Pirbhai’s Blessings

A narrative quest towards a pedagogy of virtues.

by

Al-Munir Vellani

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Metaphors of “journey” or “rootlessness” are often used to describe movements of people across cultural and social spaces, and physical geographies. Such journeys whilst revealing stories that speak of a people’s voice, are rarely seen as embodying an implicit quest for a narrative unity with a teleology and pedagogy, *sui generis*. This inquiry focuses upon the narrative journey of one such community of “travellers,” the Indian Ismailis, who left their timeworn homeland in the North Western region of the Indian Subcontinent at the end of the nineteenth century and travelled to colonial Eastern Africa to make the land their new home. In the early 1970’s, however, political unrest in this now “postcolonial” region prompted the succeeding generations of the earlier pioneers to once again uproot their African home and undertake yet another journey, this time towards the so-called modern societies of Canada and other Western countries. This historical and often turbulent intergenerational voyage of over a hundred years is also a continuous journey of a modern selfhood in *aporia* as it experiences and traverses the various institutions, practices, and milieus of modernity, while attempting to engage with or update its own biographical narrative.

Using the important and primary genre of shared conversations implicit
within a narrative and hermeneutical inquiry, this project acts as witness and delves into the narratives of a diverse group of individuals from four generations of these travellers. It is proposed that in these intergenerational conversations and stories lie experiences and expressions of *praxis* that also reveal or point towards moral enablements of practices and virtues, and arguments that make present a "living tradition." This tradition, it is felt, can act as a significant and inescapable horizon – a robust historical consciousness – from which a modern selfhood in *aporia* can once again begin to update its own narrative as part of a continuous story of a community with a teleology, and which the current and future generations of these "travellers" can recognize, argue, update, and ultimately possess as they venture purposefully into the community's shared future.

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§§§
In dedication to...

my late grandparents for their Courage, Khidmat, and Wisdom;
my parents for their Iman and Forbearance;
my wife for her Friendship and Mohabat;
my children for their Hope and Imaginations;

and,

my tradition for its Integrity in the quest for the Virtues.
Introduction...

"To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings...the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation."

Hannah Arendt

This dissertation project is about extracting such small acts from the flow of time. It is about revealing the boundlessness of small deeds and sufferings that lie inside intergenerational stories and voices of a community of people in movement who have journeyed from the Indian sub-continent, to East Africa, and then to Canada all in the period of the last one hundred and fifty years (see Appendix 2). The project, however, is also more than mere tale-tellings. Something else is being sought from these stories – not just an account of a people in movement to be witnessed where, perhaps, none has been witnessed in this manner before, but, a quest of a modern self, a conversation, a search for something deeper, something spiritual, moral, or even aporetic. It is about rethinking intergenerational relationships as the very places of conversation where renewed or novel considerations of the virtues, excellences, goods, practices, and community can be argued; it is about being a witness to people's stories, and in some cases, acknowledging voices that may have been silenced before; it is about finding places of practical-moral-settings within the stories, conversational encounters, and the ensuing arguments; and, it is also about
digging deep into characters, settings, and plots “to feel” how a people in movement have lived, cried, celebrated, despaired, loved, and died. In each of these searchings lies a beacon, a hope, a faith that such an engagement is necessary, even imperative for a modern self at a time when our moral horizons have become blurred.

And, here I must stop, for I am getting ahead of myself.

§§§

An “Introduction” is a place of seduction. Here, we see writers make an attempt to undress and lay bare some of the greater themes in their book or paper, or dissertation, and at most times rightly so. Introductions, after all, are meant to entice whilst introducing the reader to the primary topics presented in the main body of the text. In this way introductions have become a necessary part of the normal structure of most scholarly documents of which a Ph.D. dissertation is an example. There is also another ironical fact. Introductions are probably also the last area of the final touches a writer makes to his or her work and usually, I delve on them long after I have written the entire text. They are, in fact, a necessary temporal exercise where a glimpse of a textual future is provided after that future has already been lived and has moved on into the past. In other words, for me introductions rarely contain the full impact of my struggles as a writer. They are void of the torment and the moments of epiphanies that I have experienced, and they are also void of the character of the main body of my work.

For the purposes of this dissertation I will dispense with a formal introduction as a space at the beginning of this body of literature where all is disrobed and made bare. I will instead spread out “the introduction” throughout my dissertation, for it is my belief that this particular work can only be disrobed once, and that is at the time of the writing of the text when I, myself, was struggling with it. I will try to be gentle and inform you of what I intend to do,
but I cannot guarantee that your confusions will be entirely removed right away. Why?

The short answer is that this dissertation contains fragments of stories and conversations of people in movement – mine, as well as of people who have lived through a vibrant historical journey – and fragments and movements of necessity leave out many other characteristics that would have enlivened the context. The long answer, which I hope the process of reading this work and struggling through it will reveal, is that “the methodology” that I have used to pierce into the space of story, theory, and practice is: conversation, narrative, and hermeneutics all embedded as one cloth. (For, Theoretical Foundations, see Appendix 1.)

That I have realized that this “methodology” contains three different threads, I must admit, didn’t come to me at once. Yes, I knew that narrative and conversation would be the primary means by which I would enter the world of stories and re-enact meanings. But, how they would become the primary and unified “methodology” on which I would draw my comfort and thoughtful concerns would, strangely, be revealed as the hermeneutical experience of the research and the writing of the dissertation proceeded. It would become clearer to me much later, that perhaps I could not have done it any other way and that this way best suited my research personality and my thesis.

Does this mean I have dispensed with a scholarly approach? Hardly so. In fact, I believe I have exercised greater care along the way; I have become more aware of my own scholarship and my “methodology” as my experiences have engaged my writing in a dialectic. One scholar writes:

>a “truly experienced man (sic) is one who knows that he is master neither of time nor the future...Real experience is that in which man becomes aware of his finiteness. In it are discovered the limits of the power and the self-knowledge of his planning reason. It proves to be an illusion that everything can be reversed, that there is always time for everything and that everything somehow returns. The
person who is involved and acts in history continually experiences, rather, that nothing returns.”

And so under the light of this awareness, I have understood – why narrative as ‘method’? – as I have been presented with narratives of people who have shown me that inside and through narrative other complex concepts like “self,” “identity,” “human time,” “memory,” “remembering,” “despair,” “virtue,” etc. await their hermeneutics. Similarly, I have understood – why conversation? – as I have engaged in conversations with people from where other complex concepts like “conversational reality,” “speech utterances as rhetorical genres,” “social construction,” “feelings of tendencies,” “practical-moral-settings,” and “rhetorical-responsive moments” have been further understood. And, I have understood – why hermeneutic? – as I have had to (forced to, sounds appropriate) make leaps between the general and universal stories of people of the past – sometimes historical and sometimes fictional – and the very particular lived stories of a family, or an individual in the present.

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The Map of this Dissertation

As a map, I have organized this dissertation into several chapters, each either about a person or persons I have conversed with, or an event, a poem, a sacred Ismaili ginan (hymn), or a personal story. Although these chapters have followed a chronological sequence from the stories of the oldest generation (85 years old and over) to the generation in their mid-twenties, I believe each chapter stands on its own (see Appendix 2).

I have also found it necessary to frame the overall dissertation project into two parts which serve both as a breathing space for the reader, but also an indication of where my own thesis is directed as I go along in my writing. Part One, which I have named, ‘Blessings and Blows,’ is meant to set the stories and the voices against the backdrop of a tender and often disruptive journey. Part Two, named ‘Praxis,’ although in no way less a stage for ‘blessings and blows,’ is
meant to evoke the ultimate pedagogy of all the stories and narratives in this dissertation.

Within many of the chapters in both parts, I have also introduced various scholars to support or expand upon some of the social and philosophical issues that inform my work, or "the methodology" I have used. This textual space always speaks in an emboldened 'Times' font. Interweaving in spurts through the chapters, as well, is my prolonged introduction/argument piece called: "A Disquieting Journey." There are eleven connected pieces of these, interspersed throughout the dissertation where I have felt their intrusions are appropriate. In here I speak about the significant issues that have prompted me to do this research and why I feel I have achieved what I set out to do. In here, and finally in the epilogue, the project's thesis itself eventually takes its final expression. Notes supporting all eleven sections of "A Disquieting Journey" are presented together within the 'Notes' section, along with the notes on the other chapters. A glossary is also provided for the benefit of the reader.

There is also a personal wager that I have set for myself: that as I live through the experiential spaces and moments of conversation, narrative, and hermeneutic, they will reveal or orient me towards deeds and acts within stories that may make claims upon me in various ways, and I myself may change. Most of the time you'll have to take my word that in fact changes are occurring in my life -- in the way I see my world, in the way I relate with my family, in the way I engage my faith, in my relationships with others, etc. At other times, you'll see glimpses of this change right within my arguments. But, in some particular cases, I have provided myself and the reader with textual spaces where I will reflect upon myself, my writing, and my conversations under the heading: "Field Notes & Reflections." This space speaks in the 'Times New Roman' font (sometimes italicized).

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I hope this project reveals to you what it has for me, although I do realize
that to enjoy its full scope, you would have had to be born into the stories I was born into, and to have lived this journey as I have with my own community. But, as stories are also places where universal truths about our human condition are often revealed through human characters, the plots they are embedded in, the tragedies that befall them, and the settings into which the characters are born, these stories may also make their claims upon you in your own way. For this, I leave you with two verses of a *ginan* (hymn) written by an Ismaili Pir several hundred years ago:

"Hare e sabbaga nango tun aveyo nango tun vaesi, e kuch na nibhasi nale sabbaga.
Hare e sabbaga nango tun aveyo nango tun vaesi, e kar ghin vanaj vepar sabbaga."

"O fortunate one, you came naked and naked you will depart. Nothing will stay safely with you, fortunate one.

O fortunate one, you came naked, and naked you will depart. Do some good business (acts) for yourself, fortunate one." 3

Finally, it is unfortunate that the scope of my work has made me choose some stories and conversations to include over others, and whilst all conversations and stories have revealed *praxis*, I have had to select those that I felt expanded the scope of my arguments, as well as the drama on the pages. I offer my regrets to my conversational partners whose stories I may have left out, but stand to assure them that the spirit of their stories is contained in my overall dissertation. Their stories have personally helped me to care for and know myself, and my human relationships better, and to keep myself focused on my academic and biographical project which, I pray, will continue long after this dissertation is over. I hope that my conversations with them and the stories of myself that I may have shared, also do the same for them.
PART ONE

Blessings & Blows
It is my contemporary modernistic view that much of what I will experience from the moment of my birth to the moment of my death, I will experience it within the agency of a modern subject. In a particular sense, it is as a modern subject that I will account for, and understand the experience of my selfhood whilst I traverse across a multitude of modern institutions and practices each with their own general and characteristic ways of imagining human life. Yet, if I envisage each human life as striving towards a whole in its narrative sense linking its birth to its death in some coherent storied form, and I view this whole life as an exquisite weave of a complex yet intelligible unity, and if I believe that each life in so being, uncovers or is presented with a befitting telos and is guided accordingly in its moral imaginations, then modernity with its modernizing institutions and practices may offer fundamental constraints to this view of human life that I hold.¹

Modern institutions and practices are so imagined and sustained that human life is partitioned into multifarious segments.² Each segment is likely to be conditioned by an institution's mores and practices with an accountability, sui generis. Here, for example, in spite of my human agency, I may enter into roles, take up titles, be driven by goals other than my own, and may become defined into categories suited for the purposes of each segment whose aims and ends may be different from my own. I may find that I know of things as
they are, largely through the practices of modern institutions, and I may be challenged in knowing things as they can be, by the "permanencies" of institutional narratives that impress upon me. This impression, in fact, often acts to render my own narrative superfluous. And so, most likely, my childhood may be wrenched away from its own significant living moment -- a paradise forfeited -- so that I can be put in the charge of other providers; my old age would be considered just that -- old -- and kept apart and alienated lest it interferes or retards the purposes or practices of a young modern nuclear family, or even those of other institutions to which I may have served my usefulness; my personal and private life may need to be kept separate from my public and academic life as if the latter is where I do "other" cerebral things hardly important and relevant to my own personal biographical project; my academic life may seem to be sliced into disciplines and faculties that appear to separate my project further, rather than bring it into a unity; my traditional self may stand alienated from my individual and modern self, and so on.

The obstacle to me is presented in that I may ultimately begin to envisage my life not as a whole and not as an interconnected and intertwined narrative with a teleology, *sui generis*, but as separate and distinct set of episodes and actions suited to each segment of modernity's institutions and practices in what they may ask of me...
Figure 1  Map of the Indian Subcontinent and Gujarat.¹
1925 - Jamnagar, in Gujarat, India

It was a custom of time long gone by to have a person walk through the narrow gullies of the khojawaar of Jamnagar, in India, to proclaim either good news such as the birth of a healthy boy or to lament in sorrowful baritone the death of a neighbour or perhaps a little girl. This afternoon it is the latter kind of news that echoes in this lazy universe of bullock carts, bicycles, and puttering chickens. The man, a khoja of the Ismaili sect, wearing an austere mask of a jamatbhai, strides past a few barefooted children with grimy faces who take no notice of what is being said except perhaps wondering why the two little girls from Moti Bai’s house haven’t come out to play today. It is one of the childrens’ favourite pastimes, to run alongside vegetable peelings or any such objects floating in open sewers to be imagined as Kutchi pirate boats of the infamous Babu Goss scavenging inlets and oceans for loot. Elsewhere a mother’s grating voice clamours through the afternoon heat calling in chronological sequence the names of her brood to come inside for afternoon chores, to which the older one replies: “Avoochoo Maa... I’m coming, Mother,” and then, lost in an imagined battle, throws a pebble on a floating piece of gutter leaf shouting, “Surrender to Babu Goss, or die!”

The somber voice exhibits no fuss, only facts: “Jiwa bhai aneh Moti bai nee nani chokree, Sakina, goojreeh gai cheh ... Bhaayo, nani Sakina, Jiwa Bhai aneh Moti Bai nee chokree goojreeh gai cheh. Mayat aneh ziarat kaleh savaar na das vageh cheh ... Brother Jiwa’s and Sister Moti’s little daughter, Sakina has died. Funeral services and special prayers will be held tomorrow at ten o’clock.” Alibhai Devji had performed this task ever since he could remember for before that, as a small boy, he
had tagged along behind his father, Samji Devji who had held the post of jamatbhai - the keeper of the Jamatkhana - for twenty years and before that it was his grandfather, Moosa Devji.

"Poor beti," whispers Jenah Bai to her sister, Kulsum, but then had she not known that the frantic commotion in her neighbour Moti's fario (compound) yesterday night was about little Sakina. Yet, she had held off going inside only because something had told her that intruding at this time would only make things worse. Then she had seen Moti and that Muslim wahid (doctor) leave the house and had caught a glimpse of her neighbour's sorrow filled face. "Moti Bai, is everything all right?" she had braved to ask from her window which fell upon her neighbour's compound and was told that their Sakina was coughing blood but there was no fever.

"The wahid says it's double TB, but we hope there is fever soon to take the illness away otherwise my little girl will ... Ya Khoodah ... Oh, God! " Moti had answered distraughtly, and had scurried along with the wahid to his dispensary for some angresi (foreign) medicine. Tuberculosis without fever, she believed, was a sure sign of the body having given up the fight. A while later a Hindu Brahmin priest, ghee lantern in hand, had arrived with MehrAli, Sakina's chaacha, and the compound had been a buzz with incantations and acrid smoke invoking the powers of gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and then the Brahmin had left. Jenah had noticed an odd looking package in the priest's hands and had surmised that it probably contained some special concoction used as a ritual to drive the forces of evil spirits out of Sakina's frail and spasmodic frame. The Brahmin would now make sure it gets buried where no one would find it.

