoms and pleasures women of certain classes continue to enjoy despite these troubles.<sup>7</sup>

But another context is that of contemporary Lahore itself, and more broadly one that includes the networks of Lahori referents or subjects (both living and deceased) of this memoir, as well as its Pakistani readers in Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad and elsewhere in the world. What differently understood cultural notions of trust, loyalty, betrayal or decorum may be operative here? What concerns about exposure or bodily references, what risks to those mentioned (even with changed names)? What permission, if any, does Afzal-Khan ask of her co-subjects before she publishes their intimate and often sexual secrets in less than flattering accounts of their characters? How do we know as readers if the writer is not motivated by sheer malice or the gratuitous pleasure of exposing others within a small community of Lahore socialites under the guise of telling one's own story? How *much* of others' stories should one appropriate to make one's own?

Although Afzal-Khan at no point in her memoir dwells on the issue of exposing others via her writing, nor does she describe herself seeking permission of those to whom she refers, interestingly, in the fourth chapter entitled "Saira" she stages a self-reflexive moment where Saira, the titular subject of that chapter, objects to an early version of the chapter because it mentions her breasts. It is spring 2001, the now forty-two-year old narrator is visiting Lahore, and is relaxing pleasurably in another friend Naumana's perfectly tended garden fragrant with flowers, sated with the sumptuous "sweet and savory delicacies" and "freshly squeezed ... rich red" pomegranate juice rolled out on a trolley by a bearer (a domestic servant who combines the duties of a butler and footman) (62). At this party, placed in this context of upper-class female privilege and leisure buttressed by the work of an "army" of servants (62), arrives the narrator's old friend Saira:

A long, lingering hug--which I can tell is making her uncomfortable--and a few sidelong glances reveal more than I want to see--a body grown slack and shapeless under the finest pure silk shalwar kameez rupees can buy. The breasts that had so held me in awe on the verge of adolescence have turned into overripe watermelons, jiggling uncomfortably at every move she makes; you can see them heave even behind the large silk dupatta she wears modestly draped across her bosom. (63)

This physical description is meant to indicate the depredations of the passage of time, to provide a contrast to the description of the twelve-year-old Saira with which the chapter opens:

She came to the party with bells on her ankles. Tiny silver peas tinkled ever so slightly every time she moved with her creamy golden legs. We sensed rather than saw them behind the billowing cotton shalwar that draped but couldn't quite hide the curvy texture of her blossoming womanliness. (59)

It is perhaps to an earlier version of these two sexualized accounts of herself, one as nubile body in a context where girls are measured for their ripeness for marriage, and one as "overripe" fruit that is past its prime, having fulfilled the duties of wifehood and motherhood, that Saira objects, to Fawzia's reported surprise:

Saira has seen an earlier version of my story of her, and has, according to Nomi, been offended by it. I am incredulous. Pleased, touched, flattered, those were the reactions I would have expected. But offended? By what? I turn to demand in genuine puzzlement, only to be met with a nervous giggle, most unlike the Saira I once knew. "Well, Madame Sin [Fawzia], what's with all those shameless references to my legs and bosom hunh? I do have grown girls now, you know, marriageable age ... and what if my twenty-year old son were to catch hold of that description? Tobah, tobah," she shudders, touching her ears with her fingers in that classic gesture forswearing unthinkable thoughts, while I sit back, dumb-struck by the thought that my artistic endeavors have been mistaken for pornography. (64)

The narrator's protestations of surprise emphasize the distance both friends have traveled: Fawzia as an Americanized academic has lost the ability to anticipate her friend's discomfort at the overtly sexual description of her young body (purportedly flattering in an American context), or to understand her discomfort

(in a current Pakistani context) at being sexualized both as the mother of grown daughters whose chastity must be assured in the Lahore marriage market, and as the mother of a grown son who for different reasons must not be allowed to think of his mother as remotely sexual. (We might note at the same time that Fawzia can sense that her “lingering” American-style hug between heterosexual women friends is making her Pakistani friend “uncomfortable” at the unaccustomed and prolonged physical intimacy in a cultural context that severely curtails physical contact even between women).

