

Partition and its echoes in Karachi: The political agencies of Fahmida Riaz and Perween Rahman

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jcl**Amina Yaqin**

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Abstract

This article, shaped as a conversation between a scholar and an artist, critically examines the mapping of the lived experience of Karachi after Partition through a discussion of the poetic journey of the feminist activist Fahmida Riaz and urban planner and architect Perween Rahman.¹ These two activists were directly affected by the Partition, albeit in different ways, and it is through their creative practice that we try to understand the hauntings of the past in the present. This helps us to move beyond linear ways of interpreting the Indian Partition's many effects on lived experiences of communities in Karachi. While Riaz writes of the death of metaphor and the inability of verse to capture the harsh realities of everyday life in a dystopian city, Rahman gives agency to the disenfranchised and dispossessed within the urban settlements of Karachi's poor through a participatory model of community-based mapping. What emerges from the dialogue is a recreation of several voices across time and space that carry the echoes of Partition and the conditions that surround us now. It thereby offers a way to re-envision and reclaim an embodied form of mapping through memory and walking across disciplines to engender cultural change.

Keywords

Fahmida Riaz, Karachi, memory, Partition, Perween Rahman, transdisciplinary, Urdu poetry, visual culture

Preface and introduction

The idea for this piece germinated in response to the editor's call for papers, which asked for a consideration of "how the division of the sub-continent remains a subtext of

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post-independence literature". Initially, Amina Yaqin, had considered exploring the prose writings of Fahmida Riaz through her travelogue, *Zinda bahar* (Living Spring), a memory of her visit to Dhaka; her novel *Godavri*, set in Maharashtra; and her poem 'Naya Bharat' (The New Bharat) as a legacy of Partition texts. During her research, Yaqin became increasingly drawn to the poet's relationship to place. Born in pre-Partition India in 1945, Riaz grew up in Karachi, Pakistan, with her family where she established herself as a Progressive Marxist feminist activist and a poet. How did Riaz reconcile the imaginings of a secular Marxist consciousness with a city that was turning to the ideology of a new Islamic nationalism and undergoing rapid development? In order to build on Riaz's representations of Karachi in her work, Yaqin turned to visual artist Naiza Khan for a comparative intergenerational perspective. Khan's knowledge of the city and her interactions with the architectural work and writings of Arif Hasan and the urban activist Perween Rahman led us toward a conversation about the navigations of time and space across the work of two powerful women and their personal and professional interactions with the city. Rahman was born in Dacca (now Dhaka), former East Pakistan, in 1957 to a migrant family. Following the civil war in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) in 1971, her family migrated to Karachi. As an urban planner and an activist, she worked toward social justice through the Orangi Pilot Project dedicated to the improvement of living conditions of Karachi's urban poor. She was murdered in 2013 as she got closer to the truth about the land mafia and illegal water supply in Karachi. In contrast, in the 1980s the spectre of the Partition haunted Riaz, who came under scrutiny by the military state for her journalism and political and personal affiliations. Riaz died in 2018.

In bringing together the work of these two intergenerational activists and migrants, one from Meerut in pre-Partition India and the other from Dhaka, both of whom were impacted by the afterlives of Partition and the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 through their migrations and movement patterns, Yaqin and Khan hope to open up new ways of thinking about the many layers of Partition history (Mohanram and Raychaudhuri, 2019). In this dialogue they revisit Riaz's changing relationship to community and to Karachi alongside Rahman's involvement in the Orangi Pilot Project. Their conversation underlines the navigation of time and space by both activists and the vexed ownership of land after Partition.

Yaqin and Khan's exchange is an interdisciplinary investigation into the intersections of Urdu literature from Pakistan and the use of practice-based visual research for interrogating Partition and its legacies. In doing so they explore the southern port city of Karachi as a place of multiple migrations and settlement through the eyes of Riaz and Rahman. With its rapid transformation from a pre-Partition city into a post-Partition home for migrants and refugees, Karachi is also home to the echoes of a colonial past and a turbulent postcolonial present. The engagement with the city space of Karachi is mediated through Yaqin and Khan's respective fields of study and practice in literature and visual culture. Khan's project *Walking in Common*, which she developed at the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths College, sparked off this discussion. She conceptualized a series of podcasts as a chain of creative collaborations with different practitioners, and as part of her methodology formulated a set of guidelines for collaboration in relation to a specific site, geography, text, or memory.²

Walking inCommon builds on Khan's research on the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP),³ Karachi, spatializing the situated, pedagogic learning of Rahman, director of the OPP Research and Training Institute (OPP-RTI). Rahman's training in architecture, housing, and urban planning led her to the OPP in 1983, where she successfully implemented programmes of low-cost sanitation, housing, health, education, and credit for micro enterprise. She was an outspoken critic of the land and water mafias in Karachi and their political patrons. In February 2013, the social activist was shot dead in Karachi near the OPP office, thus ending her long career of 28 years to empower the community and fight for the poor. For Khan, the work of the OPP is a starting point for her project, a portal to explore how ideas of a performative, embodied mapping can trigger multiple ways of sensing the land and the body. This question of land and who owns it continues to be a violent legacy of Partition.

