

## Discovering Herstory and Construction of Alternative Female Identities in Fawzia Afzal-Khan's *Lahore with Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends, Pakistani Style*

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to re-explore and reconstruct the historical narrative of Pakistan depicted in Fawzia Afzal-Khan's *Lahore with Love* (henceforth LWL) from a feminist perspective. To achieve this objective, we draw on Robin Morgan's (1941 - ) concept of herstory and female identity in delineating the experiences of the female characters in memoir. This approach helps in presenting an alternative, holistic analysis of Pakistan's socio-political history through analyses of the various herstories of Afzal-Khan's girlfriends in LWL. Each vignette of her friends' voices lends a different vantage point that reflects the major events in Pakistan's history the effect of these events on her girlfriends. We dismantle the socio-political ambiance and class structures of the 1970s, followed by Zia's Islamization in the 1980s, to propose an alternative, feminist point of view. Moreover, we trace the metamorphosis in each character by analyzing the herstories that subsequently reveal the construction of an alternate female identity as a defense mechanism to survive the phallogocentric norms. The metamorphosis unravels the construction of alternative identities in order to strive for liminal spaces as the female haven. Furthermore, we deconstruct the characters' nicknames to substantiate the prevalence of a third space for all female characters in LWL. Overall, this critical exploration of the memoir from a feminist herstorical standpoint strives to showcase and problematize: a) the experiences of women who had been silenced in the erstwhile historical accounts; b) Pakistani and South Asian women's memoirs as significant feminist writings from the Global South.

**Keywords:** *Memoir, Herstory, Alternate Identities, Pakistani Women, Feminism.*

## **Introduction**

*LWL* is a memoir of Fauzia Afzal-Khan's life and her beloved country, Pakistan. The memoir lays bare the intricacies in the patchwork of Pakistan's past. It is a nostalgic retelling of the days which have slipped from Afzal-Khan's fingers but she preserves them on parchments. It is akin to a magical portal which transports the reader from one setting, time and space to another, defying the norms of chronology. It is a tale spanning from childhood to adulthood, delineating multifarious stories of women who were Afzal-Khan's cherished friends. The memoir recounts the tarnishing of those flowers-in-bloom at the behest of Pakistan's military dictator, Zia-ul-Haq, when he implemented Hadood Ordinance and sharia laws. It traces the experience of coming of age of the female characters alongside their country, Pakistan. However, this relationship is symbiotic, not nourishing. The metamorphosis in the ambiance of a country is represented with strokes of verisimilitude by the author. Furthermore, she uses flashbacks to evince the massive difference in the present and past personalities of her friends. The change in each female character's personality, or the death of some, is due to the phallogocentric socio-political norms of Pakistan. Consequently, the memoir reflects how herstory is affected by the surrounding history that the friends lived in.

While exploring herstory and female alternative identities in *LWL*, one is struck by the female centric narrative in the stories of the author's six friends, to whom she refers as her 'girlfriends Pakistani style' in the title. Unlike other writings about 1970s era in Pakistan, Afzal-Khan has given her girlfriends a unique title and a noticeable presence. Subsequently, the narrative portrays that all the female characters living in Pakistan at that time have developed an alternative identity. This identity serves as a defense mechanism for women's lack of freedom and helps them tolerate a religiously orthodox patriarchy. Furthermore, the word *girlfriends* depicts strong feminine bonds in the Pakistani context in this memoir. The Urdu equivalent for

girlfriends is *sahelian*,<sup>1</sup> a word emblematic of close bonds and feminine ties that women share with their female friends in the Pakistani society. This word highlights the feminist sisterhood in the Global South which is unheard of in the Western feminist discourse since the word girlfriend has a romantic connotation there.

The title of the memoir, *Lahore with Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends Pakistani-Style*, alludes to the streaks of herstory. Firstly, LWL denotes a re-enactment of history from a feminist stance, thereby establishing Pakistani Herstory. “Love” is omnipresent as Afzal-Khan show harmonious co-existence of both genders in her narrative. Afzal-Khan’s herstory gives voice to women, but not silence men. In fact, Afzal-Khan presents a comprehensive view via herstory. Instead of an archetypal male hero, her ‘girlfriends’ are the protagonists in the memoir. The memoir affirms the presence of the female sex in a historical narrative and mingles the personal with the political. Lastly, “Pakistani style” evokes the need for a study on herstory. Pakistan’s religious discourse, gender discrimination and class stratification is unveiled as a form of militarism. The “Pakistani style” is reflected in herstory as a true depiction of totalitarianism and its nefarious impact on women, the “girlfriends” of Fawzia Afzal-Khan.