As Freedman notes, “our interpersonal modes of trust are heavily shaped by cultural factors: a pre-Freudian society might regard intimate sexual revelations about a biographical subject as a breach of trust, while a post-Freudian one might regard such disclosures as morally unexceptionable” (132). The issue here between Fawzia and Saira has to do with different culturally shaped understandings of what sexual revelations are appropriate to make, not because one is post- and the other pre-Freudian, but rather, because Saira knows (and Fawzia has forgotten) that in a Pakistani context, for a woman of any class to be represented and identified publically as a sexual being is itself legally and culturally deeply fraught. Whereas in an American post-Freudian context, all humans, even children, are understood to be sexual beings, in a Pakistani one where Shariah laws are in place, and sexuality for women connotes shame, no such understandings obtain. It is perhaps a failure to recognize fully this other context that has occasioned Afzal-Khan’s memoir’s troubles after publication. My point here is not to suggest that a writer like Afzal-Khan should not critique or expose the contradictions of her culture of origin, but rather to point out the need to trouble over and perhaps explain her decision to expose people from that other context where they bear different costs than the writer herself.

In her published version, though she reports this incident, Afzal-Khan makes no apparent concession to her friend’s concerns. The chapter moves on very quickly to a denunciation (by the narrator) of the Islamization that has overtaken the country, and of the consequent “religious zealots” her erstwhile buddies have become (65). Sympathetic though we might be to Fawzia’s horror (as indeed I am) at discovering that Saira and Naumana condone the legal injustices to women enacted under purported Islamic laws (67), we might still need to examine the significance of Afzal-Khan’s juxtaposition of material here. To what extent did Fawzia/Afzal-Khan trouble over her friend’s objections to that first draft? Why does she not tell us about how or why she decided to override those objections? Or, does the ensuing account of Saira’s blind and prescriptive religiosity justify the narrator’s dismissal of Saira’s concern about how she is represented in the very context that makes her sexuality dangerous to her? The

chapter concludes with a retrospective account of Saira's arranged marriage at age eighteen to a callous and neglectful cousin and her subsequent nervous breakdown, designed purportedly to show how ill that supposedly religious society and culture treats the very women who uphold its dictates without question.

But it also includes Fawzia's memory of Saira's experience of her wedding night as recounted to her virginal female friends the day after: "She told us, quite unabashedly, that she realized she was madly in love with her husband when he made her hold on to the side of the bed and stick her tush in the air while he proceeded to do unnameable things from behind" (73). Is this what Saira was upset about in Fawzia's early draft? Or is this Fawzia's almost vengeful response to her former friend's response to that first draft, to add (or at least not excise) these sexual details after her encounter with Saira in March 2001? The salacious details apart, this reads to me as a somewhat contemptuous portrayal of a woman literally fucked over by a system she loves, a woman whose naïve faith in her marriage and religion the chapter shows to have been deeply misplaced. While justified in its indignation regarding the problems many women in Pakistan face, this portrayal nonetheless seems hardly sympathetic or respectful towards its human referent in the terms that Mills or Freedman, Black or Rajan propose as ethical. As readers we might support the writer's efforts to expose a deeply oppressive system, but we might also question why the exposé of that system must occur via ridicule of its victims.

By the same token, we might read Chapter Five, "Mad/medea," the so-called offending chapter, as similarly cavalier, even self-contradictory, in its account of the renamed friend. The chapter is ostensibly designed to show how a childhood friendship between the writer and "Madina" has developed into an adult relationship where both women do parallel work protesting and exposing the destruction of women's rights in Pakistan. Madina has founded a theater company in which she acts and directs "plays on every aspect of the grave situation unfolding in Pakistan," while Fawzia has both acted in some of those plays and "chronicle[d] them in [her] scholarly essays and poems" (118). However this putative female solidarity is stated, not shown, as if disregarding the fundamental writerly principle "show, don't tell." We read very little about either one's heroic resistance work and far more about two aspects of Mad/medea that may have aroused the real-life referent's ire: sexual revelations such as her gossiped about pre-marital pregnancy and abortion as a college student in 1978 (104); and her portrayal as a classist, obnoxious, volatile, physically and verbally abusive sexual rival. In a 32-page chapter, only three and half pages (which include both an account of one play and extensive quotations from a website) are given to the

notorious Hudood Ordinance passed under the martial-law regime of President Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980's which criminalized rape as adultery and sentenced women to lashing, stoning to death or prison for any extra- or pre-marital sexual act (115-118). (Arguably Afzal-Khan's sexual revelations about Mad/medea in fact could put the real person concerned at risk under these very laws.) The last two pages of the chapter are occupied by a brief mention of Afzal-Khan's book on Madina's theater work on "women's rights" and by Afzal-Khan's poem reflecting on the injustices that followed and that continue twenty years later under these unchanged profoundly discriminatory and misogynistic Shariah laws (123-25).