"Ya, Khoodah! La'illah ha illalah-Muhammed ar rasulillah ...there is no other God but God, and Muhammed is His Prophet!" blurs Kulsum, the consummate invocation always upon the lips at times like these. "Areh, Jenah, there is a curse on Moti Bai; three children, three! gone to mowla's (Lord's) house, and her husband, poor Jiwa Bhai, just went to Africa," her eyes follow the jamatbhai's steady and solemn
gait. "Beechari Sakina, only the other day she had accompanied her older sister, Sheroo, to our house," Kulsum reminisced, remembering how the two neighbouring families always exchanged mehrvan (sour yogurt culture) which was used to make fresh batches of the day's yogurt.

Sheroo, short for Sher'banoo, was about three years older than Sakina who was six in this year of nineteen hundred and twenty-five, but the two were like creatures sharing a same soul, always together, the younger one in tow holding on to her sister's tattered frock. And when their mother was busy with her house chores the two sisters would be seen caring for their two little brothers, Madat Ali and Pyar Ali. This was a tight-knit community where one's fario was enclosed only for the protection of domestic animals but never to the neighbours' children who would congregate in teams conjuring bhooth (ghost) stories or playing hide and seek among the goats and chickens, and a solitary cow. Such was the practice in the khojawaar, to share their rations, their simple pleasures, and their sorrows which they had seen a lot of over the years. In the evenings and early mornings, as they did everyday, khoja families of neighbours walked together as devotees -- women and young girls with food offerings in hand, their heads draped in pachedi and their calloused feet in cheap chappals or bare, their men always three paces in front, every so often holding a ghee lantern and heading towards their jamatkhana. Much solace resided in this place of worship for it was the spiritual ghar (house) of their Shaha, their Hazer Imam and mowla, and a place to pay homage to their Pirs. And so it was in this neighbourhood, this tiny piece of the universe, that little Sakina had played and taken her last breath.

Field Notes & Reflections

"Munir Bhai, are you listening?" the voice inquires.

"Of course, am I not here for you?" I reply in silence.
"I am sorry. It's just that I was worried, I was worried that perhaps you had stopped listening," the voice apologizes. "Promise me that when you tell my story, you will tell them that I did not suffer when I released my last breath, that both my older brothers and my grandfather were there to embrace me. Tell them I felt no pain. Tell my sister, Sheroo, that I feel her, and that her prayers and offerings for me bring me much peace, tell her that."

"Yes, I promise," I reply and wait in silence for the voice to speak again. "Sakina? Sakina? are you still here? Shall I begin again or shall we wait?"

"Yes, we will wait for now," the voice replies before it trails into the sounds of heavy traffic.

2001- Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Sheroo's apartment sits above a restaurant as if naked to the moods of the main thoroughfare and every now and then sirens of police cars or ambulances blare their cold-hearted intrusions into our conversation as if to broadcast another tragic story being unraveled elsewhere. "Loi peeh vineh teeh, hee police jeeh ghadioo ... They drink my blood, these police cars with their noisy sirens," Sheroo mutters as she settles her haunches further into an uncomfortable but favoured sofa, this time with a sprinkle of fennel seeds cupped delicately in her hands. Lately, she has been keeping unwell, stomach pains, she tells me, and these days the cold cough seems to linger. "After all I'm eighty-five years old. Koi choi? ... can anyone say that?" she chuckles, her gleaming eyes unable to hide the razor sharp wit lingering in the depths, and I wonder
how she has managed to remain of such sprightly spirit. She takes a few of the aromatic seeds into her mouth, chews for a while, then swallows the masticated mush down with a special brew called *rab*, made from the flour of *bajroh* (millet), some water, a pinch of salt, a little *ghee*, and some *gur* (raw sugar). As a young boy, God forbid that I had the flu, my mother would tromp into the kitchen to make a concoction of this vile drink that had a swamp like consistency and now the thought of it sitting in a mug a foot away was enough to push the bile juices upwards. I stare at the mug which reads: Grandma, you’re the best.

“And you? Munir Bhai, are you well?” she probes, noticing that a nervous cough escapes me as well. *Bhai*, ‘brother’ in Gujarati, attached to my name as a sign of respect sounds safe, even comfortable. I am all right, I tell her, it’s just a minor discomfort, a stress cough, nothing serious.

But she persists: “*Areh*, what? stress? at your age? Here, Munir Bhai, let me give you a recipe for a *desi* (traditional Indian) cough mixture. *Aai kagar?* Have you a piece of paper? O.K. *lakho*, write it down and *ajeh rhaat joh* ... tonight, start the first dose, *hanh*, O.K?” She waits, invokes the name of the Holy one, utters a small prayer, and then continues: “*ardhee chamchee madh, ardhee chamchi herder, akhee chamchi soonth, ba chamchi tahj, aneh ardhee chamchi makhan*. Mix it well in a small cup and drink it three times every day, but make sure you don’t drink any water with it, otherwise the *gharmao* (heat) of the
medicine will be reduced.” She watches me intently as I quickly jot down the recipe of the strange concoction, which sounds more like an aphrodisiac than traditional apothecary: half teaspoon -- honey, half teaspoon -- turmeric powder, one whole teaspoon -- ginger powder, two teaspoons -- cinnamon powder, and one teaspoon -- butter, just to soften the mixture.

She then adds, “I have tried all these angresi (Western) cough syrups ... Nayaqueel, Tileh-nol, Ben-leen, but this mixture I tell you is pakah! authentic! It brings warmth to the chest and throat and clears the garbage (phlegm). Soon you’ll feel better and yes, no milk for a few days.”

§§§

Circa: mid-1700’s - small village near Kutiyana, Gujarat

Long time ago when cities were towns and towns still slumbering villages, there lived in such a village near the town of Kutiyana in Gujarat, a beautiful khoja woman who through no fault of her own, couldn’t have children. Now she knew that the world was full of riddles and causes but this affront to her womanhood was far too much to bear and so in the silent moments of the night when her husband was fast asleep and the fragrance of young lovers still in the air, she would pray to her God: “Ya, Khooda, saat asmaan noh malik ... Master of Seven Heavens, I am pleading to you, take my shame away, take my pain away, give me a child, give me a son.”

In whispers and sighs, her supplications went on well into the morning hours where houris and djins were abundant and listened and jested. But as riddles and causes have their own purposes to which mortals rarely share, nothing stirred in her belly. Her God, at least for now, remained silent to her
pleas for He must have had other worries to be concerned with. Now her husband was a decent man, a provider of fair measure and he cared for his despondent wife, but the riddle of this emptiness didn't appear to him to be any cause of his, for he was sure of his Indian manliness. After all weren't his four brothers all blessed with healthy sons and wasn't he the fifth son of a stalwart and virile father? As for the woman's four jeths, as her husband's older brothers are called in Gujarati, they didn't concern themselves with the predicament of their younger brother. They left such worries to their homely wives, the woman's jethanis, and this they did with sprinklings of conspiracies and malices.

Mercilessly the jethanis taunted the poor woman with insults and innuendoes as she rolled chapatis or sorted dhal or splashed and thrashed the burden of piled up laundry on the riverbank, and soon it was that tears flowed into chapati dough to sour it, melancholy into dhal to mellow it, and rage into the river to brew it with curses. Jethanis had a reputation for petty conspiracies and of all the reasons, one that stood above all others was ruthless competition to win the tenderness and acceptance of their sas and sohra (mother and father in-law). Every maligned action, every foul insinuation, and every back-biting remark was sculpted and connived in order to anchor the jethanis' worth in the eyes and favour of their all-powerful sasrahs (in-laws). And so it came to be that in a house where a parkee (outsider) woman's voice hardly mattered, especially a pretty woman who came in marriage and couldn't provide heirs, such insidious competition was a fact of life.

Now it was a well known belief in all of Gujarat and in all of India where Muslims and Hindus lived, that having children and especially male children was an honour beyond all honours and to be without male heirs was an ill omen, a strike of lightning from the Master Himself. So it was obvious that from this belief came the tradition of parents to shamelessly sledgehammer hints upon their pliable sons to bear potrahs (grandsons), in order that the family's honour remained sacrosanct. The four jethanis knew of the power of this tradition and one day they would use it to conspire against the poor childless woman, the young dehrani, as the wife of the younger brother is called in Gujarati.

They say in the world over, that riddles and causes vainly guise in such
petty conspiracies and come to pry on peaceful villages. In this village of a few hundred souls, Hindus and Muslims shared much of their simple-hearted lives together and once a year the village would bustle with activity as the Hindus prepared to celebrate the festivities of Navaratri.\textsuperscript{3} Invited or uninvited, the Shi’a khojas and the Sunni memons tied in faith to Allah, and to the Holy Prophet, joined their Hindu neighbours and multi-god believers, for after all the village had been there long before the differences of their gods had interrupted the peace. For nine days and nine nights, Hindu houses and compounds were a wash with saffroned ladhoos and multi-coloured mithai, while aromatic flavours of spicy rice and curried lentils (dhals) filled the narrow alley-ways whitewashing the foul smells of open gutters in which the children played.

As night fell upon the village, the October sky of ambient stars kept its vigil over its simple souls, and in the shadows of lighted divas (ghee lamps), bajans and gheets were sung in praise of Mataji, the Mother Goddess. Men of diverse sects and variant passions danced the night away in raas, joined in a circle clapping their hands in pulse with the sounds of drums and chants, going around-and-in, and around-and-in, the tempo and pace ever increasing and soon the universe itself chanted: “I am creation-preservation-destruction-embodiment-release-creation ...” In their own enclaves, in another corner of the compound, Hindu women in multi-coloured saris wrapped snugly around their soft bellies danced to the furious rhythms of the gharbees as their more sedate Muslim counterparts, their unadorned faces veiled behind shadowy pachedis watched heedful of their husbands’ alert gazes.

For the khoja devotees, the nights of Navaratri or nohtra as some called it, had a cherished flavour for not long ago, when they were still multi-god Hindu believers, they had become captivated by the enchanting rhapsodies of one lone troubadour, a bearded stranger draped in luminous white who had appeared as a god out of the shadows of the night. They had watched his exquisite movements as he had joined the villagers in garba and raas and they had listened in rapture to his descriptions of the Divine and his ecstatic composition of verse and tales and it had made them see worlds that they had never seen before. His name was Shams al Din and he sang like a Sufi on a mission, eulogizing a saviour living afar in the West (Iran), with roots as deep as the Holy Prophet and they had given up
being Hindus and had folded to the path of Satpanth -- the True Path -- calling him Pir, for he had offered them a saviour, a Shaha, a hope, and a promise.

Now the story goes that a few days before the festivities were about to begin, an invitation arrived through the gracious words of a Hindu neighbour to the house of the five khoja brothers and their wives. The occasion to conspire came along with it and the four jethanis in mischievous whispers told their trustful husbands:

"We are so occupied with our children, we are so tired in the evenings with aches and pains that burden us, please do send the barren one for she has no cares of a mother."

They said this loud enough for every prying ear, Hindu and Muslim, to catch its maligned design and the poor woman ran into her room in tears. There she stayed for two days under a blanket of sorrow and shame as her trustful husband and her confounded sasrahs pleaded and begged and then scolded that this was a true fact -- she was the one without children and therefore without motherly cares and capable of going to the festivities, and this made her more miserable. To no avail, she declined this invitation and during the night, her heart in impassioned prayer she did gheerya zhaaree to her Master and her saviour of afar ... "Khooda tu'hn maneh ehk bachoh deh ... please God, I plead to you, please give me one male child, for this family mehn'roh mareh cheh maneh -- they are taunting me incessantly."

The Master of Seven Heavens, now present to the prayer of this tormented woman's impassioned heart listened and agreed and that night in the guise of four old women came to her in her dreams: "Hush child, do not cry for in your belly stirs a male child," they said, "and one of the boy's ears will be marked to honour the Mother Goddess. Name the boy, Dasaria, in memory of the tenth day of nohtrah and when you celebrate his varmoh -- the shaving of his hair -- invite the whole family for a picnic near the small village of Sisang near Rajkot and there, make some meehtoh khaavoh (sweet rice), and some chn'raah (chickpeas). Together eat this meal and whatever is left over you must not give it to any one else. Instead, dig a hole away from jealous eyes of all souls alive or dead, and bury deep all the left over food."
“And so it was that Dasaria the boy with one marked ear was born,” Sheroo continued, her sweet voice easing its way into the tape recorder, “and this then became a ritual for every first born child from the time of Dasaria for *pehdi joh pehdi* ... generations and generations, and not to do this ritual was considered an ill omen,” she added. “Our *atak*, our family name is Dasaria: *Samji -Dasaria - Hassan Ali - Dossani - Allahra’hn - Shariff* - and Jiwa, my father who was married to Moti, my mother from whom I am,” she proudly rattled off over two hundred years of ancestral names. “I am of that poor khoja woman’s boy, Dasaria, as was Mohammed Ali, my eldest brother who died when he was two, in spite of the ancient ritual, and Abdul Ali, my second oldest brother, who died when he was three, and then Sakina.”

Sheroo remains silent for a moment. Then, her voice now of a young woman, proceeds to sing a story of sacrifice and surrender:

*Kadhi torih nahi tuteh, agar choree nahi chutek,*
*Na chela swasah par kuteh, mohabat ho teh ye viho.*

*Pantango dash a tah diveh, chatah enee upar jeeveh*
*Mareh parn prem ras peeveh, mohabat ho teh viho.*

*Madhukar ras peeva jatoh, kamar ma kedh poora toh,*
*Moonjah toh, ne pana tha toh, mohabat ho teh ye viho*

*Mareh cheh chaatko tarsheh, ameh varshah haveh varseh,*
*Jeevan ashek tan karseh, mohabat ho teh ye viho.*
“To sacrifice and surrender oneself in Life, hunh, Munir Bhai, kai cheej ai? what’s that?” she inquires, her eyes fixed upon mine, but in her usual way, she doesn’t wait for an answer. “Life itself has an answer for us, but we must be able to see, nahn?”

“Sacrifice?” I say, unsure whether I’d heard her right.

“Hahn, nameeh vinanjoh.” I realized that the word sacrifice was close enough to what she meant but it could also mean to bow and submit to, or to give oneself entirely in Life.

“Is that what this song is about?” I ask, my voice hesitant, unsure of what she would think of me for not understanding the words of her song. “I am sorry, but this language, I don’t know it,” I add.

Sheroo laughs and translates:

What is in the light that a moth sees and feels as it flutters around and around the flames in a trance and then in supreme sacrifice surrenders its life into the burning amber, as if sketching for us in that instant the cycles of life and death? What story lies here? What love resides here?

Why is it that a bumblebee, able to burrow its way into wood to make its nest, easily succumbs to the sealed fragrant folds of a water lily at night, trapped inside to taste the nectar and to die, yet not willing to pierce the flower’s soft petals to escape? What story lies here? What does the lily mean to this little insect-spirit? What love resides here?

Why is it that the chaatak bird only waits for rain drops to quench her thirst and sings songs of praise when it rains, but then in silence sacrifices her life when there is no rain-dew to drink but water abundant everywhere? Why do the rain drops matter to the spirit bird? What love resides here?
“These, Munir Bhai, are the lessons of sacrifice, surrender, and of love. To see things differently is the Way to the Divine, you understand? Hakroh ginan ai, Pir Imam Shah joh ... there’s a ginan composed by Pir Imam Shah, you know what he says in it? that most times we are asleep to the world, we do not see the Divine in the world, and he implores that we wake up.”

I know this verse and ask her to sing it:

“Uth baeth re kiya suta, tera sana bhaler na nahi; tera shaha pir hodi na saum, tuje sana kihu bhave”

“Wake up! Why are you asleep? Your Lord and Pir never sleep, so how can you delight in sleeping.”