Responding to Khan's provocation to think about situated knowledge through poetic narrative, Yaqin looks to Riaz's writing on the city. The award-winning poet was known for her work as a truth-teller, activist, and feminist in a conservative and authoritarian landscape. Her body of work includes collections of poetry, translations from Persian and English, and prose writings. She worked as a broadcaster for Radio Pakistan and with BBC Urdu radio service in London. Her collection of poems, *Badan Darida* (The Body Torn, 1973), attracted notoriety by upsetting the conventions of Urdu poetry when it came to expressions of self and subjectivity by a woman.⁴ Influenced by Sufi thought, ideas of humanism, and Marxist class politics, she deploys Urdu writing in its different forms to convey love, desire, and ideas of the self. Her sensory and philosophic writing is suggestive of transnational subjectivities transforming cultural geographies that delimit urban spaces for women.

Bringing their respective perspectives together, Yaqin and Khan talk about the role of memory, situated knowledge, and the performative act of walking in selected writings by Riaz. Drawing on the principles of a participatory methodology, they situate Riaz's poetics and Rahman's counter-mapping at the intersection of multiple migrations, postcolonial feminism, and environmental justice struggles. In this way they attempt to set up a transversal relationship between what they produce and the knowledge produced by others.

Naiza Khan (NK): This special issue has given us an opportunity to revisit and further develop the podcast created for *Walking inCommon*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I began to think about ways to extend my research through a form of remote practice. To understand the local and situated politics of the place, my primary mode of research was the interview. As travel for field work was not possible, this remote practice grew into a set of guidelines for potential collaborators.

I began to storyboard a chain of virtual encounters that linked in time and space to artists, writers, and scholars in different locations. This was an attempt to bring Perween Rahman's work into dialogue with other voices. Initiating the process through guidelines for collaboration, I asked you to respond to a set of registers that were more a provocation than questions assembled through a set of fixed locations or cities (Ingold 2010). So, it was important to consider the idea of *locality/location* as a way to ground the conversation to a specific place and memory, and to create a tangible space for the listener. This connected to the notion of the *sensory*, to think about atmosphere and how sound and

touch can inform our knowledge of a poem's construction and metre. I am interested in connecting to your knowledge and perception of this location in a way that is sensory and critical. Can you think of this provocation as a situated gesture? Finally, it is important to give thought to the *condition* under which we are currently living, and how we are navigating our lives through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Amina Yaqin (AY): After much reflection on your invitation, I thought I would respond by bringing Fahmida Riaz into dialogue with Rahman and, thinking through your guidelines for collaboration, focus on the city, desert geographies, and landscapes that are integral to her aesthetic. On methodology, the act of walking also took me back to Michel de Certeau's definition of walking as an everyday spatial practice in his essay, "Walking in the city". Both Rahman and Riaz, through their different practices, reclaim the city spaces of Karachi from its official cartographies. The spectre of the map reverberates with the histories of colonization, mass migrations, and the rapid transformation of the city. Riaz shares with Rahman a resistance to inequalities and her reimagining of the city is located within multiple geographies. So, to start with, it is useful to think about the broader Urdu tradition that Riaz is a part of. The city has been a feature of Urdu poetry and is part of its Islamicate heritage, reflected in the genre of the *shahr ashob* (Tignol, 2017) which has many layers including responding to the social and political climate in satirical and humorous ways. The genre is associated with the nostalgic mourning of the decline of a city such as Delhi at the end of the Mughal empire. That link to histories of empire and its decline is connected to the question of colonial modernity and its transformations over time. How do we make sense of the social concerns of the classical *shahr ashob* and the medieval city in its twentieth-century rendition? Riaz allows us a way in: she articulates this as a lament for lyric poetry and its inability to absorb class relationships, the "megapolis", and the female body. Her knowledge and experience of the craft combined with her activism is typical of her unique style. She places an emphasis on the female poet wandering the city as a migrant traveller.