The remaining 26 pages of the chapter are devoted however to a somewhat haphazard account of Mad/medea's personal history that shifts dizzyingly back and forth between disjunct moments in the past and present. The chapter begins in a Swiss writer's retreat in July 2006 where the narrator is sexually aroused by the "kisses" of cherries and the warm breeze to remember another moment in Cairo, which in turn reminds her of a childhood experience picking Lahore cherries in Mad's garden (actually blood-red jamuns), which leads her to memories of a violent Madina associated with blood.<sup>8</sup> "And Mad always did look like (sic) she had blood on her mind; she was ready to beat the living daylights out of any man, woman ... bigger or smaller--who dared say or do anything she perceived as taking advantage of her" (97). These tenuous triggers produce a narrative of Madina that begins with Madina in fact taking advantage of others weaker than herself: she abuses her class and gender privileges by obscenely cursing, condescending to, and then defrauding a poor rickshaw-driver of his rightful payment (99): alternately screams at her beautiful younger sister and vituperatively abuses her theatrical rivals (101-102); mocks and bullies her fellow-students and wheedles her way into gaining advantage with college professors (104-106). More surprisingly, without any explanation it includes a sudden scene of the narrator herself in bed with Mad's second husband, Bakri, a former college classmate and admirer of Fawzia's whom she had earlier scorned (111-114), and whom Mad has subsequently married and reportedly "turned mad" to the extent that he is inexplicably dead at age forty (118, 122). (Unlike her unrestrained exposure of others, even here, the narrator conceals the degree of her own culpability, leaving unclear whether her affair with Mad's husband took place before or after she herself was married.) Afzal-Khan's choice to name this man "Bakri," then, (which in Urdu means a female goat and suggests the bloody sacrifice of Bakr-Eid) hints at his having become a sacrifice, Jason-like, at Mad/medea's hands.

Regardless of how accurate this portrayal of Mad/medea may or may not be (for as a non-Lahori reader I have the benefit of *not* knowing her identity), I

think a more productive and relevant question for us to ask is: why do we as readers of Afzal-Khan's memoir need to know these details? What authorial purpose(s) does this account fulfill? Where is the "minimized cost" or responsibility to others precisely in a context where the writer makes us aware that women can be punished with their lives for unlicensed sexual acts? Moreover, how does this account affect our trust in and hence relationship with the author/narrator? It could be argued that Fawzia/Afzal-Khan needs to reveal all this in order to come to terms with who she has become, or with what she has done, or to explain by contrast how she became a different person than her friend and chose a different way (her American based scholarship and poetry versus her friend's Pakistan based theater) to protest the same conditions. But without any reflections on the significance of these revelations about another, or on the reasons for their inclusion (as Freedman provides for example, explaining that he explores the reasons for his father's insecurities and difficulties because they shadowed his own life), it is hard for us to make a case that they are included for valid reasons and not for sensationalism or gossip. Without the intimacy and intricate interwovenness of life-stories that exists in the relationships described by other memoirists who trouble over how much they reveal of others in revealing themselves (Freedman and his father, Miller and her ex-husband, Mills and her children), Afzal-Khan's relationship with Mad/medea seems more distant, built on intermittent acquaintanceship rather than emotional attachment, on sexual and perhaps professional rivalry rather than sustained connection. (Madina, unlike closer friends like Hajira or Saira, is not even mentioned in any other chapter of the memoir.) How then can we as readers avoid reading this account of Mad/medea as "glib and shallow" (to return to Mills' words), as inconsiderate at best and perhaps malicious at worst?