As I linger in the flavor of her exquisite voice, the red beacon on the tape recorder flickers its hope. A silent acknowledgement of the gift of the Mother Goddess and of this conversation with Sheroo is presented by a gentle breeze as it caresses and nudges the netted curtain. I am in sacred space, I realize, for I am being moved by the language of another, and I ask myself what it is in the nature of my being that utterances like these can move me? And then another question comes up: In what ways am I being moved?
The idea that language has a much more practical purpose is not a new one. Ancient Greek teachers of rhetorics always knew that disagreements among human beings were after all inevitable. We perceived our individual worlds differently from one another and since we used language merely to communicate and show each other our worlds as we perceived them, there could be no guarantee that we would convey to each other similar perceptions of our individual worlds. In this we got entangled, for each one of us had an opinion of the world we saw, and the opinions tended to be different rather than same, and we thought this was bad.6

Rhetorics, the ancients said, was the way to persuade people to come into common places, where we would meet each other in argument and feeling, and once again begin to see disagreement as a place to start anew. Language, hence, had a purpose far more important than merely to communicate or represent meanings of our inner worlds. It had a rhetorical-poetic use, much more mysterious and non-cognitive than the world of theory and theoretical structures. Ancient teachers preferred to use arguments that they generated from language itself and from community beliefs and stories. Opinions were valued as source of knowledge, for it was held that opinions were something held not by individuals, but by entire communities. The assumption was apparent: A person's character and hence her opinions were social constructions made by the community in which she lived, and since communities were the source and reason for rhetoric, opinions were the very stuff of argument.7

§§

"And what of the story of the little girl? the breeze whispers"

"Yes, Sakina," I reply, and proceed.
"Joh, Sakina, taari ankh ma diva bareh cheh... Look, Sakina, how your eyes shine," Mongi Bai, Sakina's chaachee teases the little girl as night descends like a black curtain on Jamnagar's khojawaar. It is well known to the family and the neighbours that little Sakina is different: different in the way her forehead stands wide and radiant, full of tehj; different in the way she prays and whispers the name of the saviour as she snuggles besides her older sister just before the night sleep overcomes her gentle spirit; and different in the way her eyes sparkle like two incandescent ghee lamps in the dark. This last bit of difference bothers the little girl for she sees ghee lamps kindle in every eye and so she retorts to her chaachee: "Tamaari ankh mah bartah hasheh?... they may be alight in your eyes?" as if she knew that her chaachee wouldn't understand if she said it matter-of-factly.

"Jah, jah, salee, taari maa neh khn'uv, pagaal... go, go, silly girl, I'll tell your mother! crazy girl," the chaachee teases again, and Sakina's moment of wisdom passes by.

The following morning, as Moti and the other dehranis and jethanis squat and huddle over the wood stove and the children of the household are finishing the morning nastoh (breakfast) the solemn cry of Alibhai Devji, the jamatbhai, comes to their attention. Moti Bai stops flapping the rotloh. "Hush, children, let me listen," she shouts whilst the rotloh (millet chapati), appears caught in between her two palms as if in a time warp.

"Ismail Bhai nee Shirin goohjree gai cheh. Mayat aneh ziarat noh kam ... Ismail Bhai's wife, Shirin has died. Funeral and special prayers will be held at ...," the voice trails loud and dignified behind the wall of their compound over which they can see the jamatbhai's sweating scalp. Moti Bai mumbles something and makes a gesture of prayer and goes back to flapping a decent millet chapati which she then drops in one quick motion on to the hot pan. Sakina, who has been watching the jamatbhai, comes up next to her mother and whispers:
“Maa, aajeh Shirin bai no naam bolavechhe, kaleh maro naam bolavsheh ... Today they are calling Shirin Bai's name, to-morrow they'll call out mine.”

“Areh, Pir-Shah, Pir-Shah, what are you saying bachee(child)? Hush, it's not nice to say such things, now go play with your sister," her mother replies in mild censure, annexing Sheroo's left hand into Sakina's right one, but clearly mindful of what has just been uttered by her young daughter. Coming from a little child, as surely as if the voice had been of the angel, such things are premonitions. The words remain with Moti throughout the morning and she shields them with continuous prayers. She reminds herself to offer a special prayer at jamatkhana that evening, and decides to make an extra dozen of the millet chapatis to take as offering.

A heavy downpour washes a certain blessing over Jamnagar that afternoon announcing a solemn day in history. Imam Husayn of the Shias and grandson of the Holy Prophet, is being remembered for his and his family's supreme sacrifice over ten centuries ago, and as the rain showers descend upon the hundreds crowded on the main road outside the realms of the khojawaar, the rhythms of chants and flagellations attract Sheroo and her little sister out of the compound and into the alley-ways. Moti and Daadi Maa follow suit. They take the hands of their barefooted little girls and join the other khojas emerging out of a convoluted maze of alley-ways, all hurrying to catch a glimpse of bare chested men chanting in fury, faith, and frenzy outside the Khojawaar noh naku (the main gate of the Khoja tenements).

“I was mesmerized,” Sheroo tells me of that day, “and the wide eyes of my little sister reflected the wonder of the moment. It was pouring rain, but my mother felt that since this solemn occasion happens once a year we should linger and watch and remember the great Imam and his family. “Do you know of the Muharram?” she asks me. I did, but
only what I had seen on television or had read when I was little.

"Yes, yes, of course. Of course I know of this occasion," I reply, but my voice is a dead giveaway, which brings a smile to Sheroo’s face.

"I still remember the crowd, and the blood from their wounds mixing with the rain."8

That afternoon, Sakina plays in utter abandon, stomping and splashing in the muddy puddles and tiny rivulets outside their compound and in the alleyways, and then collecting the rain in a small tin cup, giggling and screaming as little children do, unable to contain in her little heart the magic of the moment. By nightfall however, the little girl takes on an oppressive fever and begins to cough blood, and then her breathing comes in rushes and then quietens, and then in waves of crackles and spits. Having lost two boys to fever already, Moti wastes little time. She tells Sakina’s MehrAli-chaacha to rush to get the Brahmin priest from the temple or wherever one could be found, while she hurries to get the Muslim wahid. Daadi maa takes charge of Sheroo, who in turn takes charge of her younger brothers. It’s at this time that Jehnah, the neighbour becomes concerned about the commotion in Moti’s compound and settles near her bedroom window to observe the comings and goings.

As the night wears on, Sakina, now gasping and clearly very weak tells her mother to remove all the jewelry from her body. Then she tells her Daadi Maa in whispers to unbind her chotlees (plaits). She begins to mumble sacred names ... Pir-Shah, Ya Ali, Pir-Shah, Ya Allah, Ya Muhammed, as she oscillates in and out of a troubled sleep.
“My Daadi Maa knew that death was upon Sakina and that she was preparing to leave this world,” Sheroo tells me. “My little sister’s chotlees were undone, the hair let loose by her side, the bangles and earrings removed, and then at precisely four o’clock in the morning, when the lights of the Jamatkhana were turned-off for the meditation hour of Baitul Khayal, Sakina closed her eyes forever. From the bedroom window we could see the Jamatkhana descend into the darkness of its own mystery.”

Moti mourned and agonized little Sakina’s death for months on end, and the absence of her husband, Jiwa, who was in Africa brought the burden of loneliness and shame upon her. "My third child has been taken away," she lamented. "My womb must be cursed," she wailed. "Surely, there is an ill omen on my family," she proclaimed to all who came to soothe her. To her God she silently interrogated: "What is the purpose of this?" She couldn’t draw comfort from anything and began to withdraw into herself, while Daadi Maa along with nine year old Sheroo took to running the house chores and caring for the little ones. Then, one day a mysterious woman came from a distant village to tell Moti of a dream she had:

"Sakina was dressed in clothes that we do not see here on earth," the woman said, "and she was in such a beautiful place, oh, Moti bai, what can I tell you about this place. Your daughter told me that she is very happy, but your lamenting and sorrowing is making her very sad. Tell my mother that where I am, loi neh puhroo nee nadih cheh... there’s a river of blood and puss which I cannot cross. Tell her that I am very happy where I am." And with that the mysterious woman departed and Moti began her road to recovery, but her broken heart yearned for her husband, in Africa.
"You know what it means, a river of blood and puss?" Sheroo asks. She doesn't wait for an answer and continues. "It means that we, the living ones, are made of miti, dhooor (earth) and they in the other world are of the ruh (spirit). The river of blood and puss means miti (matter). The spirit cannot become matter again and must carry on. This is what it means, samaijah? you understand?"

"Yes," I reply.

Narrative constructions are cognitive devices, say narrative psychologists. I agree. But more importantly, they are also rhetorical devices. For besides cohering events and experiences in time so that they can be known and understood, they also provide a language of feeling, a way to know and feel the shape of the otherness around us. Properly used, rhetorical devices in the form of narrative, whether historical, fictional, performative, and in all this, conversational as well, emphasize two aspects of language: One, which I mentioned above, is the persuasive function of language of speech or text to mysteriously affect a change of behaviour and move people by changing their perceptions and beliefs; the other is the more poetic aspect, and this has "to do with giving or lending a first form to what otherwise are vaguely or partially ordered feelings and activities." 9

The stories of Sheroo and others in this dissertation do not tell me anything which I was not vaguely or partially aware of. The community of Indian Ismailis in movement from Gujarat to Africa, and then to Canada, have all had their stories to tell. But how (if at all) are these stories written, or spoken so that they morally re-position me in relation to my own situation so that I re-see myself
differently? For example, what do the stories give me in symbolic terms, as Paul Ricoeur said, such that in their giving, a certain kind of thinking arises? His words exactly were: “Le symbol donne a penser. The symbol gives rise to thought.”

For John Shotter the use of rhetorical ways of speaking and writing is no small achievement. According to him, rhetorical-poetic ways of using language “breaks the flow of our mundane thoughts and interests” so that we hold our and other worlds in contrast. We are given to see everyday circumstances in renewed ways such that we are moved and re-positioned by our common storytelling. This is, of course, “one of the great powers, and one of the great dangers, of all storytelling,” for without a moral focus, all such re-positioning hardly reveals a quest for the good of all life.

§§§

Over the persistent din of homebound motor traffic below her window, Sheroo spends the rest of the afternoon telling me about many events in her life: of the time she went to her naani maa’s (maternal grandmother) village and how every morning she drank kosoh, kosoh, tajoh (warm and fresh) goat’s milk. “Did I tell you we were ghee producers in Jamnagar? The Rajah of Jamnagar himself bought from us when the prince was getting married;” she tells me of the time when her mother taught her at a young age how to make curries and rohtlas so that she would be ready for her duties as a wife one day. “But, I told my mother, ‘I’ll choose the man I marry.’” She spoke of the journey, in 1927, by ghorah ghaadi (horse and carriage) to Jamnagar railway station and onto the
port town of Porbander where the steamer ship, Karaoa, took them to Mombasa, in British East Africa, and then to the island of Zanzibar where her father came to meet them. I checked up on this and found that there was in fact a seven thousand ton steamer ship by that name and owned by the British India Steam Navigation Company. The others were Kandala, Karapara, and Karagola.

Then, she tells me about Pyar Ali, her little brother, who suddenly died in 1926 after a parkee (unknown) woman came to their house and admired the beautiful little boy: “Hahn, tamaroh bachoh toh bov’aj saroh cheh, hanh ... Yes, your child is indeed very beautiful, yes,” and with that the woman left. “People make curses in this way, you know? Such things happen,” Sheroo says, “and who knows what debts of past lives are being paid up in this life?”

§§§

Field notes & Reflections

By now I am beginning to appreciate the flavour of Sheroo’s earlier story of Dasaria and the young woman, of little Sakina, and of the moth, the bumblebee, and the chataak bird. Moti’s loss of four young children has suddenly become my loss as a parent, and Sakina has become my little sister and daughter, and Jiwa’s journey to Africa has become my grandfather’s journey, and it has all become a way of escaping the never ending rut of life and death with nothing ever happening in
Life is fragile and humans are vulnerable, and it may be the essence of our situation to be so. But, if Life is going to be the standard of value for me then I must somehow recognize that the true glory of being human has nothing to do with the will to power, and everything to do with a humble assumption: that Life has rhythms and to submit to these rhythms is to hear the muffled cries of the universe calling out for its share. And how am I to deal with this knowing? To understand this is itself a virtue. To know the connections of a human life that is invaded by passions and turmoils, dilemmas and denouements, and births and deaths, is to grasp connections between friendship, family, fate, death, and courage. And to know this is not merely to have known the make-up of characters, but fundamentally to have known their proper place in a certain kind of a story.

The story of Moti's move to Africa -- could it have been the family's only hope to make the curse of death leave them? I wonder. And what it must feel for a mother to leave the graves of four of her children in one land, and travel to another strange land separated by an ocean and start afresh? How can I ever know, if there is no one to tell, to write, to paint, dance, or sing of it? And to listen.

Sheroo's question, "What is it to sacrifice and surrender oneself in Life?" comes up again and again as I write these lines.
Sacrifice *n.* 1. doing of an act to propitiate a god; presenting a gift, slaughter of a victim; giving up of something for the sake of something else, the loss so entailed.

*Always she thought that her worth as a person, an Ismaili, a daughter, a wife, a mother, and a human came from her relationship with the divine force of Life itself. Her breath acts like a brush; her life is a palette and every choice of breath and word reveals a careful stroke of communion with God. Sacrifice, it seems to Sher'banoo, has a lot to do with presenting gifts at every turn in her Life.*

Sacrifice *v.* 2. give up prized possession or devote oneself to ...

*The most prized of all human possessions is one's self, and for Sheroo the highest act of sacrifice is the devotion of herself towards the sacredness of Life.*

Surrender *v.* 1. give up possession or control of (something) to another;  2. to submit or abandon oneself entirely to some influence, emotion, course of action, etc.

*For Sheroo, it's in the name of Allah, that things get done. In one's own name, things only appear to get done. To abandon oneself to the Divine is not to be out of control, but to have found absolute control.*

It suddenly strikes me that I have been given a glimpse of the nobility of spirit, for Sheroo's stories tell me that the true measure of such nobility has nothing to do with how much I have given and taken from Life. The true measure is in somehow understanding and accepting the reality I have been given, including all the stories I have been born into, and which have in various ways spiced the greater or lesser social advantages I find myself in. Nobility is the ability to embrace it all, however it has been
dished out, and still come out calling it a blessing of life.

I believe that there is an explicit first order argument within the inter-generational lifespan discourse where remembering narratives of our elders and recounting, both orally and otherwise, their stories of struggles and achievements, and giving them a voice are not merely communicative events but fundamentally developmental ones. Nowhere is this more salient as in the narratives enacted between the grandparent and grandchild for this relationship is unique in that it can provide both generations with a link to the past, present, and future. Implicit to this is the notion of continuity, both in terms of the elders understanding their own life experience and using it to influence the generation of their grandchildren, but also in terms of the grandchildren who by the presence of the enacted narratives of their grandparents are able to take a firmer stand towards the future knowing where they have come from.12

“Symbolic immortality” is both an “agentic” desire, as well as a “communal” one, and to leave behind traces of one’s image on those to follow is a profound generative and developmental action. The giving of gifts of stories and making offerings of experiences lived under conditions of hardships is an inter-generational process of letting go of one’s own life creations -- be they real and tangible, or real and intangible. However it may occur, the community’s need to be needed is a driving force in creating in all its members a generative script.13
Characters introduced in Sheroo's family story
(Main characters in bold)

Sas & Sorah (in-laws) of the khoja woman

1 2 3 4
Older Brothers, jeths, their wives referred to as "jethanis."

Samji ➔ BEAUTIFUL KHOJA WOMAN, married to fifth & youngest son
She is referred to as dehrani.

DASARIA, born on the tenth day of Notrah. According to Sheroo, this became the Atak of the family.

Dossani

Hassan Ali

Allahra'hn

(Grandfather, dies in India)

Shariff

DAADI MAA (Grandmother), joined her sons, Jiwa & MehrAli, in Africa, 1927

MehrAli chaacha, fetches the Brahmin priest for Sakina.
Makes it to Africa. When? not known.