Going back to your point of location, given that we are discussing this from London during the pandemic, let us first situate ourselves. During this unprecedented time, we have travelled less, worked from home more, and explored the city through walking, haunted by the spectre of death. As I walk around the parts of London that are near me, I have learned more about my local area and the routes that I'm comfortable with and feel safe in. This idea of safety and walking the city reminds me of one of Riaz's poems set in London called "Sura-e Yasin". It symbolizes the Quranic Sura as part of an everyday lived experience of religious life and conveys the vulnerability of a woman on her own. Although she does not identify herself as the narrator, the *nazm* (poem) has an autobiographical element — Riaz's experience of walking back home from film school in London:

Shaid men rasta bhul gai
Ye rah to meri rah nahin
Is rah se men kab guzri thi
Sab galiyon par yahan nam likhe

*Is gali pe koi nam nahin
 Aur dur dur tak dam sadhe
 Ye sare ghar anjane hain
 Lo pile chand ka tukra bhi
 Kale paton men dub gaya
 Ab kuch bhi nahin
 Bas mere mun men khauf se bhari aur mafluj zaban hai
 Ya
 Talo'on se upar charhti hu'i
 Mere ang ang men rachi hu'i
 Ik khunki hai.*

Perhaps I forgot the way
 This route is not my route
 When did I pass this way
 Every street has a name
 This street is nameless
 Far and wide holding their breath
 All these unknown houses
 Lo, the yellow crescent moon too
 Has sunk behind black leaves
 Now there is nothing
 Except imprisoned in my mouth is a fearful tongue
 Or
 Creeping upwards from my soles
 Saturated in my every pore
 Is a chill. (Riaz, 1988: 116–117)⁵

The poem is marked by the sadness that Riaz experienced in an unhappy marriage and communicates her alienation as a stranger in London. Expressing her interiority is part of her aesthetic and therefore the poem is a navigation of the city from the perspective of a pedestrian, a lone woman. London is also where she wrote her collection of poems, *Badan Darida*, which received a strong reaction from the Urdu literati who thought the bold sexual content was unbecoming for a *sharif* woman. In other words, a respectable middle-class woman has to observe certain moral boundaries.

Later, when she resettled in Karachi, her political writings critiquing the military state and editorial role on the political magazine *Awaz* made her vulnerable to accusations of anti-national sentiment. She fought cases of sedition and sought refuge in India to escape

incarceration (Riaz, 1987). All these things make her feel in exile, I think, at a personal level. And that sense of exile is a constant presence in her work. In another poem, “Bakira”, she echoes the imagery of the arid landscape of Hijaz or Arabia, as represented in *marsiya* poetry (see Naim, 1983: 101–116). The migrant’s gendered body is morally and ethically stranded and scorched by the desert. Her location is most likely in Sindh but it could be anywhere. You can also read it as a displacement from the developed city.

NK: The notion of “displacement” is both conceptual and visual. I feel she is trying to make sense of the city that has been violently displaced in its topography, as were so many cities during Partition. And your description of the landscape reminds me of early Renaissance paintings in which there is a division of terrestrial and celestial space, and the landscape becomes symbolic of a path to heaven: a portal to another world.

AY: So, let us look at this portal that offers a material response to the metaphysical self. The poet narrates a walk in the desert that culminates in a sacrificial act carried out by a female protagonist, who expresses her dissatisfaction to God after performing the ritual:

Aasman, tapte lohe ki manind safaid
Raig sukhi hui pyase ki zaban ke manind
Pyas halqum men hai, jism men hai, jan men hai

Sky white, like overheated iron
 Sand like parched thirsty tongue
 Thirst is in the throat, in the body, in the soul. (120–121)

And it is that fear of the unknown. What have I done? What happens next? It can be interpreted as a representation of how women themselves are part of that structure of sacrificing other women in sexual and contractual relationships. In this poem, she also plots a Sufi materialism that is a distinctive feature of her work. Her philosophic thinking is led by Sufi influences, such as Rumi, but she is also a materialist. As a feminist, she thinks about how the body is acted upon. One can argue that the answer to the poem’s question about moral duty and women is represented through the unforgiving climate. In many ways, the climate is also reminiscent of the stark landscape after Partition and the damage done to communities.

NK: The idea of speaking through the non-human condition of the atmosphere is powerful, and one that has an urgency given the climate crisis we are facing. This verse also highlights several ideas in relation to the research around this project. I was interested in the fieldwork observations and language used by Rahman and mobilized by her in different locations and scales. She migrates the terms of a geographical mapping to that of an embodied, corporeal connection, which is rooted in her own situated experience. The spatial dimension of *Walking inCommon* is in part created from within this language.