I would propose therefore that a key question to ask is the degree to which a memoirist earns her *reader's* trust, both by means of *what* she includes and *how* she includes it. A memoirist whose persona/narrator comes across as self-indulgent, self-promoting and inconsiderate of others is likely to lose credibility with her readers. My concern therefore is with both ethics and aesthetics, with the care evinced in the writing as well as care regarding others involved in the memoir. I will limit myself to three examples here.

First, why, does Afzal-Khan choose to insert the same love poem to herself three times (with very slight alteration) within the space of two chapters, a poem addressed to Fawzia that Afzal-Khan has presumably penned herself (93-94, 108-109, 112-113)? This poem consists of two speakers who in turn voice a question and reply, a supplication and response. In each version it begins with a male voice, which (as each subsequent version makes clear) is the voice of Bakri,

who desperately desires Fawzia his college-mate as his muse and beloved (“a dream come true/ Ghalib’s saqi”), describing her in flattering physical terms: “With a toss of your head/ and a swing of your hips/ how you hiss, stomping off/ oh my love/ sweet young love” (93, 108, 112). In response, the female addressee (later identified as Fawzia) snaps, “I’d rather *be* Ghalib/ and not his damned saqi/Writing those poems/ yes inspiring those rhyme schemes” (93, 108, 113). Insisting that she would rather claim the “power” to write than to be powerless, silent and written about, Afzal-Khan thus dramatizes her own feminist rejection of amorous male poetic clichés. At the same time, that repeated slip into “I’d rather be/ ... yes inspiring those rhyme schemes” suggests a contradictory lingering desire to remain the silent female muse as well, invoked and desired by the male poet. The contradiction undercuts the force of that purported feminism. Some readers may find that the repetition with slight differences in each version makes the relationship between Fawzia and Bakri slightly clearer as he pursues her beyond the bounds of college days in Lahore into adulterous temptations after both are married to others, and as she dwells with regret on his loss. However others might find the repetition faddish, meaningless and overdone, an alienating, bizarrely tasteless act of a writer flaunting her continued sexual desirability in her own memoir.

To take a second example, in the preceding or fourth chapter “Blood and Girls” Afzal-Khan alternates between bafflingly fragmentary recollections of two visits, one to watch bull-fighting in Spain, and the other to a working-class area of Lahore to watch the (by implication) similar spectacle of Shia men publicly flagellating themselves in the Moharram ritual of mourning. Again, while some readers might recognize here literary techniques that represent the stream of consciousness and the impressionistic seemingly random movements of memory, others might find the disorienting moves of the chapter simply affected, imitative, undisciplined and confusing. More importantly, the chapter provides an example of ideological self-contradiction that damages readerly trust. Describing again with unselfconscious pride her affluent circumstances, Afzal-Khan presents herself on the trip to Spain staying at a “rich sheikh’s” “stunning villa atop a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean” (81), after being driven “efficiently” through the city of Pamplona by her cosmopolitan Pakistani friend Zara (79). But when her Spanish hostess deplors the “primitive custom” of bull-fighting in which “many [young boys] die each year,” and Zara and other women present agree, the narrator’s disagreement and desire to see the bull-fighting is expressed through a surprisingly sexist contempt: “grateful though I am to have [Zara’s] road-skills at my disposal, I can’t help thinking, what a bunch of--well, women, excuse me--I’m

surrounded with, now that I've discovered the machismo upon which my feminism is built" (81).

How can this self-proclaimed "feminism" co-exist with such contempt for women who express concern about a brutal bloodsport that involves the destruction of human and animal life? Moreover, how can a sentence that proclaims the narrator's "feminism" at the same time turn the term "women" into a derogatory epithet? Such a cooptation of the term feminism seems to me to remain self-contradictorily unable to see the gendered asymmetric value system that upholds "machismo" or a certain form of violently performed bloodthirsty masculinity as unquestionably superior to the putative weakness of women.