Mongi Bai, chaachi, teased Sakina.
Makes it to Africa.

JIWA ➔ First trip to Africa in 1909

MOTI, joined her husband in Africa in 1927

Mohammed Ali

Died in India - 2 yrs old
Reason: Fever

Abdul Ali

Died in India - 3 yrs old
Reason: Fever

SHEROO

Died in India - 6 yrs old
Reason: Pneumonia

SAKINA

Pyar Ali, "beautiful little boy."
Died - India
1 1/2 yrs old
Reason: Curse

Made it to Africa, in 1927 - 11 yrs old.
Embarked at Porbander.
Disembarked at Zanzibar
Ship's name: Karoa

Madat Ali

Made it to Africa with Sheroo in 1927 - 3 yrs old

34
a ruptured note

her lament speaks of a pain
of a soul in a trance,
quenched by the melodies of life everywhere
and still thirsty.

"i am of that which i cannot find,
a mere beat of ancient tune,
once raw bamboo,
now fair flute.
i am of that which i cannot see,
a ruptured note of celestial songs
once known,
now sought."

her lament remembers
ecstasies of intoxicating silence
in lavender fields of coloured lights,
tapestries of perfumed blooms.

"i am of that which kindles my fire,
veiled behind fingers of eternity,
a wayward spark,
erupted
out of burning marrow.
i am of that which shelters
in frail harbours of life itself,
a beacon,
in murky fog."

her lament seeks
a voice to chant,
a language to heal.
"i am celestial song,
wayward spark,
raw bamboo,
mere beat, 
ancient tune, 
fair flute, 
in murky fog, 

a ruptured note."
... Now, if I add another layer of complexity to this view of my modern selfhood and say that in a period of one hundred years or so, my Ismaili-Indian ancestors and I have traversed from a non-modern, rural, and perhaps harsh life of Gujarat in North Western India, through the transient and fickle homeland of a wanting-to-be-modern colonial and postcolonial East Africa, and on to the seemingly very modern society of Canada, the obstacle presented to my view of a narrative unity of human life is confounding even further. I am now as if in a turbulent journey across time and space, searching for roots and routes and where although I didn't begin the journey with my ancestors, I am implicitly and explicitly part of it.

The obstacle to my notion of a whole life striving towards a coherent narrative unity arises when I begin to question, even doubt my sense of home, and in particular my feelings of rootedness to a homeland. The distant stories of my ancestors and my grandparents from Junaghad and Jamnagar in India related in one language, or of my parents and mine from Mombasa in East Africa related in another, or of my children in Vancouver in Canada, related in yet another, appear disconnected and remote as landscapes of cultures change and generations fold into the past to make way to the future. The literal journey backwards seems almost inconceivable or even impossible. I dwell merely in recollections of fictions and histories:
I remember myself, a little boy, soiled tears streaming down my dirty face as I watch my grandfather covered in a white, cotton, death-shroud, lowered into the freshly dug grave: “La’illah ha illalah, Muhammed ar rasulillah ... There is but only Him, and Muhammed is His Prophet,” the mourners chant as one by one family and several community members take the shovels and begin to fill the grave. I am offered a shovel by my uncles and proudly scoop a large portion of earth onto the frigid corpse of my grandfather who is slowly being covered up. Particles of dust-clouds emerge out of the grave and blanket the huddling mourners.

The night, muggy, as I recall it, is pitch black, lit up only by a few kerosene lanterns around which night insects hover frantically; my father is standing beside me, clutching my hand. I cannot stop crying. I see Bapa, again on his favourite rocking-chair, wearing only his vest and a faded striped pyjama. He has finished his evening meal of buttered kheechree and yogurt. I am invited on his lap and he sings in rhythm with the rocking of the chair. Then the chair is empty. I cry. Who will now sing to me? tell me stories?

Hundreds of lighted agarbatis (incense sticks) are passed around to the gathered mourners. Most are gently nudged into the fresh mound of earth just created, others are spread around onto adjacent graves. The nightly air of the Ismaili cemetery of Mombasa takes on a powerful scent of jasmine, tradition, and death. “Al Fat’iah Hazrat Nabi Muhammed Mustapha...,” the final prayer is offered in somber reverence. Mourners, in their hundreds, quietly
disperse. A few remain in the night’s shadow to pay respects over the graves of their own loved ones. Hasham bhai Vellani, or Hasham secretary, as my grandfather was fondly called, is now a story...
Jericho Beach, Vancouver, 2001

I had rested my weary haunches on this particular wooden bench a number of times. The early morning stroll through the contiguous parks of the West-side sea-front had turned tables on me - from a man dutifully walking his dog, the morning chore had become a soul’s habit of dutifully walking its man. Delirium is the word that comes to mind, an embrace of two lovers inter-twined at dawn, probing each other, half asleep and half fired-up. The slumbering world awakens in this way, I thought, in scenes and acts of half-awakened passions until the moments of communion with the scents and sounds begin to release locked-in stresses of life lived and yet to be lived. I found that the words flowed better after my walk and the pages of my writing embraced more of my spirit.

From this vantage point, seated on the bench, the spread of the view in front affirmed my feelings about the imposing beauty of the place. On the far left, Bowen Island, a sentinel to the entrance into Howe Sound. Then, in a wave of one single breath: Atkinson’s Point, Cypress, Grouse, Stanley Park, and Seymour, interrupted by the city’s jagged skyline, and then the snow-capped mountains far beyond. Even if I stretched my vision both left and right past the painful muscular threshold of my neck, I still was locked inside an incredible land and seascape. By late spring, the English Bay already sported an enchanting flotilla of small and large sail boats, some out on a leisurely morning sail, letting the jibs stretch a bit while others practiced confounding tacks, trying to meander through the anchored ensemble of sea-aged trans-Pacific cargo ships, or so it seemed. The distances from this vantage point always played tricks.

The morning that Ben called me over to sit with him on the bench had started off with a slight drizzle. And then, as if to unveil to the waking world an early morning miracle, the spring sky over the Bay shed most of the rain-clogged clouds letting bright sunlight frolic its magical shimmer over the gentle waves. I
hesitated at first, not knowing who the young man was or what he wanted, but he smiled a warm glow, and I relented.

"Why the wharf shimmers? that's what you're wondering, mmh?" he asked. "Go take a look." The voice, resolute but distant like an echo, held me in a tender embrace and I felt drawn to do its bidding.

I walked down from the grassy knoll upon which the bench was perched, towards the green-fenced wharf in front and noticed for the first time that the glitter was from a carpet of tiny crushed fragments of pearl and lavender coloured mussel shells. The entire wharf floor was covered with them, as if an idiosyncratic Venetian floor-tiler turned artist turned West-coaster, in some whimsical flight of fancy had terrazoed the whole place with this extraordinary raw material. Not a single calciferous carcass was left intact to desecrate the design or give away the secret of this masterpiece. The scene in the sunlight was sheer magic. The soft crunch at the soles of my soiled boots sounded an unwelcome presence and jolted me out of my reverie. Ben laughed in the distant and motioned with his hands to come over and sit next to him. "They won't come if you don't leave the wharf," he added, lassoing me in with curiosity.

I eased myself on to the bench and waited for him to say something, but Ben remained silent. Ten minutes into this soundless invitation, mayhem erupted over the wharf. It appeared as if an airborne battle had been launched between gangs of stoic seagulls and irascible crows a few meters above the wharf, each clique of the plumed-air-machines claiming a stake over this precious terrazoed space. The winds from the Bay deflected on the sides of the wharf creating beds of upper gusts more suited to the superior streaming skills of the seagulls while the crows, more land creatures than their adversaries, compensated their inexperience through cunning, belligerence, and sheer numbers.

"Kali Jug achee vio ... times of confusion have arrived," my mother would have said, if she were present to this sight. "Our world is spiraling downwards. Even birds have taken on human habits."

Then with wings resting over beds of swift air currents, members of the opposing feathered gangs began dropping shadowy objects out of their mouths on to the hard floor, seagulls claiming the left side and crows, the right, and then dove down to pick up the objects again. Sometimes, upon hitting the ground the objects cracked open, their calcified pieces bespattering across the wharf floor and the birds swooped and settled down for a few quick pecks and nips, all the
while clutching pieces of the broken item between their talons. Sometimes the objects did not fracture, in which case the battle-crazed owners or nearby marauders of the same or different gang dove to grab the prize in their beaks, and tried again. The sight of the objects hitting the ground reminded me of a film I had once seen where frogs had rained from the sky. It made no sense and then again it made every sense - if you knew the story. The spectacle made us both laugh.

“Baby mussels,” Ben whispered, “and it’s not even the season yet. The birds must find them in sea-grass on the rocky shore on the other side.”

For nearly an hour the circus and the feast continued over the wharf floor until a large area was carpeted with thumb-nail sized fragments of broken shells, and then the air-borne gangs retreated and disappeared. I imagined how the day would now unfold as countless feet, bicycles, baby-strollers, and sprightly canines would mindlessly stomp over this unseen sight of battle, crushing the shells even further into glittering sandy fragments, smoothing and seasoning a wondrously complex story. Would the people hear the crunch under their shoes? I wondered, or would they fix their gazes ahead or towards the sea, trapped by the sight in front or muddled in conversations within, and miss the story upon which they marched? So much like life encased in protective shells containing morsels of ruptures and rhapsodies, I thought. And to get inside, the shell needs to be cracked open every once in a while, bespattering a multitude of sorrows and joys anchored to conferences of fictions and histories. How else could we taste life? But even before that, life’s knots need to be held in a gaze, attended too, watched over, and then ever so gently, probed - and, if we didn’t do it ourselves, then someone (or something) else would do it for us.

For a while afterwards Ben and I sat in silence. We had been granted the privilege to be witnesses to a natural story, and I for one had been undone by its brevity and clarity. “I would’ve never imagined,” I said, wistfully, and turned towards Ben. But his space was empty. He was gone.

Every so often, I still stop by to rest a while on Ben’s bench. It has become a place for gifts – an idea for a chapter in my dissertation, a prayer for my family and
friends, or just a place to remember my life. Other times I see someone else sitting there, wrapped inside a different kind of story – reconciling a lover’s argument, or inhaling the view and exhaling gratitude, or just resting. Most times, however, the bench remains unoccupied, or so it seems. The tarnished bronze plaque attached to the top wooden rung of the back-rest of the bench hints of a snuffed out story. It reads:

**FREE BIRD**
Benjamin Leeson Pike
1971-1994
Son Brother Friend

Next to it, if one looks hard, someone has carved on to the wood itself:

"miss ya – Robyn."

Benjamin n. 1. Hebrew patriarch, the youngest and favourite son of Jacob.

Mussel n. 1. any bivalve mollusc of the genus *Mytilus*, living in sea water and often used for food.

Field Notes & Reflections

The world performs for me a moral story. I seek this world in every breath.

“Daddy, this Ph.D. thing is making you strange,” my
daughter teases. For I collect fragments of life in language, and the details become at times offensive to those under my scan. “Fill your language,” I tell her, “fill it with words that embrace life, words which mean more than what they say. And of those words that empty your language, let them go. Banish them.”¹

“So, you mean no more ‘s’ word, right?” she teases.

Events only occur. Events are amoral. Events are apoetic. Stories, on the other hand have the power to make events moral. And so I search for stories — painful ones and joyful ones — following their endless paths. Fragment by fragment, detail by detail, I insert notes and voices and pray that the song may one day find the singer.

§§§

Ismaili Jamatkhana (prayer hall), downtown Vancouver

The old man’s posture is bivalved, like a shelled mollusc, his scrawny face shielded behind large, thick-framed spectacles, his fingers knotted tightly as if in a permanent clasp. I notice him sitting, slouched, a solitary figure on one of the chairs reserved for the most senior members of the Ismaili congregation. Jamatkhana services are over, and people having spent the hour seated cross-legged on the carpeted floor in prostration and prayer have discovered a renewed zeal to chat and
mingle, and also commit to personal sacred rites. An evening of prayer in congregation and community always refreshes and sanctifies and my return to the mundane is never the same anymore. I take my place in a corner and wait for the old man to make his move, all the while wondering who he is. He must be in his late eighties, even nineties, I speculate. Life seems to have written itself a telling story on his crumpled frame. A middle-aged woman whom I know approaches from across the women’s section and says something into the man’s left ear. He doesn’t hear too well, I notice, and the woman repeats aloud:

“Ha’loh, bha ... let’s go.” The old man turns towards the woman showing no visible sign of acknowledgment, but shifts in his chair, preparing to stand up.

I surmise that she must be the daughter and walk towards them.

“Ya Ali madat, Mumtaz,” I offer the traditional greeting, and proceed to make conversation. She appears glad to see me and asks how I am progressing with my Ph.D.

“Fine,” I lie. “But you know how these things are, they never go according to plan,” I counter with a truth, and then, looking towards the seated man, I casually ask her: “Is he your father?”

“Yes, that’s bapa,” she replies, her voice embracing a tender tone, clearly of affection. I anticipate an introduction but none is forthcoming. “He doesn’t hear too well when there is too much noise,” Mumtaz adds almost apologetically.

I explain to her what my doctoral work is about and ask if her father would agree to converse with me.

“He’ll be thrilled. Boy! you’ve got a great catch here. If there’s one person who’ll be able to tell you things, it’s my father. Let me ask him at home and if he agrees I’ll phone you. How’s that?” With that Mumtaz offers the father her hand and eases him
out of the chair. Once freed from the seated position, the man, his drooping head
perched on a tightly locked neck and his back notably hunched towards one side
pushes aside his daughter's hand and takes hold of his cane and begins a deliberately
paced walk towards the exit door of the Jamatkhana. Mumtaz tags behind. He is
walking in small, measured steps which appear hurried, somewhat like a wound-up toy.
The motion is calculated and purposive. He is self-conscious of his disability, I can tell,
and every once in a while moves his stooped head slightly to the side so that the eye
can get a fix on passersby. A few young ones, with the fire of youth in them are
relieved to ease quickly by-him without a glance or word towards the old man, as
they move on to some distant rendezvous. Other middle-aged jamati members, like
myself, out of courtesy or politeness lag behind him, although a bit uncomfortable with
the sudden slowed pace of stride.

In that instant, the whole scene becomes an analogue of one generation
resigned to a crawl as it exits the enduring flow of a community's life, hurriedly being
overlooked by a fresh one eager to enter new horizons. And what to make of the
generation in the middle? dutiful, polite, and yet uncomfortable in stride, frustrated by
dealing with the frailty of the old and confused by the swiftness of the young.
Mumtaz's bapa realizes he is slowing people and tries harder to hurry down the
stairs, making his movements all the more awkward and ancient. And yet, in all this,
nothing gets diminished in the man. At that moment I see him dignified, controlled, and
proud.

Two weeks later, the invitation for a conversation comes through a telephone
call, and Mumtaz, on behalf of her bapa gives me the directions to Fazal's simple
apartment home in the False Creek area of Vancouver. It is then that I realize that he
lives by himself, and that makes me wonder how he manages.

As Fazal finally settles down on to his favourite sofa, I notice that with his oversized spectacles removed, he has donned a gigantic character. He speaks in a booming voice, in an English of the colonial ways, and with a lilt suggesting a person used to public speaking and authority. He deals in absolutes. He seems to know his place in conversation.

"I think instead of us having our conversation in Gujarati or Kutchi, let us have it in English," he bids forthrightly and then pauses. I feel like telling him that I had hoped for a conversation in Kutchi or Gujarati, a researcher's inclination to record a voice in its mother tongue. I am about to request this when Fazal says: "This generation's children, your generation and your children, they all talk in English, don't they? We will speak in English." Later on, he would remind me of the previous Imam's sentiments to make English the lingua franca of the community. "Bury Gujarati in Gujarat," Fazal echoes what he claims were the previous Imam's directives.