Afzal-Khan’s intrinsic liminality is useful in tracing the construction of alternate identities of women in Pakistan. Clothes are a signifier of identity, especially in a Muslim country like Pakistan. Afzal-Khan’s fashion represents a female straddling between two realities, of being a Pakistani yet being receptive to Western trends which is tantamount to freedom in South Asia. She notes that her “own self-presentation as a middle-class woman of Muslim Pakistani background who grew up wearing a combination of Western and Pakistani-style clothing without the hijab” (Afzal-Khan, “Introducing a New Course”) places her in a liminal zone. Therefore, the discovery of an alternate identity is the writer’s own autobiographical and representational facet in her memoir LWL. Through the various

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<sup>1</sup> Sahelian is an Urdu word for female friends of a girl. It does not have romantic associations as the word girlfriend has in the Western linguistic construct.

stories in her memoir, Afzal-Khan unveils Pakistani socio-political ethos in the 1970s that forced the female population to “endur[e] the constant political upheaval that threatened... (their) freedoms” (“LWL”). She shows the unmasking of political schemes that aimed to eradicate women from the pages of history, force them to wear veil and confine themselves within the domestic sphere. Put simply, women were silenced and denied their rightful freedom of choice, freedom of speech.

Fawzia Afzal-Khan’s literary style also thrives in the land of liminality. She fuses footnotes i.e. facts with personal incidents which can be deemed as fiction. Afzal-Khan notes in the disclaimer section at the onset of the book that some incidents in the memoir are “fictionalized”. Furthermore, her writing style oscillates between that of a writer and a historian to create Faction, which is a postmodern genre of writing that merges real events of history with fictional tales. However, her story grants male characters their due spotlight and significance by conferring both genders a role in her memoir.

Continuing with the debate on the writing style of the memoir, it is idiosyncratic in its portrayal of women for they are not “flat images of modern Muslim women” (“Lahore with Love”). Afzal-Khan’s memoir lauds the protean capability of women to evolve and efface their past identities in order to form new selves/identities. In this research paper, we highlight the agency of “women characters (that) do not fit the mold of the gendered subaltern in the “third world”” (Khan, “Inevitable Multiplicity” 25). In other words, the Hudood Ordinance erased the selfhood and individuality of women in Zia’s Pakistan. This caused the formation of liminal spaces where females adopted dual lifestyles and roles. On the one hand, there was the subdued public persona, while on the other, there was the hidden self, which only emerged in their diary entries or amongst female companions. It can be interpreted as a coping mechanism for women to survive patriarchal hegemony and control. The remainder of the paper will trace the presence of these alternate identities in the female characters of this memoir.

### **Herstory and Alternate Identities**

Herstory is an invented lexicon in the linguistic discourse as an equivalent to the word history. It was coined by Robin Morgan, an American poet, activist and author. She used the word herstory for the first time in her article “Goodbye to All That” (1970). Herstory, as the term suggests, is the re-viewing of the past through the lens of a female. Consequently, herstories accentuate the role of women in the historical narrative that had hitherto been silenced and made invisible. Herstory flourished in the 1970s and 80s during the second wave feminism.

This new term and approach to study the historical narrative serves as a means of establishing a female-centric subject position as well as a feminist literary canon (Showalter 1941), while simultaneously challenging the male-centric historical narratives and literary canon. Therefore, herstory is crucial for feminism. It projects “representative and intersubjective elements of women’s experience” (Hitchcott “African ‘Herstory’ ”). Herstory further highlights that “(women’s) accomplishments (that) are too often glossed over as they’ve been forced into supporting roles” (Mack “Herstory?”). Herstory assigns significance to the invisible women who are the “supporting” pillars that keep the pantheon of reality and history erect with a sturdy formation.