For example, Rahman compares the map to an X-ray of the body, revealing, stripping down to the core: what is essential, what is in distress — connecting the idea of mapping to the body itself (2013). This comparison also intertwines the embodied process of walking and the X-ray's primary function to scan and diagnose (Columina, 2019). The metaphor of the X-ray makes visible something that cannot be seen, or has been obscured (by the state), and that becomes a tool for change and transformation through this visibility. In this way her archive of fieldwork observations becomes a living and operative tool, which allows us to get a deeper understanding of the collective issues faced by the community. By expanding the meaning of these terms, we see the emergence of subaltern subjectivities with relevance to the project.

For Rahman and students at the OPP-RTI, drawing the lines of the Orangi settlement was a way to learn from the community. It became a two-way transmission of knowledge, as the community learnt to lay sewage lines and build essential infrastructure in their neighbourhoods. These counter maps, if we can call them that, developed environmental literacy and political agency within the OPP community and beyond, and eventually supported legal claims for land rights. Forming a consciousness of land rights was also a part of the Partition project, and so we continue see the afterlives of Partition in such land struggles.

I am reminded of another text, which looks at the role of “walking archives” and the recovery of history and memory. Sonia Borges examines how much of the archives of the PAIGC (African Party for Independence for Guinea and Cape Verde) were lost in the war in Guinea-Bissau, specifically documentation of the militant education. When Borges began to research, record, and translate the revolutionaries' testimonies, it emerged that it was through walking that they created the revolution: that “the struggle was made of walking and marching, a constant walking” (Borges, 2019: 19).

In Riaz's poems, I also look for submerged perspectives (Gómez-Barris, 2017) such as gestures of decolonial walking in relation to Partition history, as an inherited, encrypted language. For me, the memory of large-scale evictions come to mind in relation to Partition history and then the secession of East from West Pakistan in 1971. Rahman's family fled during the 1971 war and settled in Karachi as refugees. So, I feel that histories of dispossession and historical memory find ways to re-emerge in different forms, and become mobilized within local geographies and frameworks. Rahman's personal history is reflective of her affiliation with struggles for land rights and issues of social justice.

AY: Your decolonial approach opens up the possibilities of an intersectional analysis of community when it comes to Partition, gender, the environment, and class politics. With regards to the woman question, it is hard to extricate it from a binary and non-inclusive gendering after Partition and independence. We can look back at the way women are fetishized and symbolized as carriers of a national identity rooted in shame and subservience. Riaz, as an activist, was a supporter of the women's movement in Pakistan which fought back against an authoritarian state and its attempts to use the law as a means of controlling sexualities. Protests took place in the 1980s against the Hudood Ordinances implemented by General Zia, where women's bodies were targeted in the symbolic campaign that was General Zia's *Nizam-e- Mustafa* (law of Muhammad) strategy of reiterating the Islamic state (see Khan, 2006). Activists have continued to demand

the right for women to coexist alongside their male counterparts. In my current research I am exploring the potential of new methodologies and the question of agency across postcolonial and decolonial theorizations. For instance, a focus on indigeneity and the epistemic violence of history has been at the heart of the postcolonial thinker Gayatri Spivak's 1995 work on the Bengali writer and activist Mahasweta Devi. In contrast, a decolonial scholar such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) rightly questions knowledges that emerge from European imperialism and colonialism and benefit researchers in the Global North only. The feminism and activism of Riaz as an Urdu writer can take us toward a participatory methodology from a Global South perspective of shared languages and community voices. Her poetry archive along with Rahman's work can help us to reflect on shared post-Partition futures and how we define heritage.

When we come to protest marches, they are directly connected to the women's movement, the closure of the Left by the military state, and the impact of Cold War politics in Pakistan. The women under the umbrella of the Women's Action Forum were marching in the 1980s to protest against the infringement of rights by the introduction of Hudood Ordinances and the control of women's sexualities through Islamic law. Women poets such as Fahmida Riaz and other writers involved in the resistance were linked to the historic left-wing Progressive Writers Association. During this time, the targeting of the Left through Islamic ideology was also facilitated by the military state's cooperation with US Cold War Politics and their proxy war in neighbouring Afghanistan. This cooperation promoted Islamism as a tool to counter Communism in Muslim countries (Toor, 2011). Thus with the official closure of the Left, women's alliances became an important site of activism. Riaz, Attiya Dawood, and her contemporaries writing in Sindhi, Punjabi, and Siraiki voiced regional resistance (see Riaz, 1986). Their archive is rich but lesser known. It is also unfortunate that Urdu writings on 1971 are not as accessible as they should be in Pakistan for a number of reasons including state censorship and fear of reprisal. There is an archive of protest that needs wider circulation and recognition. Riaz's (1996) travelogue on that period is interesting to read alongside Rahman's biography, and their narratives unlock deep-rooted cultural and collective memories.