I nod a resigned approval.

Then suddenly he breaks out into a laugh and says, "I am an insignificant person, you know." Halfway the laughter changes into a cough which takes Fazal into a strange wheezing embrace. "You want to make research of me?" he soon continues, his eyes unable to mask a playful twinkle. "O.K. You can ask me about my life or my career, nothing about my health," he teases. I agree. "I am a little bit deaf ... and a little bit dumb ... my disability is shortsightedness and an instability in walking. I can't see features of people. OK, ask me now, without loss of any time."
When a human narrative shell cracks open, it bespatters fragments of stories in which are present or absent actions with a moral focus. If we are attentive at this time, we notice that in the background of these actions are intentions that have arisen out of a bustle and flow of activity, intentions that perhaps point of a heroic vision, or of conditions of hope or hopelessness. It's against this hurly-burly of life that the stories in conversation take their meaning and often it pays to pause and notice, and resist the urge to stomp and smooth the bespattered fragments. It pays to hold your own voice in lock and let the other speak, and in the speaking, a single life, from birth to death, reveals in slow spurts a quest and a personal myth: “It is mine to carry forward the hopes set inside a journey out of India; it is mine to serve the Imams of the time; it is mine to build institutions of my community that will serve the generations that will follow me.” Or, are all these merely aspects of the Self’s desire to leave behind a legacy -- a grab for immortality?

A personal myth, writes Dan McAdams, does for an individual what myths traditionally have done at the level of cultures. It “delineates an identity, illuminating the values of an individual life. The personal myth is not a legend or fairy tale, but a sacred story that embodies personal truth.”

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“I am an insignificant person,” Fazal’s words haunt even though veiled in laughter. The cultural tendency to view aging and bodily disruptions as a sign of insignificance is peculiarly Western, but it is worth noting that he has exposed up-front a whole gambit of bodily challenges he faces. Why? Is he probing me to uncover his significance? to make it known to his daughters and this stranger in their midst, that in his deficient and feeble body hides a mighty spirit, with an even mightier story?
Fourteen year-old Jamal Ahmed Ladha couldn't read the words written on the steamer-ship anchored just beyond the forbidding walls of Fort Jesus that welcomed newcomers and seafarers as they entered the Old Mombasa Harbour. Had he been able to read English, he would have acknowledged the presence of the British India Steam Navigation Company's two-thousand-ton S.S. *Ethiopia* making one of its infrequent stops. And yet, recognizing the Union Jack of the Imperial Raj fluttering atop the ship's stern was enough of an assurance for him. He must be approaching safe harbour, Jamal thought, as he stood idly on deck of the Indian *va'han* as it passed inches away from S.S. *Ethiopia's* anchor chain. After nearly a month on water, with brief trading stops at Mogadishu and Lamu, the approaching sight was at once overbearing and crammed, yet exotically inviting.

The Old Harbour was dotted with a large fleet of colourful ocean-going sailing vessels, mostly Arab *dhow's*, but also a few Indian *va'rans* huddled close together like water-lilies, each committed in a frenzy of activity and preparation. Many would continue on their onward journey to the Island of Zanzibar. The North-East monsoon which had brought them here from the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Kutch, and the Indian coastline beginning in November would eventually die down, and by April the South-West monsoon would allow them, once again, to return to Northern ports laden with cargoes of grain, ivory, and other wares. Jamal had learned the magical powers of the trade winds from one of the crew and had secretly made a prayer that with the grace of God and His Holy Prophet, and if it is his Imam's wish, he too would one day make such a voyage back to India to marry Santok, the betrothed he had left behind in Porbander. For now he pushed such thoughts aside. A temporary shelter had to be located somewhere in Mombasa before embarking deeper in-land to join his brother. The letter from his brother had mentioned a large lake named after the great Rani Victoria, and a town that sounded Indian to the tongue:
K-i-s-u-m-u. Jamal rested his eyes upon the steep incline that donned the oncoming shoreline and admired the exotic vista of Arab style coral-lime residences, warehouses with corrugated metal roofs, and colonial-style official buildings all adhered in some chaotic and random tapestry. Africa may not be as ominous as he had imagined.

No sooner had the va'han anchored that loud shrieking noises of strange sounds surrounded the vessel prompting the wiry Kutchi captain to shout an order in gujarati to his thirty passengers of odd sorts to gather their belongings and make preparations to disembark in twos and threes on to flimsy dugouts now attached like leeches to the vessel's hull. That was the very first time that Jamal laid eyes on black skin and surmised that not much needed to be made of this oddity for it was not much darker from the skins of those he had left behind. And if first impressions mattered then the bare chested Swahili boatmen who had arrived to take the disembarking passengers ashore in their leaky cockleshells were an enterprising bunch, certainly cheerful, although not much could be said for the water-craft in which they had chosen to do their business, and the sight of hollowed, partially submerged tree-trunks sent a quiver down Jamal's spine. It would be a shame to drown now, he thought, and then chuckled as he watched an older Hindu man in line before him nearly take a tumble into the foul waters of the Old Port.

"Areh, be careful Jayanti Ramji bhai, or else you'll be a laughing stock of our village back home," a companion said jokingly. "This is not the Holy Ganges you know. Here, who knows in whose unholy shit you'll drown in benediction."

"What kind of a mad captain are you?" another passenger shouted. "From such a big va'han you want us to enter that! You wish to kill us?"

The African boatmen laughed at the clumsiness of these brown-skinned newcomers in strange attire, often referred to as "wahindis" in Kiswahili, or as "banyas," the latter being a pejorative term coined by some odd-ball colonial not pleased or perhaps even jealous of the weed-like scatterings of Indian traders all
over British East Africa and the Uganda Protectorate. Jamal made a quick note to be careful with the last rung of the ladder leading down the va’han. God knows what filth lurked in these murky waters, he thought. He looked stern side and noted the boat’s external and only latrine jutting out, and made a quick calculation of at least fifty dhows and va’hans in the vicinity with similar structures. A few were even occupied with crews defecating. He’d have to be very careful stepping off the boat, he resolved.

Meanwhile, the chatter of strange language grew louder and all Jamal could make out was: “pehsa, pehsa,” which he surmised was the fare to make the final treacherous twenty or so yards in these water-laden dug-outs and on to the slime-coated concrete steps leading to the wharf at the edge of the shore. For those who had deep pockets of which there were only one or two, the fare of two rupees would take them ashore in a more sturdy and rudderless mashua, promising an arrival on shore in a style worthy of a pukka (pure) British Sahib. What showoffs, Jamal thought. He had arrived with only thirty rupees to his name, of which twenty he would need to purchase the train ticket, and he was not inclined towards unnecessary luxury. With the Pir’s invocation on his lips and the honour of his village to guide his limbs, he avoided the last rung of the ladder and stepped on to the dug-out and carefully squatted on his heels. Any lower and he would have rested his haunches on a filth of foul water, fish heads with lifeless eyes, and scraps of half-eaten, rotting fruit.

“Jayanti Ramji bhai, the khoja boy knows the ways of the black people already. Areh, shame on you,” the va’han’s captain derided the Hindu man, who had by now become the brunt of the crew’s sarcastic humour.

The African boatman patted Jamal on his back to show his appreciation for having learned the art of sitting in a mtumbwi like a proper Swahili, for which the fourteen year-old Khoja-Ismaili from Kutiyana beamed, and remembered the time when his father had let him use the oxen-plough for the first time, and then had
showered his son with praises for having tilled one whole row of the rain-starved earth in a straight line. The warm memories of home brought with them his reason for leaving his village in India. The barren land, which his family had lived off for generations was unable to sustain the Ladha clan anymore, and the famine of the past four years had devastated their resolve to remain here. Like sons from other towns and villages in similar predicament, Hasham, the eldest son had braved the trip to Africa three years earlier and had sent word that his employer, Seth (entrepreneur) Allidina Visram, a fellow Ismaili trader whose enterprises and agents spanned both the British and German protectorates and dotted every African village worthy of trading in, was looking for young apprentices -- Khoja or Bohra, and even some Hindu boys were joining him.

"Hurry and come. Jaldi! When you arrive in Mombasa go to the shop of Suleman Virjee. He will help you. Or ask for Mukhi Tejpar. They'll tell you how to get to Kisumu." Jamal recalled his older brother's emphatic words, and then his parents half-hearted urgings to go and make a better life for the family. "Go, beta, go. It is the Imam's wish as well. May his blessings guide both our sons. The future is better in Africa. And forget not that your older brother is your father now. Stay in his shadow's guard."

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“What do you think? You think my father came with money rolling out of his pockets? You think he came with two or three suitcases full of clothes? What do you think?” Fazal quizzes me, his voice trembling. I remain silent. “My father came with his bare clothes!” he exclaims in undisguised pride mixed with ire, for I had naively asked him if his father had come with any money. “Only two pairs
of clothes! one he was wearing and the other was inside a *potloh*, and he had only a few rupees. Whatever possessions he had, he carried them inside a small bundle wrapped with cloth.” Then reverting to Kutchi he repeats for the benefit of his daughters: “Olehkeh jee suitcases keh kinh na vah! Eee potloh bandhi, potleh meh loograh bandi, aneh ginyech nah vah heedah. Potlah! potlah!” By now Fazal has raised himself further out of the sofa, his hands are wildly animated, his voice loud. This story about the early life of his father holds a passionate spot and needs telling, I realize, and I let him speak. “My father’s life was of a farmer’s son. They were not financially well off. Ismaili pioneers came with nothing. In Zanzibar you hear names like Sharif Fazal Bhai Issa, *Vazir* Mohammed Remtullah Hemani, *Vazir* Mohammed Saleh Kanji Hansraj, Mohammed Nasser Jindani and Jiwan Lalji. They worked from nothing and became prosperous. They built our community’s roots that allowed others to come. They were part of the first Ismaili Council which Imam Sultan Mohamed Shah created when he visited Zanzibar in 1905. Slowly, slowly their offsprings left the Island of Zanzibar and went into German and British East Africa.”

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**Field Notes & Reflections**

*I am in my actions and in my practices, as well as in my fictions*
and in my history, a story-telling animal. I am already born into a stock of stories and it is only through such stories that I know myself as a character, and where I can initiate an action and see it as arising out of a history. It is through such stories that I meet up with consequences that inform my intentions and guide my practices, and where I know of the plots I suffer and resolve. It is through such stories that I find myself in familiar and unfamiliar settings, and as I arrive towards an end, I see it also as a beginning — and I realize I am a different person again. How else but in the stories that I share can I ask another of the image she carries of me, and vice versa? How else but in stories I share can I give an account of myself and become accountable? and ask others for an account and make them accountable. To know what Fazal, Jamal, or his grandfather suffered is to know why I am here. I am part of their story as they are of mine and it's in the telling that they remain alive to instruct.

Mombasa, 1943-1946

"Kassamali Paroo wants to see you. Why don't you go visit his office tomorrow," Mukhi Vali Bhaloo Govani mentions casually to Fazal after the Jamatkhana ceremonies are over. Fazal, who is in his early thirties considers the slightly older and well-respected Chairman of the Ismaili Education Board a close and valued confidant ever since the two had served as the Mukhi-Kamadia pair in an important majlis.

"Don't keep him waiting. He doesn't like that and give him no reason to
dislike you,” reminds Vali Bhaloo, as the two part company. Fazal’s interest had been sufficiently stirred by his friend’s message and so that evening over dinner he tells his wife, Nurbanoo, what Mukhi Vali Bhaloo had told him.

“Perhaps it’s a Council position? That would be so honourable, No?” Nurbanoo wonders aloud.

“How can that be? There are other khandhias to choose for the Council job. It must be something else,” Fazal replies, aware that one’s family members or friends were often favoured for special spots within the community’s various hierarchies. Besides from what he knew about Paroo, such cronyism wasn’t the man’s style. The couple try in vain to imagine what must be so important that Kassamali Paroo himself would want to speak to a mere clerk.

“Nurbanoo, this thing is bothering me. He is Paroo and I am Fazal Jamal Ahmed Ladha. What could he possibly want with me? ”

“You’re one of the few who has finished high school and you speak the language of the British. Besides, your parents have served the jamat for a long time. Perhaps he needs you for something special,” his wife offers. It is common knowledge in Mombasa that Fazal comes from a khandan (honourable) stock, and furthermore is an educated man for he has passed his London Matriculation and works as a head clerk in a well known shipping company. Eventually, the couple give up all speculations and finish their meal lost in their own thoughts. Finally, Nurbanoo sighs and breaks the silence as she begins to clear the table.

“Khoođa matheh choroh. Leave it to God. Whatever it is, it will be made clear tomorrow.”

The following morning, Fazal walks the distance from his cramped office at the Holland Africa Line towards the temporary offices of the Jubilee Insurance Company, where Kassamali Paroo, the managing director is awaiting him. All kinds of thoughts are swirling through his mind when he enters Paroo’s office. The solemn-faced man seated at the desk commands a formidable presence. Many in the community have come to revere him as a leader of outstanding character and an orator who can hold crowds mesmerized for hours, a man with integrity and vision. But as with every community there are a few odd-balls who dislike him, more from power jealousies than anything else, for he is favoured by the Imam as one who can get things done, a trail blazer. On the wall, behind him is the picture of the smiling Sultan Mohamed Shah, Aga Khan III, Hazer Imam of
the Ismailis. Paroo, in his usual courteous and charming demeanor reserved mostly for those who hold the same standards he has set for himself, waves Fazal in and asks him to take a chair.

“How are you?” he inquires in Kutchi.


Then, getting straight to the point, Paroo says, “I have a proposition which I want you to consider.”

“Yes, Paroo Saheb? I’ll try.”

“You know that Jubilee Insurance Company has become the jewel of our community. By the grace of the Imam, it has surpassed our wildest imaginations. Look around you. Mombasa is growing and the British are pouring money here for the war cause.” It was true. The town was full of British troops and business was brisk. Since its inauguration in 1937, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Imam, the Jubilee Insurance Company had already established a name for itself. The company’s success had raised the community’s profile in British East Africa, and amongst other Indians immensely.

“We are looking for someone to take up the post of Corporate Secretary and you have come recommended. It is a propitious moment to join this institution which I can assure you will grow even bigger. What do you think?”

Fazal, who by now had stopped hearing Paroo’s words couldn’t believe what good fortune had landed on his plate. It was also a predicament. To have been asked by Paroo himself, and to decline was not wise. But why decline? he decided. Here was what he had always wanted -- to serve his community and his Imam. Besides this was also a promotion from being just a head clerk.

“I most gratefully accept, Paroo Saheb. Of course, I need to give proper notice to my boss, but I accept. Thank you. Thank you.”

Fazal was a natural bureaucrat for the post and over the next two years moved from the secretarial post to one of an acting General Manager of Jubilee Insurance in Mombasa. Then, in 1946 directives came from the Imam to set up a trust company that would promote the business interests of the Ismaili community, as well as provide loans to cooperatives and building societies. Paroo once again summoned Fazal to his office and told him to prepare to move to Kampala, in Uganda where one branch of the Diamond Jubilee Investment Trust
Company was being planned since the Ismaili community had grown substantially there.

"January meh oodah pooghi vinoh," Paroo told Fazal. "Be there by January. You'll need to set up the offices from scratch. I hear people are eager to take out loans to start businesses and announcements have already been made in Jamatkhana that we'll be starting soon. Hassan Kassim-Lakha is there. He'll help you."

"Paroo wanted me in Uganda right away," Fazal recalls, and then lets out a loud sob as he remembers the opportunity that was given to him, the man who gave him that opportunity, and the significance of the move. "Those were hard years, but we did well. Soon, I was asked to take up various honorary positions besides my paid position at the trust company. First, as the Secretary of the Ismailia Education Board, and then later as the Chairman of the Provincial Ismailia Association. Much was being done to improve the welfare of the Ismailis who by now had ventured into many smaller towns and villages in Uganda. Hazer Imam was making changes to the Ismaili constitution as well.