Third, such unfortunate lapses are compounded by frequent infelicities that suggest lack of care in the writing: grammatical or syntactical mistakes or factual inaccuracies that suggest at the very least poor editing. Twice, for example, Afzal-Khan describes the death by hanging of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as occurring in September 1979 (4, 56), when in fact it took place in April 1979. Certainly, it could be argued, memoirists do get things wrong, for what they record is not truth but the vagaries of memory. This is the argument that Salman Rushdie makes about his narrator Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, who gets the date of Gandhi's assassination wrong. However Rushdie's point is precisely that this makes Saleem an unreliable narrator ("Errata," 22). Unlike novelists whose narrators are fictive characters, it is surely risky for a memoirist to suggest her own unreliability. At the very least, such mistakes suggest surprising carelessness regarding a crucial historic moment that traumatized the nation.

All of these examples accumulate to lead a reader to wonder about the care that has gone into the production of the published work. The apparent lack of care evinced in the writing then becomes linked to a loss of readers' trust in the writer, a loss of trust that extends to her lack of care in representations of others and her motivations for representing them in a memoir that is so absorbed by its self that it neglects respect and consideration towards the very others on whom the story of that relational self depends. My critique of this text is built therefore on both aesthetic and ethical grounds, for it has to do with the loss of trust that it provokes in us as readers. What I present here is therefore not a defense of or comment on the action taken by the press or the former friend, but a response to reading the memoir itself. Without knowing and without needing to know what was objected to by the actual person concerned, what we as disinterested readers can analyze are the modes by which a text enacts its own proclaimed purposes, and assess its degree of care or visible conflict with its own purported goals.

## II. “Lady, this conflict is about class”: Some Other Questions about Memoirist Responsibility

I hope to have shown how a critical framework drawn from autobiographers and scholars who have troubled over the ethics of life-writing is illuminating for a reading of *Lahore With Love* (and the circumstances following its publication). In light of these questions I would like now to raise some related questions regarding the representation of less proximate and less privileged others in memoir writing.

All three of the memoirists or theorists I have consulted in the previous section explore the ethics of representing others who are very close in their relationship to the memoir writer: children or immediate family (Mills); ex-spouses and lovers (Miller); parents (Freadman). None of them however address the representation of individuals who exist as part of a broader circle of acquaintances, or who interact with but exist in more socially distant or removed circles from the memoirist. I would then extend to less proximate others the same question posed by Eakin regarding closer family and friends: “[W]hat are the consequences for those [others] whose lives [also] touched--and touch” the writer’s (*How Our Lives*, 156)? My contention is not at all that those others should not be written about. Rather, as I suggest in my reading of the Mad/medea chapter, surely, even if not bound by as powerful a relationship of trust or intimacy as immediate family or friends, these others have claims on the memoirist to be represented within a similar structure of ethical consideration. I want to turn in this section to the different but related question of the representation of people of different or less privileged classes with whom the memoirist interacts or on whom she depends, and who also shape her identity and experiences, ranging from friends with lower class origins to servants who share domestic or other spaces and thereby occasion more incidental but nonetheless important intimacies or interactions.

Eakin makes an important point regarding the representation of proximate others in life-writing: “Because our lives never stand free of the lives of others, we are faced with our responsibility to those others whenever we write about ourselves. There is no escaping this responsibility...” (*How Our Lives*, 159). A memoirist’s ethical *responsibility* (as distinct from questions of legalities such as libel or infringement on someone’s ownership of their life-stories, or even the ethics of over-exposure) is then precisely the *consequence* of the relationality of human lives. My concern in this section then is somewhat different from the usual sort of question asked regarding the representation of members of the lower classes in fiction (whether a middle-class writer knows about or has the right to

represent the experiences of socially significant others, etc.).<sup>9</sup> More specifically, I want to ask, in life-narratives about the self where the act of writing is itself an act of self-enablement and self-fashioning, what use is made of those less privileged? How is the self elevated and at whose expense? What implicit trust (again) is violated when those who cannot read at all, or who cannot read in English, the language in which the memoir is written, appear insistently (without their permission or knowledge) in the narrative? What is a memoirist's obligation to broader or widening concentric circles of people who share space in her memoir? Does the same implicit trust obtain between them and the writer as between her and her closest family and friends? The question here then becomes not only one of exposure of privacy (though that remains a concern), but of responsibility, of *how* (not whether) one represents others.