In her article “On Female Identity”, Judith Kegan Gardiner states that identity is a self-contradictory notion for women who mold themselves in compliance to their surroundings. This perpetual process of change should ideally evoke displacement but it becomes a fountain of creativity for women. Females saunter between alternative identities due to their haphazard and intermittent identity development. They harbor the ability to construct and efface multiple identities at the behest of phallogocentric norms which seep into all meta-narratives such as structures of religion, society, class, etc. Gardiner rightly posits that “the word ‘identity’ is paradoxical in itself, meaning both sameness and distinctiveness and its contradictions proliferate when it is applied to women” (“On Female Identity”).

Our feminist analysis of LWL elaborates the alternative herstory of Pakistan as envisaged by Afzal-Khan through the diverse herstories and voices of Pakistani women who are not represented in the dominant historical narratives about Pakistan. Therefore, when Afzal-Khan writes about her friends in LWL, they come across as real women with a presence. This not only lends an alternate perspective to Pakistan's political history, albeit in retrospect, but also makes visible the invisible and the under-represented. Thus, LWL completes the portrayal of Pakistan's past. We contend that LWL is an unbiased image of Pakistan which does not omit men, even though male historians have often ignored the female experience in their narration.

Stringer writes that *Lahore with Love* is a "text that is both, global and local, personal and political" (Stringer "*Lahore with Love*"). With such an all-encompassing canvas, the memoir depicts the diffusion of personal in the political. Afzal-Khan "weav[es] the fragments of her memory to reconstruct history" (Khan, "Inevitable Multiplicity" 23). This incorporation of "memory" of a female in the discourse of his-story allows her to locate and endorse the presence of absent figures in the past records. By tracing the past, Afzal-Khan highlights "Pakistan's political, cultural and social transformations" (Stringer "*Lahore with Love*") via women's lives in the motherland.

The emphasis on both personal and political results in a period of transition, a liminal space of construction of alternative female identities. But in the memoir, Afzal-Khan "mourns the erosion of selfhood that some of her friends experienced" (Khan, "Inevitable Multiplicity" 26). However, this loss of identity may be viewed as a survival strategy. The women ostensibly succumb and "find themselves constrained by the normative structures" (Khan, "Inevitable Multiplicity" 26) of hegemonic powers. Ironically, the women struggle and raise a voice while enchained in domestic domains and donned in cloaks of invisibility. This memoir contests the phenomenon of historical truth. Afzal-Khan opines that reality is merely a "representation(s) of truth – claims, highly mediated and never transparent" (Stringer "*Lahore with Love*"). Historical narrative is subjective and is a mere simulacrum of the male ego. To this

historical narrative, Afzal-Khan has provided a counter-narrative of herstory.

We contend that Afzal-Khan's portrayal of her girlfriends is by extension a symbolic representation of all Pakistani women who were living through those tumultuous times. As a result, it refutes the author's view that "any one account or person can be 'representative' of a complex agglomeration of people, of multilayered cultures, is nonsense" because no one woman is the same. Thus, a homogenous representation of the female body is impossible and unjust. (Stringer "Lahore with Love"). Afzal-Khan's setting is rich in cultures and classes but the uniformity of religion, or rather a warped sense of that religion, compels the readers to fathom each female character as a prototype of the multitudes living in Afzal-Khan's Pakistan.

As aforesaid, Afzal-Khan's memory interweaves the personal with the political. Her independent flair lends the historical mark with a stamp of the female gaze and most pertinently, the presence of a female in the metanarrative of his-story. She commences with an apt depiction of the personal coinciding with the political: "Factually speaking, I was born at the end of the 1950s, almost exactly a decade after the inception of my country, Pakistan" (x). Her "inception" (x) recorded along with the nation's birth is an immediate mingling of a female in history. The birth of a girl is equated with a landmark event which is felt to be a celebration of the onset of feminism and motherhood. Females are seen as a life force. Likewise, Afzal-Khan associates her "inception" (x) with that of the country, which is the start of a new narrative pertaining to Pakistan. This new narrative is herstory. The protagonist claims that Pakistan is "my older sister(s)" (x) and that "we have come of age together" (x). By giving the country a female gender, she underpins the argument that Pakistan has to undergo identity transformation to uplift a "chauvinist revival" where women are subjugated by men (Pandit, "A Feminist Reading" 107). "We have come of age together" (x) also denotes the intermingling of the political with the personal. The external political conditions of the state carve out the personality of women in the memoir, thereby substantiating that the mother-land and its various

daughters did “come of age together” (x). By placing women in the country’s past, she grants them not only presence and a female voice but a present and future too since past matures into a future.