Perhaps the most important moment for me was when I was asked to become the honorary secretary of the East African Muslim Welfare Society (EAMWS), which had been founded by the Imam (Sultan Mohamed Shah) in 1945.
Fazal goes into detail to explain to me how Hassan Kassim-Lakha and Sherali Bandali Jaffar, with himself as secretary, were the key Muslim Indians to steer the Society towards the Imam’s pan-Islamic ideal. The presence of Ismailis was really appreciated by the African Muslims, Fazal tells me. What he neglected to tell me was that the Ismailis in Uganda were the main source of finance for the Society which between 1945 and 1957 saw to the building of 63 mosques, 75 schools, a training college, and a technical school.5

“Then, in 1959, EAMWS invited our new Imam, Shah Karim, to Kampala for the opening of the Wandegeya Mosque. I was asked by Kassim-Lakha and Sherali Bandali Jaffer to remain in the background. The Kabaka of Uganda attended and so did the British Governor, Sir Frederick Crawford. You know what Prince Badru (Kakungulu), the President of the Society told the Imam in front of all the dignitaries? He introduced me and said: ‘Mwandi si murungi! Here is the best secretary our Society has ever had.’ The Imam replied, ‘I know.’”

Fazal begins to cry. The memories of honour bestowed and services rendered and the years of building successful institutions all boiled down to one thing: Serving the Imam of the time and the community, and there was no greater honour than having his Imam acknowledge that service publicly.

“I have been very lucky to have been given the opportunity to
serve the community,” Fazal says, then adds quickly, “All this self-praise, it is not good.”

The hours in conversation have passed quickly and suddenly the man of ninety sitting before me doesn’t appear fragile any more. The stories continue and in them are revealed the mighty spirit of the man.

“Who is there to listen?” I recall Roshan’s words from a prior conversation, and wonder if anyone besides Fazal’s family has ever asked him to share his stories. The image of the man quickly being by-passed by the young in Jamatkhana flashes by. The door bell rings. It is Betty, the Filipino home-care worker. “She will cook some rice,” Mumtaz tells me, “and then give my dad a wash and a shave and get him ready for Jamatkhana.”

§§§

Jamal’s journeys - 1902 to 1908

It must be close to mid-night when the train reaches Kisumu. The night is blanketed in darkness. There is no station in sight, except for the sign: Port Florence. The name has ceremoniously been chosen to honour Florence Preston, the wife of the chief British rail head engineer to whom has fallen the task of ensuring that the project is finished on time. In the rush to hammer the last rails of Britain's newest imperial highway, Ronald Preston has decided that the construction of stations along the way be put aside for now. He is not unaware of the daily
hecklings in the House of Commons back in London demanding that he finish the railway urgently. The British taxpayer, he has been told, cannot be expected to bear the brunt of this East African extravaganza. Nakuru is the last stop which has a decent set of structures worthy of calling it Nakuru Station. Telegraph communication poles, the only way of staying in touch between railway towns and the rail head, have been hastily put up, sometimes only to be taken down by warring Nandi tribesmen who have been making life difficult for Preston and his crew. It is becoming obvious why the railway is now known as the 'Lunatic Express.'

Fourteen year old Jamal, hence has come into a make-shift station that is only a confusion of drenched tents pitched on marsh grass and mud surrounded by thick forest. Somewhere up front is the shore of Victoria Nyanza, the great lake of the dark continent, home to creatures of varied sorts, and arguably the mother of the Nile. The deluge of rains that normally end by December have kept up their onslaught and show no signs of abating. Jamal, with his mud-caked feet cased in worn-out leather chappals searches in vain for the familiar sight of his brother, and soon the searching turns into fear. He starts mumbling prayers. This is a strange place, much different from the bustling port of Mombasa where Ismailis are a plenty. What if Hasham is not here? Who would give him money to go back? The last letter from his brother, sitting in his pocket carries a date at least six months old.

"Kauntameh? Who are you? " a voice from the dark inquires in Gujarati.

"I am Khoja Jamal Ahmed Ladha from Kutiyana in Gujarat. I am looking for my brother Hasham Ahmed Ladha who is employed by Seth Allidina Visram."

"Areh, come, I'll take you to the shop. I am Lalji, Seth Allidina Visram's clerk. I am also Khoja, but from Rajkot. You're lucky I was out to-night. There is always someone or other who comes in the train and I have my orders to welcome them. Hurry Jamal bhai, the rain is not good here. It gives pneumonia quickly and the muddy waters bring flies that give a strange sickness. People get so tired that they wish to die." The ravages of sleeping-sickness had claimed many African lives, and if
it wasn't the disease, than it was the sheer gloominess of the place that had driven many British colonial officers to suicide.  

After walking for sometime in pitch dark towards the tiny lamplights in the distance, the two men approach a small store. Kisumu town, a hodgepodge of a few Indian dukhas lining both sides of a narrow street, is eerily quiet. Lalji thumps on the door. "Areh, jaldi darvajoh kholor neh... Open quickly this door," he shouts, his voice muffled by the pouring rain. A small figure clasping a kerosene lantern opens the door and the two enter into a cramped, musty space. Jamal's eyes slowly adjust to a sight of piled up merchandise: americani (imported cloth), ivory, sacks of grains, tents, lanterns, mounds of tanned hides, skins, pots and pans, and all sorts of wares are heaped everywhere. The smell of kerosene invades the entire room. There are five figures sleeping on the floor, and Lalji hands a thin blanket over to Jamal and asks him to join them.  

"Just now sleep. To-morrow, we'll go meet your brother, Hasham. There is a village nearby. That's where he is. It's not too far." His brother's name uttered in this dark and wet African night blankets him with warmth. Jamal snuggles next to the five figures, one of whom mumbles a sleepy welcome, and soon the young traveller succumbs into a dreamless sleep.

"Can you imagine how they travelled at the time?" Fazal asks. "There were no tarred roads. Not even mud roads. There were only trails through the forest, surrounded by elephant grass in which all kinds of creatures lurked. Perhaps snakes, wild animals. After he joined Allidina Visram's Kisumu branch, my father had to travel on foot in the company of pagazis -- African labourers -- to villages scattered all over the forest to trade or buy things. You know what Allidina Visram's telegraph code-name was? Pagazi! My father and the pagazis walked for days. Kisumu was the main centre and also Mumias. But my father ventured as far
as Arua and Pakwaach in Uganda. Can you believe that? He was asked to set himself up there for a few months as one of Allidina Visram's agents. You ask me about my father? He was my inspiration."

"How so?" I probe

"By seven, I had decided that I would be an educated person. Both my parents wanted that. I wanted it more. One day whilst playing, a friend of mine said: 'Tokeh naam naai leekanoh, paanji navi school sharoo thiye thih? ... Don't you want to write your name down, a new school will be opening soon.'

'Kuro? What?' I said. I was surprised. 'Halo, let's go right away,' I said to my brother, and dragged him to the Ismaili Council offices. There they told me that a new Aga Khan School for boys will be opening soon and they were taking names of students. 'Lakho munjo naam ... write my name down,' I insisted. 'No need to ask my parents. Just write my name down.'

If you can find that Council register today in Mombasa you'll see that my entry -- Fazal Ahmed Ladha -- is number fourteen, my brother, Malik Ahmed Ladha, is number fifteen. Before my entry were the names of Hassanali Panjoo, Habib Alibhai, and Janmohammed Kassam. It was 1918.

By 1907, Jamal and his brother Hasham had learned the ropes of running their own trading business and whilst still acting as agents on behalf of Allidina Visram, they also traded for their own account. By then Kisumu town's only street was lined with Ismaili, Punjabi, and Goan shops all in competition with each other. A few, like the shops of Dharamsi Khatau, Kassam Damji, and a branch of Suleman Virjee of Mombasa, had been there before the railway had reached the town, all trading in the style of Allidina Visram. Uganda, lying off the northern shores of
the lake offered plenty of opportunity for trade. It was ironic, however, that the country which had caused the Imperial British to build the railway in the first place had no rail connection. Uganda Railway, as it was officially called, had stopped at Kisumu in Kenya, and all goods into Uganda had to be carried by laggard cargo steamers first to Entebbe or Port Bell on the Ugandan side of the lake, and then by foot or cart to Kampala. Many of these cart transports were set up by Allidina Visram whose trade systems penetrated all across Uganda.

The coming of the railway up to Kisumu had also cut-off the old caravan route, previously used by Allidina Visram to enter the Uganda Protectorate. At that time, goods from Mombasa were first taken south to Bagamoyo or Dar es Salaam in German East Africa and then westwards to the old slave centre of Tabora, where a northern trek by the western shores of Lake Victoria took them into Uganda. It would be safe to say that Allidina Visram himself had learned his ropes from his Kutchi Ismaili mentor, Sewa Haji Paroo, who had successfully launched or supplied various trading caravans venturing into the heart of German East Africa. The railway from Mombasa to Kisumu had changed all that. Both Hasham and Fazal recognized the immense potential of trade in Uganda via the port town of Kisumu, and frequently sailed across the lake in the ever slow midget steamer William Mackinnon, or the broad-beamed cutter named S.S. Winifred.

“My father returned to India in 1908 to marry Santok, the woman to whom he had been betrothed six years before in Porbander. He had saved enough money by then to bring her back to East Africa, perhaps in a steamer ship. First they settled in the small village town of Mumias, in Kenya where he had several small shops. I was born in 1911 in Mumias. My father became the mukhi of Mumias jamat and remained there until 1914 when his older brother, Hasham, asked him to go to Mombasa to open a branch
of the family’s ever growing enterprise. In 1918, my father became the mukhi of Mombasa Jamatkhana and when he finished his term of two years as mukhi, he took his entire family to India to visit his parents, our grand parents. I was only seven years old, but I remember the entire trip. I remember my grandparents, their village near Kutiyana, and we even visited my mother’s town -- Porbander.”

Betty, the home-care worker is making enough of a clatter, signaling the end of an afternoon. Fazal is helped up from his chair by his daughter Farida, and excuses himself saying that he needs to get ready for the evening prayers. “I am very slow in getting ready,” he tells me, and laughs. That evening I see him at Jamatkhana seated in his usual place. He has donned on a black striped three piece suit, and has a red silk handkerchief pluming out of his coat pocket. He doesn’t appear slouched anymore.

§§§

August, 1972, Uganda - “Asians, Get Out!”

“Idi Amin gave the order that ‘all Asians, go out!’” Fazal tells me, his voice markedly angry. “Asians in that proclamation were defined as those of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi origin. Not Chinese or Japanese. On the radio, James Mbogi, the black Ugandan radio-announcer was screaming: ‘ASIANS, GET OUT! GET OUT OF UGANDA!’ Asians from all across Uganda were ordered to straight away come to Kampala to prove their citizenship. Can you imagine? They came from Mbale, Soroti, Gulu, Jinja, all over. Nearly fifty thousand Asians from all over the country were given two days to come and prove their citizenship.
Everybody lined up night and day with whatever documents they could find. When finally our turn came, I remember that place, it was a gloomy dark place. I produced my passport and my Uganda citizenship certificate. The man looked at the certificate and stamped it -- REJECTED. 'What?' I said. You see even though I had taken Uganda citizenship, I was born in Kenya. When my wife's turn came -- ACCEPTED. She was born in Uganda. Now what to do?

Soon, however, Idi Amin changed his mind again. Now he wanted all Asians out, even those born in Uganda. He wanted no Indians in the country. We went through great hardships at that time. They say in Kutchi: 'Loijah ahn'soo aachi vineh ... Tears of blood flow,' that's what this man did to us. Our citizenship was rejected outright, our passports thrown away or confiscated. 1972 was the year of great hardship. We still wanted to remain in the country, it was our home. We paid all kinds of money to local African lawyers to help us stay as citizens. They took the money and wrote letters that went nowhere. Then we applied to the British High Commission to give our British status back to us. Most Ismailis, after independence had given up their British citizenship and had become Uganda citizens. Now, with Uganda throwing us out, we were desperate to become British so that we could, at least, go to Britain. No one else was prepared to take the non-British Indians. But the British didn't want us back. Then the Canadian High Commission in Nairobi came to Uganda and set up a temporary office, and invited up to five thousand Asians to apply as refugees. Most Ismailis applied for Canada. We were one of them."

Fazal begins to cry. "The residents of Charlottetown took us in -- very, very happily, very nicely, they took us in."


“There is a narrative truth in life that seems quite removed from logic, science, and empirical demonstration. It is the truth of a ‘good’ story,” writes Dan McAdams. Our ancient ancestors were intimately familiar with this form of truth, he goes on to say, and then quotes the following:
“No one in the world knew what truth was till someone had told a story. It was not there in the moment of lightning or the cry of the beast, but in the story of those things afterwards, making them part of human life. Our distant savage ancestor gloried as he told - or acted out or danced - the story of the great kill in the dark forest, and the story entered the life of the tribe and by it the tribe came to know itself. On such a day we fought and won, and here we live to tell the tale. A tale much embellished but truthful even so, for truth is not simply what happened but how we felt about it when it was happening, and how we feel about it now.”

§ § §

**Khidmat**

There is a word in my own language borrowed from Arabic, called *Khidmat*, a word which cannot easily be translated into English. The closest an English word that can come to this Arabic word may be ‘service,’ but even that may be saying far too little. To offer *khidmat*, means to be of service to another without expecting recompense. To offer *khidmat* can also mean being prepared to offer service to society, one’s community, family, and in the case of Fazal and his father, to the tradition of the community and the Ismaili Imams. The ability to offer *Khidmat* is not merely a quality of character. Neither is it a skill learnt. I put the quality in the category of virtues. *Khidmat* characterizes someone who knows what is expected of her or him within the context of their place in a community, and particularly in a family.

Not always is such a pure offering possible, for the disposition towards


*khidmat* presupposes not only that some of the other virtues be present, for example, courage, integrity, temperance, magnanimity, etc., but that one also knows when and how to exercise sound judgement and wisdom in particular cases - an intellectual virtue which Aristotle calls, *Phronesis*. One does not choose to offer *khidmat*. One either does or does not, just as one doesn’t choose the virtues of integrity, courage, or magnanimity. One is already predisposed to them. I cannot be genuinely disposed to *khidmat*, courage, or, faithfulness, and be so only on occasion. In this sense, *khidmat* is also kindred to the virtue of excellence, for by having it, and disposing it, a community’s practice is extended in its ends, and towards greater goods.

To what extent do the stories in this and other chapters instruct the virtues, and especially the virtue of *khidmat*? Indian Ismaili protagonists mentioned in Fazal’s story, people like Kassamali Paroo, Seth Allidina Visram, Jamal and Hasham Ahmed Ladha, the first Zanzibari and Mombasa Ismaili pioneers, and perhaps even Fazal himself, all appear to possess qualities of character which hint of the virtue of *khidmat*. But I can only know of that if their characters and the events they have lived are given a narrative form -- in history or fiction -- within a tradition. It is in this form, which Jerome Bruner calls the “narrative mode,” that I am able to see and feel more than what these characters say. “What is character but the determination of incident?” Alasdair MacIntyre quotes Henry James. “What is incident but the illustration of character?” The deeds of people amidst hurdles and triumphs are thus made known, and what comes under my gaze are the patterns of such hurdles and triumphs that individual lives face, patterns in which such lives find their place, and which such lives in turn embody.

More importantly, it is through the narrative form that I am able to demand
that their actions be made intelligible to me over time. For by being made intelligible, my place in the history of my community's actions comes into view. It is here that my forebears' stories and mine merge and begin to offer, at the least, a moral starting point. Fundamentally as well, they lead me to ask questions of myself: "What is required by the social roles I inhabit in my community? What conceptions of excellences or virtues enable me to do what such roles require? And, towards what good do the virtues serve?" I can now become part of a tradition of argument through story-telling, a tradition where "the story enters the life of the tribe and by it the tribe comes to know itself."
Figure 3  Map of British East Africa 1902 - 1914
Main characters introduced in Fazal's story.