NK: I feel language is an important part of how both Rahman and Riaz map personal identity and create a new social imaginary. By this I mean how they produce a mode of resistance and counter-narrative in opposition to the regimes of power around them.

On a different note, as I edited the podcast series, I realized there were many complexities in the production of collaborative work. The bumpy recordings and ambient sounds gave me a sense of the uneven geographies we have lived in during this time of COVID-19. The word so often heard during the past year, "transmission", has been evident in my project, in a creative sense. I found myself in the role of a mediator within this field of voices; there were points of intersection where ideas transmitted from one author to another. It was like creating a new, imagined network of conversations, a multisensory map. For example, in his podcast, artist Christopher Cozier creates a speculative map of observations around the relationship of language, autonomy, identity, and geography, as he recalls his walk-through Port of Spain. His form of an embodied walking to re-envision and generate a cultural change resonates with the afterlives of the Partition that both Riaz and Rehman confront in their respective struggles.

AY: When it comes to new technologies of communication and transmission, the creative work that you have done during Covid translating and transmitting voice across multiple cities has been innovative and inspiring. I have enjoyed listening to what the others had to say, and now it is good to hear more about your process. Language has been an interesting and important witness in this journey across time. It bears the burdened memory of a Partitioned history and carries the promise of new futures. That sensory act of walking and listening to languages and your conversation with Christopher Cozier reminds me of the hybridity of languages and how different authors inflect that hybridity in their work, both in English and in Urdu. Riaz has a strong attachment to Sindhi and to languages in general as part of her commitment to a multilingual South Asian heritage. However, her position is politically fraught given how languages have been communalized in the freedom struggle both in the colonial and postcolonial periods. The politicization of the Mohajir community as a sub-nationalist group and the formation of the Mohajir Qaumi Movement in Karachi is a phenomenon she must contend with (Verkaaik, 2017).

A poem that represents her negotiations with language, identity, and the city is “Kya tum pura chand na dekho ge?” (Won’t you see the full moon?). Set in Karachi, the poem can be read alongside Rahman’s work on urban planning and the right to ownership of land. Her dedication can be seen as an example of how she imagines her relationship with the city through metaphor:

Kaghaz, tera rang faq kyun ho gaya?

“Shair, tere tewar dekh kar”

Kaghaz, tere rukhsar par ye dagh kaise hain

“shair, main tere aansu pi na saka”

Kaghaz, main tujh se sach kahun ...

“Shair! Mera dil phat jaye ga”

Paper, why has your complexion faded?

“Poet, from watching your deeds”

Paper, what are these blemishes upon your cheek?

“Poet, I could not drink your tears”

Paper, shall I tell you the truth ...?

“Poet! My heart will burst”. (312)

She gives the paper a tone of confession and her poetry displays characteristics of a confessional style as seen in “Sura-e Yasin”. The narration that follows is not just a lament for the lost city in the style of a *shahr ashob*, and the woman who inhabits the poem is not a wanderer in the style of Charles Baudelaire’s flâneur, but a self-conscious projection of a woman walking the streets, demanding a new politics of belonging. This is part of her transnational aesthetic moving towards a spatial fluidity. An interesting comparative reference point here is a literary history of female writers walking global cities from

London to Tokyo by Lauren Elkin (2016), who has reinterpreted Baudelaire's male flâneur to plot the female flâneuse, who has less access to and privilege in city spaces than most men but creatively and emotionally reclaims places. I find this aesthetic resonates in Riaz's poem as she walks the city with purpose:

Aaj mere andr koi isteara sirf thakan se mar gaya hai
Lafz heran khare hain
Aur qafiya hath chura kar chala gaya hai
Banjar ho gai hai zamin
Aur vazan — mun ke bal gir para hai [...]
Kya tu bhi —
Meri shairi, tu bhi?
Mun pher le gi? Ankhen churae gi?

Today, exhaustion has caused the death of metaphor inside me
 Words are in shock
 And the rhyming qafiya⁶ has freed its grip from my hand
 The earth is barren
 And metre has fallen flat on its face.
 Will you too,
 My poetry, you too?
 will you turn your face away? Will you look away from me? (313)

This is an elegy to the country, to the city. It is about how the experiences narrated in this poem cannot absorb the pain and the sorrow. Perhaps it is also the overwhelming memory and trauma of a partitioned history. All her complex identifications come together in this poem. She draws attention to sectarian conflict, different ethnic groups, and the increasing violence in the city. Spatially, I think it is interesting because it is in the city of Karachi that her relationship to the lyric breaks down. Her emotional response is a mixture of an anthropological mapping, journalistic truth-telling, and an activist's reaction to community. To state the obvious, journalism in Pakistan is a dangerous profession because you can be put behind bars, disappeared, or endangered in some other way, without a fair trial.