Members of the lower classes are everywhere present as shaping presences in the fringes of the world that Afzal-Khan describes in her memoir. From the street vendors outside her elite convent school from whom Fawzia and her friends obtain forbidden treats, men comically described as "pathetic creatures" with "pouring sweat" or "enticing kohl-rimmed eyes" (15-16); to the trusted family servant, the old driver who is tricked and made fun of by Fawzia's friends, cavorting teenagers who abscond with the car (39); to the Pathan guard who, in possible collusion with honor-killers, or in thrall to his mundane bodily needs, fails to protect the terrified woman who is shot dead by her own uncle (32); to the silent cooks and bearers who produce and serve food and whose listening presence the adult Fawzia scorns because even if they understand her ribald English jokes, it makes no "difference" (64): these are representatives of the real workers whose labor enables many of the luxuries of the cocooned world the narrator fondly remembers. The question then is not whether they should or should not be included, but what *use* is made of their inclusion, and the extent to which the memoirist is self-conscious about how she breaches that social difference, how self-critical she is about how she elevates herself at their expense.

Clearly, there is some self-indictment on the part of the adult narrator of her younger uncaring or unaware past self, some self-implication in depicting spoilt teenagers who took pleasure in deriding a servant to get what they wanted (39). Or, in Chapter Two, college age Fawzia describes herself as feeling "strongly ... about class oppression, ... [and] the need to change the system" (46-47). But then only a few pages later she tries desperately to dissuade her closest friend Hajira from marrying a man from a lower-class background because "he is so very different, and ... class background does matter..." (52). The adult narrator makes no attempt to distance herself from this view. In fact the unself-censored adult narrator describes her mother's college students (without retrospective

revision or caveat) as “stupid Urdu-medium lower-class girls who couldn’t spell literature if their lives depended on it” (40).

Even if we attribute these inconsistencies to a past self, the narrational structure and presentation of Afzal-Khan’s memoir manifests similar self-contradictions or class prejudice. The narratives of both the first two chapters, “Sam’s Secret” and “Hajira,” for instance, are structured to attribute sexism and murderous disregard for women (the reasons that both these friends die) to lower class culture. While drawing attention laudably to misogyny and heinous practices like honor killings, Afzal-Khan constructs causality and plot with the unfortunate consequence of making it appear as if those problems are exclusively the domain of lower class people. Sam, a friend from Convent school days, and a member of a lower-middle class family that she takes pains to conceal from her friends, becomes the victim of an honor killing when she is discovered to be involved in a romantic relationship unauthorized by her family. To the amazement of Fawzia and her friends with greater “class privilege,” the murderers are Sam’s lower-class brothers (29). Do upper class men in Lahore (we might ask) not punish their women for stepping outside culturally defined sexual parameters? Again, in the next chapter, the upper-class Hajira becomes so unhappy and depressed after her mistaken marriage to a purportedly hypocritical, callous opportunist from a lower-middle class family (after he gets her pregnant) that she shoots herself after six months of marriage (53-58). The narrator comments on her dead friend’s husband: “How interesting that Sufi, Mister Communist himself, ‘a man of principle’ as Hajira had been led to believe ..., who decried material comforts as signs of the decadent and morally corrupt bourgeois lifestyle of people of Hajira’s family’s social class, should have accepted so readily the comfortable goodies from the people he had denigrated and mocked,” (55). She herself, she claims, saw through him at once: “he is no communist, he is after her money, her class pedigree” (50). Again, in this repeated pattern, the lower class male is cited as the source of deadly trouble for her youthful female friends.

This animus against members of classes lower than her own is acknowledged at some moments and unwitting in others. In the fourth chapter, for instance, on possibly the only occasion when a lower-class character is given a voice, Fawzia’s mother’s cook becomes the mouthpiece for lower-class ignorance and propaganda-fueled religious hatred. On a return visit to Lahore, the adult Fawzia is “stunned” to discover that both her mother and her cook believe that Shias are non-Muslims (82). “I almost scream at my mother and her cook.” This moment that reveals to the adult Fawzia how “deep” the “rot ... had set in within the fabric of Pakistani society” (82) becomes an occasion for contrastive self-elevation. “You two are simply parroting the extremist, hate-filled ideas circulated

by jihadi parties,” (83) she reports herself announcing with unself-conscious superiority. While clearly implicating her mother as well as her cook in this portrayal of infectious prejudice (the mother is another figure who is not spared in this memoir, from denunciations of her ineffectuality as a college professor to hints of her marital infidelities (6, 86-87)), Afzal-Khan implies that while she expects better of her educated mother, the cook is an example of lower class stupidity that is only to be expected. The narrator’s occasional representations of domestic servants thus accumulate to build a picture of working class or lower-middle class individuals who lack the intelligence, insight and moral rectitude that she claims for herself. In fact the *use* made of these lower-class figures is as foil or background, as negative contrasts to herself.