LADHA Clan of Kutiyan, Gujerat in India. (Farmers)

AHMED

 HASHAM, older son goes to Kisumu, Circa, 1899

Joins the firm of Seth Allidina Visram

Quickly becomes a very prosperous man

JAMAL, second son arrives at Old Mombasa Harbour in 1902 at the age of fourteen. Takes the train to Kisumu or Port Florence.

Sets up shop in many places. First, Mumias then moves to Mombasa in 1914.

FAZAL, born in 1911, in Mumias, Kenya. At age 32, joins Jubilee Ins. Co. in Mombasa.

Moves to Uganda in 1945 to set up the Diamond Trust Branch in Kampala

Comes to Canada as refugee in 1972 after all Asians were expelled from Uganda

Betrothed to SANTOK of Porbander. Returns to marry her in 1908 and brings her back to Africa.

Ahmed's wife, not mentioned.

Nurbanoo, his wife.

Mumtaz

Farida (Daughters)

Prominent Ismailis
-Kassamali Paroo
-Hassan Kassim-Lakha
-Sherali Bandali Jaffer

JAMAL

FAZAL

Nurbanoo

Mumtaz

Farida

Prominent Ismailis
-Kassamali Paroo
-Hassan Kassim-Lakha
-Sherali Bandali Jaffer
How many such graves and stories remain buried across continents and across time as families move on to different lands? As I tarry here I am reminded of Stuart Hall, as he evokes the metaphor of diaspora:

“(T)he scattering and dispersal of people who will never literally be able to return to the places from which they came...These are people who belong to more than one world, speak more than one language; inhabit more than one identity, have more than one home; who have learnt to ‘negotiate and translate’ between cultures and who are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures.”

I see and feel myself in his words. And, from here I journey into the poetic world where I am also reminded of the greater diaspora of the shattered soul that the great Sufi poet, Rumi, evokes at the start of his epic poem, *The Masnavi*:

Hearken to the reed-flute, how it complains,
Lamenting its banishment from its home:-
“Ever since they tore me from my osier bed,
My plaintive notes have moved men and women to tears.
I burst my breast, striving to give vent to sighs,
And to express the pangs of my yearning for my home.
He who abides far away from his home
Is ever longing for the day he shall return.
My wailing is heard in every throng,
In concert with them that rejoice and them that weep.
Each interprets my notes in harmony with his own feelings,
But not one fathoms the secrets of my heart.
My secrets are not alien from my plaintive notes;
Yet they are not manifest to the sensual eye and ear.
Body is not veiled from the soul, neither soul from body,
Yet no man hath ever seen a soul.”  

And from here I enter the world of the Ismaili Pir, Shams al Din, who reveals in the verse of one of his *ginans* (sacred Indo-Ismaili hymn) the tenuousness of this material life:

"hare e sahaga nango tun avyo nango tun vaesi, e kuch na nibhasi na e sahaga ..."

O fortunate one, you came naked, and naked you will depart. Nothing will stay safely with you, fortunate one.”  

And once again this too transports me into another place, a place of discourse and I hear Gadamer say that we are ‘masters neither of time nor of the future’ and this insight is power itself. For it tells me that whatever I need to know can only be understood -- grasped in their “true light” -- between the time I am born and the time I will die. I realize that I am a finite inquirer. This insight reveals to me that my capacity for self-understanding and moral action is itself born out of this finiteness.
Movements such as these offer my journeying modern selfhood a paradox: on one hand is the intense desire to cohere my narrative self's historically situated, turbulent, and dislocating journey and give it a sense of home within a tradition or culture. On the other hand is the very modern and seemingly indomitable -- perhaps even hegemonic -- predicament of partitioning my modern life into segments and episodes, *sui generis*. Axiomatic of this paradox are two fundamental questions I seem to face:

Who am “I” to be in my individual biographical project and in relation to my history and tradition? and, what sort of person am I to become?

To me these two questions, and particularly the latter one, provide a crucial and delicate thread that seems to join the two sides of my modernistic paradox. At the most basic level the questions seem to suggest a disoriented narrative-self attempting to seek intelligibility of and from its modern and mobile life. At a more abstract level they seem to propose a moral beacon amidst which a displaced modern selfhood embroiled in a modern condition -- some even say, malaise -- may conduct itself and seek its bearings. The practical-moral challenge of life, hence, appears not in what I must do, but rather in who I must be. I sense a feeling that I must continuously update and configure my own biographical project whilst being aware of the historical traditions I am part of, and yet I am also drawn to dissect and define my project further to suit my own individual ends and those of the various modern institutions I am traversing across...
"Banyani gaanga, pili pili maanga..."

Mombasa, Kenya, 1969

I once knew a god and his name was Albert Casthana. Wily, nimble, and handsome, he was a god among gods whose reach seemed to extend effortlessly across the two poles of the earth he stood upon and for that he was loved, feared, and loathed. But Casthana couldn't be said to walk, he glided instead, so that his stride seemed never to touch the ground he walked on and his agile torso encased in a dark, skin-tight costume appeared to foreshadow a comic-book like dexterity. He had black, bushy eye-brows stretching across a narrow brow that sheltered a pair of hawk-like eyes which took the entire field at a single glance. And what would a god be without a Clark Gable moustache and "frankly, I don't give a damn" disposition? For Casthana was such a god: square jawed, long sideburns and all. His hands were gloved in red and white leather, its patina like thunderbolts in the late afternoon sun and depending upon which gods the crowds had come to submit to that day, they would surrender into a hush and a roar at the same time as Casthana descended on to the field. They knew that with him between the posts not an inch of the netted womb would be yielded to the lightning onslaughts of his formidable adversaries.

Albert Casthana, the god, the prince of goalies was the numbah one goalkeeper of the legendary Liverpool Football Club of Mombasa. He was also a Goan, a fish-eater, and my immortal enemy. I had sworn to bring him down with whatever gaanga or black magic an adolescent mortal could muster ... perhaps a rooster to sacrifice, a clip of Casthana's oily locks to burn, or more dangerously, even finding a suitable place behind his goal, spewing out incessant taunts and thick saliva spits of venomous curses. No, today like all days, I will leave it up to my gods to bring him
down to his knees begging for his life ... a dishonoured Goan gladiator. Yes, my gods were more powerful, mythical, and legendary.

"Jugu! jugu! soda! ... Fanta ... Coca Cola ...," the cry of a hawker in tattered clothes pierces the narrow aisles of the only stadium in town, drawing my attention to the immediate needs of my mortality. Somewhere afar a melodious aria conspires with the punchy aroma of Arabic coffee and brings favoured anticipation to the crowds around me. Kaha ... vaa?, tanga ... veezee? Coffee? ginger tea?" the stocky coffee merchant invokes. My reveries interrupted, I notice men with half vacant smiles puttering around, some headed for a quick relief at the urinals while others puff away at their sweet mentholed cigarettes or self-rolled beedis of harsh tobacco. Some are chewing the sour marungi stems to keep their libidos charged up, occasionally making a guttural sound, forewarning a rapid spit of greenish saliva juices which will eventually bespatter the aisles. The place is a veritable human tapis of threads of dark skins, brown skins, white skins, men and boys, arbaas (Arabs), banyanis (typically, Hindu Indians), occasional dhorias (whites), lots of karyaas (blacks), khojas (typically, Ismaili Indians), and even a few bohras, memons, and kala singhas (sikhs). A hodgepodge of raw and fiery tension hangs in the air. I hurriedly dig into my pocket for some change and purchase two carefully stuffed cone-shape packages of heavily salted jugu (peanuts) to be later washed down with a refreshing bottle of ice-cold Fanta. In Mombasa, the afternoon sun rarely descends into a cool evening.

"Areh, yaar where's our team? these idiots are already practicing and our chohdoohs are still farting around in their dressing room. Paah'dooh maa'reh tah keedak! Oh No! Hai reh, maree veeh 'ia! we are dead!," Salim, exclaims in his usual uncensored spew of expletives and mock concern. He has it all figured out that the more words he packs in one single in-out breath, the more it all makes sense. It's the same with his Shakespeare lines during English literature classes which most Thursdays we skip to make it to a cowboy movie at Moons Cinema and then a soccer
game. Today, it’s Clint Eastwood and double sly Lee Van Cliff followed by Gregory Peck in Mackenna’s Gold. I spy around and take a quick glimpse of my father in a far corner. I wonder if he knows of my afternoon escapades and the thought makes me retrench into my seat a bit further.

"Look, areh, naar, they’ve brought in that ghaandio from Kenya’s national team, oh man, he’s dangerous, nahn? what’s his name?" For Salim, anyone who couldn’t be sufficiently described was a ghaandio, a mad person.

Just then a thunderous roar erupts from the open stands on the left side of the stadium where the Liverpool players in their all-red attire have temporarily encamped. The newcomer, Salim’s ghaandio, in a practice shot sends the ball rocketing towards the goal. Casthana springs from his spot, as if the earth has just released its hold on this preferred god and grasps the ball. "Casthana, wewe numbah one! you’re too good, man!" they shout, as hard unripe mangoes rain on to the field.

Lined behind the stone fence surrounding the stadium are four giant mango trees amply adorned with free-loaders, misers, loafers, and those who feel that the game is better appreciated dangerously perched from the trees' ant ridden branches. Even the lofty coconut trees interspersed here and there in the distance aren’t spared from the free-loaders, as a few shadowy heads camouflage amidst clusters of yellowish-green coconuts, although I wonder how much energy has gone into fighting the forces of gravity at these heady heights.

"Areh yaar, did you see that? That new guy is going to skewer our dah’raas (testicles) for mishkaki. We are completely and absolutely barbecued ... British-style massacre, yaar, for-sure," Salim mutters in protest as he nervously swallows his saliva whilst keeping the single breath and the verbal spew in pulse. Liverpool of Mombasa is of course the namesake of the great Liverpool Soccer Club of the English Football League, lately among the top teams and hence Salim’s reference to the British.
In 1840, the Sultan of Oman, a veritable economic and political force in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian sea, and the Indian Ocean moves his capital and his entire government, from Muscat to the Island of Zanzibar, off the coast of Eastern Africa. Zanzibar has historically belonged to the Sultanate of Oman and the Arab presence in the area goes back hundreds of years. A year later, in 1841, Capt. Hamerton, the first British Consul, sets up a consulate there and strengthens the grip of the British Empire’s Bombay office from afar and settles down for some claim staking and diplomacy over this prized area. It is said in narrative lingo that characters enter the scene all at once as if a deeper plot demands it in some ways. As with Prince Hamlet in act 1, scene 2, of Shakespeare, characters bring along with them untold prior actions and stories but also arrive on scene to reveal temperaments and passions and to tell of things to come. They arrive as if to make clear stories and plots that otherwise would remain incoherent. Such is the case with the Sultan’s and Hamerton’s entrance on the historical stage. With the first move, the Omani Sultan’s principal advisors, merchants and financiers, mostly Kutchi Indians from the Kutch area of North Western India follow along. And with the second event, Indian sea faring merchants as well as those who have been on the Island of Zanzibar for generations, now come under the protection of the British Imperial flag. A scheme in British diplomacy is spawning.
"Never, yaar, no way, neh- wer!" I stumble out a bark. A hush descends in the stalls. "Naar, look, aivah, aivah, panjah vaarah aivah, they're here! " I yell, and annex Salim's hand into mine to raise a sign of solidarity. Liverpool's rivals appear beside us, lining up to run onto the field. "Ali Kajo, the rocket, centah-forward, numbah-nine, yes! Sungura, the Rabbit, right wingah, numbah-eight, O.K! and look, it's Mungwana, the dribblah, numbah-ten and Kitwana, the dancing Swan, goalie." The last one is a visiting guest champion from Nairobi. "Our net will remain a virgin, yaar, with Kitwana, the Masai or is it Kikuyu? all he has to do is spread his wings and not one shot goes in, lagi? ... wanna bet?" I propose, and then, "Die! ... Liverpool ... die! today, we bury you, Casthana, go eat fish!" I can feel the strength of this magnificent ensemble of gods in their green and white colours flooding my already impassioned adolescent veins.

Now mind you, Mombasa Stadium is no Roman Colosseum. The stall on the right, bare to the blistering late afternoon sun is where most of the anti-Liverpool crowd is gathered and it suddenly erupts into a thunderous applause, murmuring approvingly at the coach's choice of players. Some ardent supporters sigh and shift in relief on the rock-hard cement benches for which many have paid top black-market shillings to see this rare friendly match. The middle or main stall, sheltered under a corrugated steel roof traditionally feigns neutrality for it accommodates various self-important dignitaries, cowards, and often a few Parsees hoping to avoid any unforeseen entanglements. The stall on the left of that is staunchly pro-Liverpool making the Parsees and the cowards somewhat sandwiched and uneasy since an ample supply of empty Coca-Cola and Fanta bottles on either side threaten to turn into dangerous Von Braun's V-Rockets. But, there is little chance that the Liverpool side would start any fracas since the left stall is sprinkled as usual with well-mannered, mild-tempered dark-skinned Goans in white uniforms. Goans, Indians from Goa in India, are in most part Catholics and proper English speakers and owe this strange twist of history to the Portuguese and the British respectively. Most Goans, if they
were not already teachers, worked as government clerks, or accountants in some custom agent’s office or a British bank which, I imagined, required them to wear crispy white shirts neatly tucked under white shorts followed by knee length white cotton socks.

Extending out from this three stall structure, to the left and right in an oval shape, is the rest of the stadium with spectators sitting on an open air mound of raw earth. These are the cheap seats or open-air balcony as we call them, where fights usually erupt. Stragglers all around now hurriedly take their place as the chants of “Fai...sal! Fai...sal! Fai...sal!” boom across the entire right side of the stadium. The Faisal mascot, a wiry Swahili kid in a dapper white khaanzu struggles with the club’s huge flag as he leads the players and the coaches on to the field. Faisal United of Mombasa: Faisal, the team that bears the name of the great Saudi king of Arabia; Faisal, the club whose flag always flies in the Arab part of town, a show of history, tradition, and defiance; Faisal, that once had Hamisi, the Arab and Babu Lalji, the Ismaili as its eminent goalies. “Faisal rules!” a medley of Arab and Indian voices cry out to which many murmur an echo of approval.

Decades go by and more Indians now referred to as “Indian colonists” by their British rulers in the Empire’s Foreign Office arrive on to the East African shores. Unbeknownst to them, a subtle “second-hand” colonization process on behalf of an Imperial power is in the hatching. From railway workers and petty traders they become clerks, financiers, and dukhawallahs; from bureaucrats and professionals they become second-hand
empire builders. They participate in raising entire city infra-structures; they set up systems of money, trade, and finance while setting up institutions, mosques, churches, temples and private clubs for their own kind. Khojas, Bohras, Memons and Hindus make good traders, the latter being given the name Banyani; the Goans make reliable clerks, teachers, and administrators; the Singhas – sikhs, formidable masons and labourers. In the process, indirectly and for the British Empire, for better or for worse, a land is colonized. To many, like the Ismailis, this land becomes their new and only home and to others a kind of a Nova-Terra-India, a temporary place to trade, make and save money, and return to Mother India.

More ominously, however, the stage is being set for a future story.

By now the crowd on the left side of the stadium has united in concert, chanting "Liva...pool, Liva...pool," and then the whole stadium suddenly erupts, and just as suddenly quietens into a hushed murmur. Each team has brought in their own sorcerer, a gaanga wizard, to offer the capricious soccer spirits a black rooster, its head to be sliced in sacrificial ritual near the goal, a custom that would later be prohibited but performed nonetheless at some secret location just before the game. Silence descends in the stalls, the players all standing with heads bowed as the sinister magic consecrates the earth with the crimson life-juice of the headless bird in spasms. I wince at the spectacle and Salim offers a mock
sympathy: "Loi (blood) has to be spilled, yaar. I sure hope ours was a bigger rooster."