NK: Yes, it is reflective of a complex set of emotions and entanglements. Riaz's poem creates a map of the city which I can navigate, because it is so situated in the materiality of place. Rahman also has to walk the lanes to locate herself in the fabric of Orangi town because she is an outsider to that community. Within the traditional environment of the settlements, Rahman's presence as a woman enabled her greater access to the domestic spaces in the community. So, there was an emphasis on participatory methods, the integral role of women in mobilizing the community, the training of youth in the settlements, and micro-finance schemes for women.

During the 1980s and 1990s, these projects were seen through the lens of developmental work, but critical discourse in the Humanities has brought a stronger coupling of research and activism to the fore. Scholars such as Rubina Saigol (2004), Nancy Peluso (1995), and the Argentinian philosopher and activist María Lugones (2003) have worked on collaborative emancipatory practice and experiential social learning. I am interested in where they place the centre of knowledge production and how it can be mobilized by activism on the ground, as well as by creative practitioners and scholars.

You said the space of “Kya tum” becomes confessional. Do you think it can also be a space of testimony?

AY: I would say the co-creation of knowledge is integral to local community-led feminisms, and absolutely there are problems with development-led agendas set out in the Global North and applied to Global South locations. An integrated approach attentive to creative critical humanities places emphasis on narrative and sets up the possibilities of co-production.

As far as the poem is concerned, I think it moves towards testimony. We can test this out by looking at the parts of the poem in which the narrator is walking and navigating the city, for instance:

*Main chali ja rahi hun,
 Iradon ko danton main pisti
 Samaitti apne muntashir hote vajud ko
 Jo bar bar bal kha kar
 Meri peshani ki girah ban gaya hai
 Main mun andhere nikli thi
 Aur ab din dhalne ko aya
 Dekho — main ne kahin tham kar sans bhi
 Nahi li hai
 Main baithi hun samjhoton ke saebanon men
 Pair larkharate hain, thokar lagti hai
 To main apna ahd dohrati hun —
 Barud ka git likhne ka ahd
 Lekin —
 Mere dost
 Main thak bhi jati hun!*

I am walking
 Grinding my desires between my teeth
 Gathering my scattered self
 That has entangled itself more and more
 Deepening as a furrow on my forehead

I left in the pitch dark
 And now the day is ending
 Look — I didn't stop to take a breath
 I am sitting in the canopied shade of compromise
 My feet stumble when they encounter obstacles
 Then I repeat my vow —
 The promise to write a song of weapons
 But —
 My friend
 I also get tired! (1988: 319)

Here is testimony that she will write a *barud ka git*, an explosive song. The verse reflects the crowded city encroaching on her vision, an existence shadowed later by structures such as the Grand American Embassy, a neo-imperial presence that has taken over the architectural landscape of a colonial city. She is the poet-narrator, the observer of the inequalities of her location. In five chapters, she unveils the “truth” of the city that has inspired her to write a war song which will rock the foundations of injustice with the horrifying evidence she finds. The poem plots a mood of fear: describing a police state, spies in the civil service, constant surveillance, bullets, guns, the presence of the army and their khaki uniforms — in essence, things that are unsaid. The narration includes direct speech, facts, interrogation, and investigation as the poet's testimony reflects a city that is exhausted with bullets and surveillance by those in uniform.

NK: This is an epic poem and a testimony to the years of strife and political attrition in Karachi. To me, it sounds like a human rights report in poetics.

When Rahman was assassinated in 2013, she was one of several urban activists who had been targeted by the land and water mafia. The milieu of ethnic strife and coercive politics in the city were channelled through contestations of land: “[T]he ethnic conflict in Karachi [...] has turned land into an instrument of power” (Hasan et al., 2013: 93). Rahman was driving an important initiative through the OPP-RTI, to teach the community youth to map their urban villages and thus create a strong relationship between community-based mapping and environmental literacy. Reclaiming the *goths* (urban villages) through this mode of mapping became a subversive moment, a transference of knowledge, and a mode of resistance within the structures of power and illegal land occupation in the city.