Sam/Samina contributes to the validity of the historical narrative through her personal romantic experience. “Her beloved” (6) was a participant of the Civil War of 1971. She shares that “thousands of East Pakistanis (were) dead, butchered by their West Pakistani brothers” (6), whilst the Pakistanis blamed “the evil Indians who want(ed) to tear ‘our’ East Pakistan away from us” (6). Afzal-Khan’s ripe memory lends the political fervor a personal sheen in the form of memoirs of family friends who “treated [their] Bengali brothers as inferior” (8). They deemed themselves to be the “sole Voice of Punjab – er, [she] means Pakistan” (8). By unlocking the cognitive vaults of her memory, Afzal-Khan lends a glimpse to the chaotic times of 1971. Her view is nevertheless unassailable in the test of verisimilitude. Truth is relative and subjective but always a speck of the entire Truth, as put forth by the writer through her experiences. She lays bare the bitter truth of prejudices harbored within a nation for its fellow “brothers” (8). As a result, the personal betrays the political.

The portrait of women in Afzal-Khan’s memoir has layers of historical revelations. Through her life story, she reveals the dismal and murky “fate...befallen many a women since the so-called Islamic laws of Hudood” (42). It is the delineation of a political regime’s assault on women. However, herstory reveals the political manifesto from the female perspective. The protagonist unravels that it was a subtle means of “curtailing women’s rights in every arena... during Zia-ul-Haq’s military regime in the 1980s” (42). The Herstory of Afzal-Khan unmask the façade of an “innocent” militia which was, in fact, a collective and representative “patriarch” (43) for every woman. The power of women was “stoned to death” (42) to ensure the male domination at the behest of religion in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The fetters of religion were employed to subjugate the female sex in order to render her weak and marginal. By tracing the impact of politics on the female population of Pakistan in the 70s and



80s, herstory reveals the atrocities, such as stoning to death, that were carried out against women in the name of Islam.

The “ultimate objective” of a “scary fanaticism” (70) is disseminated by Repressive State Agents highlighted in Afzal-Khan’s Herstory. Repressive State Agents are, as put forth by Althusser (1970), forms of command to ensure obedience for a particular ideology or power. For instance, Dr. Israr Ahmed’s “vigorous movement for the revival of Islam” (70) manifests in various moments enumerated by Afzal-Khan. This conglomeration sheds light on the evils perpetuated “in the name of reviving Islam” (71). Some of these misogynistic evils include termination of the “rights of women,” “rape of the...poorest of poor women,” “accus[at]ions of fornication and adultery” against women (70-71), alongside the man-made right to “cut off the noses of these amongst them who dare assert their desire to marry men of their own age” (71) or of their own choice. Herstory brings the forced female subordination and gender violence to the surface.

The deplorable status of women and deterioration of judiciary in Pakistan is portrayed via the retelling of the past from one’s memory in LWL. Women’s legal testimony was nullified due to gender discrimination (128). The female sex was “asserted” to be “emotional and irritable, with inferior faculties of reason and memory” (128) so she was silenced. Ironically, her entire existence was reduced to a “half” (128), in spite of her being the bearer of life. The imposition of Islamic Shariah by the fundamentalists aimed at eradicating women’s agency. The political regime used religious radicalization to silence the female voice.

Afzal-Khan’s herstory reveals the extent of censorship in Pakistan. The multifarious impediments hampering the freedom of expression are divulged in a historical narrative woven by female hands and seen by female eyes. This is a reference to the hue and cry in Pakistan against Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* which draws a literary allusion to religious personages from Islam. Its publication enraged the Mullahs as a female voice recounts in the memoir: “...tires / Burn in riots / Against Rushdie” (149). The marginal sex

recorded a literary void and lack of intellectual understanding in clerics who see and read just the alphabets on a page and are quick to condemn and announce punishments for any dissenting voice.