On one occasion Afzal-Khan acknowledges that upper class women like her Lahori friends and herself might not always have the upper hand in contesting the Pakistani patriarchal ethos that pervades every aspect of everyday life or in understanding some of the roots of the problems that bedevil their country. In describing her visit to interview the head of a militant Islamicist women’s seminary in Islamabad, she notes: “Umm Hassan seems a stauncher women’s libber, free of the yoke of husband and family, than any ‘westernized’ Pakistani woman I’d ever met—including myself” (141). As members of a lower middle class, these women are representatives of another Pakistan that Fawzia has not yet known. Afzal-Khan thus reports how her 2007 conversation with Umm Hassan and her students and teachers educated her on the split between the proverbial two nations within Pakistan, the rich and the poor, and hence the attraction of anti-western Islamicism for the latter (138). “Lady, this conflict is about class,” Umm Hassan instructs Fawzia (141). And that’s an important learning moment that Afzal-Khan includes in her memoir.

Yet we might wonder if that lesson is in fact fully learnt. The chapter certainly makes clear, and rightly so, that this poverty-driven Islamic feminist militancy of “Chicks with Flicks” who got “some of their anger right” (144) is in fact predominantly misguided and wrong, that Umm Hassan’s seminary propagates misinformation, unthinking paranoia and self-righteousness, and that this female strength is united under a wrong cause (138-39). While not in disagreement with this assessment, I am troubled nevertheless by the snide *mode* of portrayal that mocks the lower-class women just for being underprivileged and lower-class. Unlike the “grey-green eyes” of Fawzia’s Anglicized friend “Sherry” (136), Amina the zealot “hissed, her eyes glinting through her frames (presumably because she was too poor to afford contact lenses or expensive non-refractive lens spectacles) (139). Unlike the narrator, this student at the seminary “sporting a white hijab and thick reading glasses, zeroes in on [Fawzia] and begins talking

non-stop” (138). These details are as revealing about the observer as about the observed. Is the narrator’s scorn and lack of respect for “Amina” due to Amina’s misguided beliefs and under-educated style or to her belligerent poverty and appearance? What does this tell us about the memoirist and her ways of seeing? To return to Eakin’s question, what are the consequences to Amina and those of her ilk (or class) of this kind of generic representation that is designed to circulate both in elite circles in Pakistan and in the U.S.?

### **III. Conclusion**

In a bizarre moment of self-revelation in her introduction, Afzal-Khan reports how she uses her American constructed identity as a woman of color instrumentally: “My place is now also a place where I manipulate my Muslim womanhood to make my way up the U.S. academic ladder, reporting to increased acclaim the dire situation of Muslim women in Pakistan” (10). As readers we might wonder both why she makes this startling confession and why she does what she purportedly confesses. A generous reading could argue that Afzal-Khan thus seeks to expose racist structures within the American academic system that disallow fair evaluation and opportunity and therefore induce such methods of self-advancement within it. However it could also be said that that is not her only choice; that other women academics of Pakistani origin have chosen to negotiate such systemic difficulties differently, without compromising their professional integrity.