AY: I imagine a human rights report might be filed and possibly forgotten until someone digs it up, but the poem “Kya tum” thrives on orality and is a living memory of the violation of human rights. It is shocking, but not surprising, that Rahman was targeted in the way that she was. This violent underbelly of Karachi informs Riaz's overview of the city. The narration brings into view a city that is invisible to the naked eye. Disappointed by the absence of humanity, her walking becomes a metaphorical imprisonment:

*Main chali ja rahi hun — magar ye kaun sa maqam hai,
 Har taraf “rasta band hai” ki takhtiyān āvaiza hain
 Kya main yahin khari rahun?
 Aur tumhara intezar karun?
 [...]
 Kaghaz ke ye tukre
 Jin par main ne pyar bhare paigham likhe hain
 Zindagi ke nam
 Nazmon aur giton ke rup men*

I keep on walking — but
 What is this place
 Everywhere there are signs saying “the road is closed”
 Should I keep standing here?
 And wait for you?
 My people —
 [...]
 These pieces of paper
 On which I’ve written messages of love
 In the name of life
 In the shape of songs and poems. (349)

NK: It is interesting that the poem plots the different moods of fear and their spatial position in the city. In the years between 2009 and 2013, the *Express Tribune* printed a map of the city each day, which was generated by the investigative journalist Mahim Meher and her team. Every morning I would open the paper to see this map ridden with dots, each representing a person shot in random killings the day before. It was like an early infographics map; a location pin with a brief sentence about each target killing, such as “Sohrab Goth, 07:00, Yaqub Muhammad was shot by a sniper on a motorbike as he bought some milk from the corner shop”.

At this time, Meher was trying to do something quite complex — an experiment to create a mobile app which would track fear across the city. As news of a bomb blast or firing in a specific locality circulated through mobile messages, anxiety spread across the neighbourhoods which would have a ripple effect, causing the shutting down of shops and long traffic jams.

During this period, I was working on *Karachi Elegies*, a series of watercolour drawings that represent what I call a disrupted geography, in which Karachi’s cityscape is constantly drawn and redrawn (Khan, 2011–2014). Enclosed in a kind of amorphous cloud, the city becomes both real and mythical, opening the portal to a surreal dynamic. These works are set against the backdrop of social upheaval, mushrooming construction

sites, labour force migrations, and turf wars which transform the foreground and background of public experience.

AY: In Riaz's earlier poem, the changing nature of communications through mobile technologies and the transformation of the city through construction and migration patterns are hinted at. Thinking of memory and history in relation to the city, the span of years between this poem and the important work that you and Meher have done since reiterates the unknowability and fragmentation of city spaces.

Riaz's narration of fear and testimony gets more pronounced in her book *Karachi* (1998). It starts with a distinctive sense of place in the poem "mera watan Malir" (my country Malir) to which her use of voice adds multiple layers. Packaged as a novel, it reads as a book of non-fiction with its representation of the politics, geography, and economy of Karachi from Partition to the present. There is an omniscient narratorial voice that is reflected in the poems, and Karachi is imagined as a love-crazed woman with dishevelled hair and a bloodied mouth looking at the moon. A poem that struck me as a deeply personal one is entitled "*Maishat*" (Economy):

*Is shahr men, main yun ajnabi to na thi mere khuda
Is ki zamin, is ke falak, is ki hawa ko kya hua?
Pehchan men ata nahin, pehchan bhi pata nahin mujh ko koi
Badla hua sara saman
Hai roshni itni magar kuch bhi nazar ata nahin
Ghar the yahan
Rahte the jin men kuch makin
Ik per tha us ja khara
Jhula para tha dal par
Ik dost rehta tha yahan
Kyun mit gaye sare nishan?
Ab to faqat har mor par, har gam par
Bazar hai, bazar hai, bazar hai*

Dear God, I was not a stranger in this city
What happened to its land, its sky, its breeze?
I can't recognize it and nobody can identify me
The view has changed
There is a lot of light but you can't see anything
There was a house here
In which lived a few dwellers
A tree grew there
On its branch a swing

A friend lived here
 Why did all those landmarks fade away?
 Now on every turning, every step
 There is a bazar, a bazar, a bazar. (Riaz, 1998: 33)

Riaz includes a note to say she wrote this poem after her return from exile in India in 1987. It is a record of what she saw in the lead up to the 1990s and the rise of neoliberalism. In the prose narrative that follows, the narrator mocks the sarcastic tone of the poem, arguing that the poet does not understand market economics with her demand for a simple life. From there she goes on to detail the story of Karachi from a beautiful clean port city at the time of Partition to what she calls a “megapolis” by the 1950s. She ends with three chapters, titled “Karachi men kya ho raha hai, 1, 2 and 3” (What is happening in Karachi 1, 2 and 3) (1998: 94–110). In these chapters she talks about democracy in Pakistan, joblessness, corruption, violence, property inheritance, and inheritance tax. Religion, sectarian conflict, the uneven momentum of the economy, poverty, and class differences all come together in a vicious cycle. Riaz speaks of journalists being slapped down when they provide commentary on current affairs, such as on “disagreements between PPP, MQM and the establishment” (104). The book has many threads that connect. For instance, we are also told that a woman journalist is advised by her English language newspaper editor to avoid using the words “drug mafia” (102) because the place is Peshawar and the Pathans feel they are being framed. I have a lot of questions about this. The picture she draws of Karachi refers to its multi-ethnic (Baloch, Mohajir, Bengali, Punjabi, Sindhi) make-up and the tensions surrounding it exacerbated by the police, rangers, and the MQM, who are implicated in bribery and corruption networks contributing to lawlessness and killings.