In order to show the construction of female alternate identities in the memoir, Afzal-Khan's characters, who are also her real life friends, present a plethora of identities with their "ever-multiplying fissures of a selfhood fractured into so many roles – performances of identity" (162-163). Living in a patriarchal Islamic Republic, they have to interminably mold themselves to appease the dominant gender, men. But the society also compels these women to explore alternative identities. Consequently, the female characters show the truth of female existence.

Samina, one of Afzal-Khan's friends, belongs to a lower middle-class conservative family. She explores her true self when she falls in love. Though Afzal-Khan depicts the journey of all the female characters into womanhood, she writes that "none of [them] know quite what that means" because grown up "women" do not get the liberty to sculpt their own identity (10). Instead, they are forced to become an unwitting model for the male sculptor who chisels their identity for them as subservient, silent, shy and senseless "women" (10). Nevertheless, Samina rebels against this discursive pattern. She asserts her "freedom" by falling in love (10). However, she meets a drastic end for her transgression into "the corrupt outside" world (15), which is the domain of the wayward Other. Samina's desire to claim her "freedom" of choice receives a final and irrevocable rejection of identity at the hands of "two young men" who grant her the stature of a "dead body" (15), refusing to acknowledge her as Samina.

Samina's affair, in spite of its failure, is a rebellion against the male repressive ideology. Her defiance in the face of the male ego restricts her from negotiating a liminal space for herself. It is so because she blatantly refutes the norms of parental-conjugal subjugation, in terms of dominance of male figures in one's life such as father, brother, husband and finally, the son. Unlike other characters, she does not construct an alternative identity as a survival strategy. She gets wiped out of the system lest she besmirched it. Both

face the music for uplifting their personally formed identities as opposed to the construction of alternative roles.

Hajira's introduction, which begins and ends in blood, foreshadows what awaits her. She is introduced as a girl undergoing her monthly menstrual cycle and uses a "modess pad" (29), which the author *mistakenly* calls a "modest pad" (30). This linguistic joke is a symbol for Sufi's, her husband, male chauvinist demand that she become "modest" (30). Falling a prey to the "clutches" (10) of patriarchy, Hajira eschews her modern lifestyle for it is stereotyped by fanatic men as Westernized, which is a euphemism for debauchery. It is merely a signified incorporated to impose female subordination with the aid of misrepresentation of Islam. Hajira succumbs to the phallus. To prove that she dotes on Sufi, she transgresses into a liminal zone. The space demands from her to entreat Afzal-Khan that "Darling, don't call me that name (Shelley) again, please" (40) allowing her to eradicate a facet of herself. She morphs into Haju from Shelley. Her proclivity for the change in names is symbolic. By denouncing her old nickname Shelley, not only does she bid farewell to a modern life but also shows her shift from the mystical domain of naturalist and the iconoclastic poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Rather, she treads into the dogmatic and fundamentalist world of a Haji, a religious zealot. The conversion of names sketches a parallel "inception" (x) of an alternative identity for Hajira, giving birth to her liminal space as she is a Haji who yearns to indulge in art. Art is deemed a blasphemous discipline that mirrors God's power of creativity. The apex of Hajira's assimilation of an alternative identity is evident when she is "seated behind Sufi" (43) on his communist motorcycle. The positioning denotes victory of the male bourgeoisie over the female proletariat who walks "behind" (43) the master.

Hajira negotiates an alternative space for herself as a docile wife. But she is deprived of her liminal sphere when Sufi wrenches her out of the cathartic world of arts. Her husband and his replica of religion construct an alternative identity for the free-spirited and jubilant Hajira, transforming her into a wan and listless "sad-eyed wife" (56). It is noteworthy that "wife" (56) is an imperative label for

her newly acquired identity. The weight of the masked identity crumples Hajira who withers away with a “sardonic smile” (57). However, Hajira is not deprived of life by the male master. Her suicide shows her agency. In that agency is the freedom and control that a woman exercises to battle phallogentrism in society. Therefore, her end is “a sardonic smile” (57) akin to Cixous’ Medusa’s laugh. In her suicide, Hajira asserts her agency, freedom and her final identity which peels off the mask of her previously assigned alternative identity.