Instead of taking this statement at face value and praising it as “honest confession,” as one reviewer does,<sup>10</sup> we might instead interrogate its underlying assumptions. Why is it so important to go unquestioningly in only one prescribed direction (vertically up this “ladder”), and at what cost both to oneself and to others? What cost-benefit analysis produces both such a confession and the behavior to which it confesses? Is the reported concern for the “dire situation of women in Pakistan” then genuine or is it also a career move towards self-advancement? This might lead us then also to wonder if the memoir too is such a calculated mode of self-advancement, an act in which making use of others and reported concern for others may be precisely instrumental, and in which a careful weighing of ethical responsibilities may be regrettably absent.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Fawzia Afzal-Khan is Professor of English and Director of Women's and Gender Studies at Montclair State University in New Jersey, USA. Born and raised in Lahore, Pakistan, she obtained her Bachelors in English and French from Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore, and her Ph.D. from Tufts University in Massachusetts, USA. She is the author of *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel* (Penn State Press, 1993) and *A Critical Stage: The Role of Alternative Secular Theater in Pakistan* (Seagull Press, India, 2005), the editor of *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out* (Interlink Books, 2005) and co-editor (with Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks) of *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, (Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> For a history of the technical distinctions between autobiography and memoir, see Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 2-4. For the purposes of this essay I will use the terms interchangeably, both respecting Afzal-Khan's choice to call her book a memoir (1) and drawing upon theories developed within the field of autobiography or life-writing studies.

<sup>3</sup> The question of ethics is relatively recent in autobiography studies. See for example, Smith and Watson's introduction to *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, which mentions it briefly as a subject for future theorizing.

<sup>4</sup> For a clear and thorough discussion, see Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Chapter 2. In their introduction to *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, Smith and Watson discuss the theoretical and historical foundations for reading women's life-writing as relational (7-21). A stellar example of a Pakistani-English memoir that presents a woman's life (narrative) and identity as relational is Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* (1989), with which *LWL* invites obvious comparison. It is beyond the scope of this essay to undertake such a comparison, though I would note here the obvious similarities and differences. Both Suleri and Afzal-Khan are postcolonial literary scholars in the American academy, both attended Kinnaird College for Women and both focus in their memoirs on their youthful lives in Lahore. Formally, like *LWL*, *Meatless Days* also interweaves past and present, and is structured chapter by chapter around various individuals formative in Suleri's life (though Suleri highlights parents, siblings, and a grandmother as well as her friends). *LWL* is however not as intricately wrought or linguistically dense or intellectually analytical as *Meatless Days*. Unlike Suleri's memoir, which eschews nostalgia or idealization, *LWL* tends to veer between diatribes about politics and patriarchy (deserved though they are) and nostalgia for the putative innocence of childhood and youth destroyed by the dual advent of military dictatorship and Islamization in 1980's Pakistan. For a brief account of scholarly approaches to Suleri's memoir, see Hai, "Sara Suleri."

<sup>5</sup> I will use the life-writing studies convention here of referring to the author of the memoir (the one who makes narrational choices) as Afzal-Khan, and to the subject of the memoir (the actor within the narrative of self) as Fawzia. It is useful also of course to remember the distinction in autobiography between the younger

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(narrated) self versus the older (narrating) self (referred to here as the narrator), both of which are textual constructs.

<sup>6</sup> My point here is certainly not that memoirists should reveal all--of course they should use discretion in protecting themselves and others. Rather, my concern is with obviously visible gaps that disclose that something is being withheld and that therefore evoke readers' suspicion or distrust. In revising my own memoir-essay for instance ("Departures from Karachi Airport") I was advised by an experienced memoirist to be careful to give readers the impression that I was not holding something important back without in fact enacting complete disclosure (for in reality all writers of course do and must hold something back).

<sup>7</sup> Other contexts in which *LWL* belongs include of course the early 21<sup>st</sup> century culture of popular American television talk shows, sensational "reality TV" live confessions as well as the (arguably related) phenomenon of contemporary print memoirs that flood the market every year (See Eakin, *How Our Lives*, 157). Again, this American cultural context that encourages self-display and exhibition as well as exposure of others (though not without strong critiques; see Eakin, 151-59) is not at all the same as contemporary Pakistan where such disclosures can carry very different cultural and legal consequences. Yet another (generic) context includes the recent surge of memoirs by hyphenated American academics and Muslim women, especially from Iran. Examples of the former include Edward Said's *Out of Place* (1999), Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage* (2000), Henry Louis Gates' *Colored People* (1995) (though all these are more chronologically organized and considered than *LWL*); and of the latter most notably Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) and Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Blood is a frequent motif in this text, ranging from Fawzia learning about menstruation (37-38) to violent deaths, to bull-fighting in Spain and self-immolation by Shias mourning during Moharram.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent recent intervention in these debates, see Shameem Black, especially Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>10</sup> See Nandi, 47.

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