NK: There is something about the ambulatory nature of this novel which allows for a fluid process of scripting the narrative. This comes from walking the city which enables the poet/artist to access a submerged creative life and at the same time accurately observe events, through an investigative lens. I wonder if we can use the lessons of the walking map as a way to think about the role of situated knowledge and epistemologies from the ground (Harvey and Haraway, 1995: 508). I was guided by this mode of practice in my research through a series of interviews and testimonies from Rahman’s peers and students.

The poem itself raises an important question of what is truly happening in Karachi. The contestation of land is a major source of strife which urban scholars such as Arif Hasan, Rahman, and others at OPP have been preoccupied with for years. It is above all a moral question of land rights, of the re-forming or reconstruction of the commons (Anwar, 2012: 18, 20). Through the project, I explore this question under a broad umbrella of “environmental justice”, a useful term that offers a set of shifting points that are interlinked. Rob Nixon describes “the environmentalism of the poor” as an entanglement of food security, forest rights, rights of the dead, land rights, opponents of mining and mega-dams — struggles that bleed into each other (Nixon, 2011). This becomes a movement that needs to be interrogated as an intersectional space of class, mobility, gender, and transnational solidarity.

In addition, if we are to understand the particular “environment” that has evolved in the city, we need to foreground the colonial legacy of Karachi, contemporary displacements, and historical migrations during the Partition. Part of this legacy begins in the long history of colonial violence, through agrarian laws which were set up in the nineteenth century to create precarity for the landed peasants, and a rural hierarchy which provided revenue to the British Empire.

I would add that the work and activism of Riaz and Rahman need to be seen through the lenses of intersectional, postcolonial, and ecofeminist theory to find alternative discourses of belonging to the land and also to resist patriarchal and religious nationalism (Rahman, 2019: 3, 4). I use this project and my research of the OPP to raise a set of questions and open a dialogue with other transnational discourses, which I feel are crucially linked to social justice and indigenous political organizing and resistance within the Global South.

AY: Rahman’s walking through the Orangi settlement demands a particular type of “transmodernity” for the inhabitants and Riaz looks at how planning and development encroaches on city spaces and identities (Dussel, 2012). Physical space, the land, the sea, the desert — all matter to her as the natural environment and basic existence she yearns for. The return to Rumi and Mazdak in her later work is a sign of her retreat from the overdevelopment of Karachi to imaginary worlds where social justice and love coexist (Riaz, 2006: 2017). What you said about the ability to walk the city reminds me of Deborah Parsons’ (2000) argument about twentieth-century women writers in English literature and how they walked the city for survival in the urban environment. There are always two cities, one that is being built and one that is already in place, and Riaz inhabits that space in-between.

NK: This has been a rich conversation. You have selected poems that are linked to place and practice, which resonate with the life experiences of Rahman in really tangible ways. The notion of reclaiming the city through a gendered intervention is both a political act and one of personal survival for both Riaz and Rahman. This resonates with my own experience of working in Karachi and I find inspiration in their strategies of survival, building community, and giving creative form to their struggle. By *Walking inCommon*, I feel we have opened up the possibility to reflect on land struggles, to animate historical memory, and to inspire future modes of resistance.

AY: Thank you, it has been thought-provoking to talk about activist women, the creative process, methodologies, the city space of Karachi, and how artistic narratives have contributed to transformative communities and contemporary life in Pakistan after Partition. I feel we have only touched the surface and look forward to continuing the conversation.

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Notes

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- Arif Hasan, chairman of the Orangi Pilot Project Research and Training Institute, and mentor to generations of architects and urban planners in Pakistan for the last six decades.
2. *Walking inCommon* is a series of podcasts produced by Naiza Khan for her Master's degree at the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths College, London. Available at: <https://www.distancedifference.com/the-listening-room>.
 3. For an in-depth study of the Orangi Pilot Project, see Hasan (2020).
 4. For an in-depth study of Fahmida Riaz, see Yaqin (2022).
 5. Subsequent references are to this 1988 edition of *Main mitti ki murat hun* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text. All translations of Fahmida Riaz poems are by Amina Yaqin unless stated otherwise. Page numbers refer to the original Urdu text.
 6. Rhyming essentially means 'qafiya' here.

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