While Samina and Hajira revolted outwardly, engulfing themselves in the flames of self-annihilation to shed their alternative identities, Saira and Naumana strike a contrast. As their defense mechanisms, they wittingly embrace alternative roles to live a life in compliance to the norms erected by the militant and zealous male dominated society. Saira transforms from a fashionable girl to a woman who takes umbrage on Afzal-Khan’s “shameless references to [her] legs and bosom” (65). She bows down in fear of even her “twenty-four-year-old son” (65-66) who would renounce his mother’s true identity with religious cries of condemnation, “*tobah, tobah*” (66).

Simultaneously, Naumana adopts “false divisions” created by the “male interpretation of scriptures” (69) just to serve their phallogentric ideals. She creates her haven in the construction of an alternative self which reflects a perfectly subservient Muslim woman. “Dr. Israr’s lectures,” however “false” they may be, helped her “come to grips with ... [her] life” (69). Therefore, she uses her agency in an ambivalent manner. She willingly adopts the role of an alternative Naumana, who follows the “revitalization of Iman” in a “false” and illusory manner to ensure her “existence” (69) in a male-oriented, radical Pakistan.

Both friends, Saira and Nomi, create a façade to survive. They exercise their agency by choosing to carve out alternative identities for themselves. Saira oscillates between sanity and insanity, adopting roles of Bertha and Jane Eyre. Her shift from sanity to insanity echoes a transformation from the normal to the deviant. The asylum where

Saira is admitted serves as her liminal space. It is her sanctuary from where she negotiates “fissures” (162) and splits in her identity. The asylum mirrors Hajira’s diary and Azar Nafisi’s reading room in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* where all women digress to imbibe their true selves. These spaces become their niches which grant them freedom. After returning from the asylum, Saira strategically recrafts her identity to survive in the turbulent political and religious dynamics of Pakistan.

The title of the memoir itself is an elemental drive for the critical probing of alternative female identities. “Growing up” intimates formation of identity as an undying process according to the “Pakistani Style,” which encompasses religious, political and gendered hegemonic discourses to usurp women’s freedom and agency in the country under the guise of “Iman” (69). The setting of the narrative in Lahore is important as it is the center of cultural and social life in Pakistan. In this study, Pakistan itself is constructing an alternative identity due to the changing political regime and its manifestos. The country survives in its liminal spaces through an array of women ranging from liberated Madinas and Fawzias to subjugated Sumairas. The motherland also inhabits those who have a dual identity to create the flux of liminality exemplified by the writer’s friends Saira and Naumana. Hence, it may be deduced that liminality for the female characters in this memoir leads to the exercise of agency and emancipation through construction of alternate identities.

In conclusion, Fawzia Afzal-Khan’s *Lahore with Love: Growing up with Girlfriends, Pakistani Style* shows Herstory of Pakistan and Pakistani women’s construction of alternative female identities. The writer, via her characters in this memoir, delineates a parallel genealogical line of the country by viewing it from a female and feminist lens. This lends the historical record a missing voice, i.e. the female rendering of past events. The immersion of the female body and its role in Pakistan’s history affirms women’s presence and agency. It is tantamount to a female giving birth to a narrative as the study on Afzal-Khan’s memoir lays bare the detrimental influence of

religious and patriarchal militarism on the female population. Representation of the past from a female perspective is also a means of procuring the marginal status as “Pakistani” and existing in “Pakistani Style”. Thus, sketching herstory reclaims female existence and agency.

Women create liminal spheres for themselves where they traverse between their adopted and indigenous identities. We have categorized such women into two kinds. One group asserts their agency by ostensible displays of defiance, while the other hoodwinks the patriarchy with a false compliance to male demands. It is noteworthy that a false, fabricated self does not mean servitude since the female characters willingly adopt that stereotypical aura as a survival tactic. Hence, it is a subtle and subverted way for women to exercise their agency. Put simply, female characters preserve fluid identities to enable their safe existence in a turbulent and fundamentalist country. The lands of liminality become a female’s haven in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, the identity crisis of women is depicted via alternative names. Pakistan is also inferred as a female entity that also displays identity transformations similar to its female inhabitants. We hope to have shown how religion is employed as an ideological and repressive state apparatus by Zia-ul-Haq’s regime to make women invisible and docile by silencing their voice and how herstory makes women’s voices heard and their presence visible.

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