And so as the titans of Mombasa face each other, the crowd's anticipation as to which mortal would dare referee this match becomes palpable. Impartiality is not something that this crowd takes for granted. "Yaar, fairness is for fairies," was Salim's standard line. "Pesa lao or tamasha dekho ... throw money and observe the frolic of the weak-minded." Many Mombasa referees had been bribed in the past by offering money or a brand new made-in-England refrigerator, and in return a false handball or foul call had been given inside the penalty area in the last moments of the match. The unfortunate team that hadn't matched the bribe price the night before in some shady under-goings had to go down in defeat the following afternoon. No, this time someone who had honour and guts was needed.

"Areh, it's that Liverpool sympathizer! Your Mansoor chaacha (pseudonym) is the referee, madar-chod!" Salim declares in a markedly angry tone as my uncle runs onto the field with his two linesmen. "He's mad, yaar, this crowd will have his chambro (skin), if he makes one wrong call. Hal, hal veenjeh, let's go, this match is cursed," he adds, his mouth contorted in a sly Elvis-style grin as he fakes to leave. The crowd is now visibly agitated. Mansoor Vellani, my father's younger brother, chaacha in kutchi, has been known to be a fair referee, but he has also spent many evenings at the club's bar sharing bawdy jokes and Pilsner beer with Liverpool managers and sidekicks.

My late grandfather, a khoja Ismaili Indian, is part of this colonial enterprise and comes as a "settler."

Perhaps convinced by persistent ravages of famine in the Kutch area, religious decrees from his Imam,
and a sense of hope for a better life, he leaves the Indian Subcontinent towards this new home called Africa. I call him and his voyaging Ismaili predecessors “adolescent pioneers.” Many of them, mostly boys not yet in their teens place themselves in the confines of rickety Arab dhows or Kutchi va’hans for at least a month or two and make the journey, perhaps first to the Island of Zanzibar and then to Mombasa, on the East African coast. There, greeted by their mentors, folks from the same North West Indian towns of Rajkot, Jamnagar, and Junaghad, and deeply bonded in village brotherhood they begin their apprenticeship as “rookie” traders and clerks, usually serving within the vast business empire of the legendary khoja trader, Seth Allidina Visram and Co.

"Get that banyani off the field! " scream several black Faisal supporters seeing an Indian on the field." Banyani gaanga, pili pili maanga ... choroni kula ...," chorus a few Arab boys at the far corner of the Faisal enclave. What's with this banyani thing, I wonder. Often, if an Indian kid at school got into a fracas with a kaarya or an arbaa kid, the taunts of "weve banyani, enda India ... you, banyani, go back to India," would begin in support for the latter. Sometimes, khoja and bohra kids would filter the meaning down even further and do the same to their Hindu class-mates. It was true that officially to be called banyani one had to fulfill the
following three necessary conditions to make it a sufficient case: being brown, being Indian with roots to the land of the banyan tree, India, and arguably also being a Hindu trader or the son of one.

"Wewe, you khoja! you're not gonna see your family to-night or any night if you screw us," a rasping voice thunders from behind my head. My uncle is the brunt of this threat. I cower closer to Salim. This is not the time to show any overt favours towards my chaacha.

Salim elbows me sharply in my ribs. "Areh, say something, nahn, he's your uncle you know?" he whispers just loud enough for half a dozen people to stare and peg me as a potential traitor.

"Shh! Choop thi, nahn? Sao chohdooh ai tunh. Don't me mad, yaar? Did you see the guy's face? Looks like d balochi mercenary with one of those curved chaakoos (daggers) stuffed in his pants, somewhere," I hiss under clenched teeth. Balochis, once guards to the Sultan of Zanzibar were also renowned for their ivory hunting prowess and notorious for their dagger wielding predictability.

Lanky and bearing a short fuse, Mansoor Vellani, the khoja Indian took his refereeing seriously not hesitating to throw players off the game for minor offenses like raising the middle finger. But this afternoon, as hard as he tries to appear stoic, I notice that his darting eyes show hints of fear. He approaches his two black linesmen and a few words are exchanged between them. Finally, at 4.27 pm. Mansoor lets out a shrill from his whistle and waves at the center forwards to take their places for the kick-off. The crowds cheer in anticipation.

"If he's edgy today, if he loses his cool, there's going to be more than those dead roosters' blood on this field," I tell Salim, who by now has submitted his soul to the gods on the field. A heavy police contingent with their tear-gas masks on their belts and heavy wooden batons clenched in their hands take their own positions at various key positions in the stadium. I, along with a few Parsees, mentally eye an exit strategy if things get hairy. The gods on the field are unpredictable and the mortals around me even less so.
Ears serve these pioneers well and the first two decades of the twentieth century sees many more Indian Ismailis arrive, this time in steamer ships crossing the Indian Ocean from Porbander and Bombay in India, to Zanzibar and Mombasa. Cohorts of entire families who were perhaps previously left behind arrive to join their husbands and fathers and spread out into cities, towns and villages like Dar-es-Salaam, Kampala, Nairobi, Bagamoyo, Kilwa, Tanga, Moshi, Kisumu, Mumias, Masaka, Morogoro, Mwanza...

But as generations of Ismailis and other Indians take hold on this land, the prior story, one with a deeper and festering plot conspires against them and eventually Africa regurgitates them as unwelcome and undigested citizens. Not only do they lose "home," but they once again enter a period of "movement" and uncertainty.

Trapped in their earlier history, one of being the frontline colonist trader-cum-second-hand-colonizer, a "bad guy," a petty tribalist, a banyani, and an impartial referee. The Indian is pegged as an expendable character caught in a larger tragedy. No sooner the Empire surrenders and relinquishes her hold on her East African colonies, that the presence of the Indian in Eastern Africa becomes an anomaly, a problem and a pussed sore, first subtle and then obvious. And gradually, caught amidst the nationalism of the time, the tragedy unfolds its woe and passions and
lets loose on to the stage venomous black African characters like Idi Amin, the dictator, and John Okello, the revolutionary soldier, or Nyerere the teacher turned politician to expose older stories tied to grief, freedom, and revenge.

Amin's wrath is aimed against the Indians in Uganda and Okello's against Zanzibari Arabs and the Sultanate, purveyors of slavery. In other cases, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (Tanganyika and Zanzibar), rightly or wrongly, let loose social and political actions that reduce entire populations to Chinese style socialism on African soil.

The resentment is building all around. Other African leaders cheer on—silently. Many in Tanzania have their properties confiscated and others, in Uganda lose their most prized possession—the citizenship of a country and a home.

At least three generations of Indian Asians leave Uganda literally overnight, having lost not just material possessions, but a whole sense of identity tied to generations of early pioneers.

Photo albums exposing countless stories of good and bad times lay scattered, lost to the mind as refugees hurry to meet a dictator's deadline.

Mosques, temples, Jamatkhana, houses, are left behind for the benefit of the squatters and soldiers. Graves of ancestors are left behind for the benefit of dead spirits and dying stories.

Others in Kenya, shaken by events around them and with their extended families now refugees in Canada, England, or elsewhere, also prepare to leave. Many, like the Ismailis could not go back to India, since that country was no longer "home"; they could not stay since they were not considered
Africans — to be that you had to be black:
and Britain caught under the grip of nationalist fervour of Enoch Powell, was reluctant to grant them entry. Most Ismailis, thinking Africa was their home, had officially given up being British subjects by taking the citizenship of newly African independent nations.

Most were thus left to the winds of destiny and

the compassion of a few countries like Canada that extends hope and provides a place to pitch a tent and start once again.³

"Keel him! keel the banyani!" the shouts threaten blood. I have abandoned Salim to fend for himself and am positioned adjacent to the exit doors. A few anxious Parsees are already there, the Goans trailing not far behind. Such venom in the crowd is the consequence of Mansoor the referee's perfectly legitimate penalty call against Faisal in the final minutes of the match. We had all seen it as clear as the heads bobbing out of the mango trees: a corner kick and the Faisal defender feigns a header and thumps the ball away as it skillfully tracks a curved trajectory towards the open goal. It would have been Liverpool-one, Faisal-naught, game over, for-sure. Now the Faisal crowd smell a rat and emotions boil down to much older rivalries: a fancy British-style copycat team versus an authentic bastion of Arab and Swahili tradition; one imperial power against another; Captain Hamerton, head to head with the Sultanate of yester years; and of course the banyani "colonist" referee versus Africa itself. To heck with right or wrong! the Mombasa winds seem to howl, and to heck with lofty principles, this is about staking ancient claims, making old wrongs right again. The crowds at the two opposite ends of the stadium
chorus a strange symphony of human emotions. The left side is blaring away, as if in the throes of the theme from, The Bridge on River Kwai, while the right side is in a somber mood, simmering in hostility with Arabian bombast. At the centre of this Mombasa melee is an embattled Indian.

The police have taken up their positions all around the stadium and Mansoor the khoja, clearly in a bind does an Indian Pontius Pilate routine by conferring with the two black linesmen to get consensus on his call. They both nod their approval, albeit hesitantly and point the flag towards the penalty area, their fate thus sealed in conspiracy. Deftly washing his hands to that, my chaacha, the savvy Indian referee approaches the police captain to plan a flawless exit strategy in case this crowd runs on to the field faster then he and his confreres are able to run out. Time stands still and the world seems to be a jumble of angry mango and coconut trees, fast exiting Parsees, chaakoo carrying balochis, and a sneering Casthana. Salim's ghaandio prepares to take the penalty shot and Kitwana the Swan, the Masai or is it the Kikuyu? focuses intently on the shooter who prepares his feet and mentally marks the angle from which he is going to run to take his shot. A correct prediction by the goalie will begin a dive even before the shooter's foot hits the ball and could mean a perfect save or an absolute error of judgment, and hence a goal. What a conundrum revisited: a khoja Indian's life in danger, old traditions at stake against a modern and foreign namesake, and it is all in the hands of two kaarya guest players who are about to exact an ancient revenge.

Ghaandio takes the shot and Kitwana predicts right. The swan spreads its wings, the ball supremely embraced, the net untouched, still virgin. The stadium lapses into a momentary hush and then ... rampage, total fujo ensues. Fujo, in Kiswahili, means, a sudden ruckus, and this one is like a monsoon gone crazy. Never has anyone ever seen such a rocket shot and such a magnificent save. Kitwana salvages the day, ghaandio is in utter doldrums and panic, and the previously ill-favoured Indian now safely in the clutches of his uniformed protectors makes a
quick getaway. Salim, along with hundreds of Faisal supporters has joined the fujo that is headed towards Kitwana, to hoist him to the skies. At the other end, Casthana remains stoic but the armour has been chinked. As for me, I am already on the streets trailed by the chattering Parsee contingent, a few anxious Goans, and the Khojas. I see no sign of the white sahibs -- the dhorias -- and conclude they must have hung around to congratulate the two teams for a game well-played.

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Figure 4. An “adolescent pioneer” makes a family in Africa. My paternal grandparents, circa 1930. Young boy standing in middle is my father, surrounded by my juis and chaachas.
(Source: Author)
...The complexities that constrain my modern, narrative self also arise in other subtle relationships as well. For as “I” travel in modernity and across geographical and cultural spaces, I do so as an embodied temporal product: I use my body to relate to my material world; I use my body to ground my narrative self and recognize narrative selves in the embodiments of my family members and others; I use it to express my moral imaginations, my excesses and my limitations; I use my body to embrace those I love and retreat from those I care less about; I use my body to adorn myself and adorn others; I use it to move myself from place to place, to prostrate before the Divine that I care for, and to bury other embodied selves who have passed on. My body follows multifarious paths, intersects other embodied persons, and accepts their impressions upon me. The impressions are often of scattered stories that seem etched into every focusing movement. In my joys and in my sufferings, I am now more than mere body. For I realize that my embodied self, once a crying boy lamenting the loss of a grandfather in Africa, urges me to produce temporality, to invite past, present and future and re-member it.

And in all this, I come exposed, for it is also a case that whether I wish it or not, whether I know it or not, the modern world unceasingly writes itself upon my body and discloses itself to me; the modern world interrupts and disrupts and engages my body such that I feel myself differently at different moments, and in different lands. My body registers everything that it feels and “I” the author of my modern
biography, needs my body to recollect events and moments for “me”, the various characters that I am.

The constraints upon my narrative unity and the vision of a whole life that I hold dearly are thus, that I often need persons or things to remind me of other embodied moments I may have shared with them; I need vistas, smells, and sounds of by-gone moments to bring back recollections of impressions I may have merely registered unconsciously; I need traditions and cultural practices to ground me to my embodied self; and I need a stock of stories through which my embodied self can feel itself, in time and movement.¹⁴

And then I realize that I have moved so often -- in space and in time -- that many of the embodied anchors to the senses, the traditions, and practices have been left behind on some seascape of past time and past soil; I realize that the stock of stories I need now to see myself never got written or were abandoned, and the graves (if they still exist?) that hold the memories of my ancestors are scattered in different lands...

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Field Notes & Reflections

Sometimes I need to be reminded of the way tattered morsels of meager stories cohere on to the skeleton of my own identity to give it a modern posture. Most times such remindings are not of my own doing. My story is rarely without outside characters who in turn appear to give support to contemporary plots which again are rarely vacant of at least one traditional moral window. At times, when I am listening to someone else’s story, it’s not the actual event that strikes a chord but the way the person handled that event or cohered it - perhaps it would be courage shown in spite of unimaginable burdens, or failure embraced and taken as nothing more than a lesson in wisdom. Sometimes the tattered morsel would be a child’s frolicsome spirit playing in the afternoon rain and then the same child’s God-like surrender to a force greater, and yet much like her own that has appeared to embrace her. The moral window increasingly reveals an imagery of a bridge that carries me across profound crevices of peoples’ stories and memories as I move from one on to another.

I wonder if there is ever a place or space or neither, where the oral history of Life is being recorded. I am
beginning to believe that the human privilege to perceive the polyphonic tempos of Life in all their quintessential tenderness, their allegro chatters and adagio silences, or their alluring shades and frightening shadows, carry with them an honour and a responsibility. The honour hides in the gift of perception itself and in the narrating of Life’s multifarious miracles while the responsibility endures as a moral landscape upon which every story first performs.

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Sah’chai 1 - My Grandmother and the Eagle

Fifteen year olds share with other fifteen year olds throughout the world at least two things: the year of their birth and all events significant or otherwise that happen every year after, that may make them say silly things like, “You were fifteen then? Get lost, no-way, so was I! What month were you born in? Wow, can you believe that?” etc, etc. And so in 1969, when I am fifteen, my country, Kenya, as a post-colonial independent nation is just six years old. Its sister countries, Uganda and Tanzania, where some of my family is spread over, are seven and eight years old, respectively. Much is happening elsewhere of which I am not aware, at least not in the way I am of things happening around me: I have the current Beatles song: “Here comes the sun,” memorized; "The Trial of Sir Thomas More," where I play the part of King Henry the Eighth, is taking a lot of my time; I have hopelessly fallen in love with my new health-science teacher whose mini-skirts and provocative thighs are shamelessly stretching the imaginations of my adolescent loins; and I
have already made up my mind that the moment an opportunity arises, I will ditch the endless dreariness of my town and head for Europe.

In the summer of that year, far away from earth, an oversized eagle with its own story of courage lands upon a celestial sea and from its belly emerge two alien beings of strange luster. A voice crackles from the first one's globular face: "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," thus leaving nearly half of the earth's population unaccounted for. Most American fifteen year olds hear the voice as they watch on TV, their countryman, Neil Armstrong release his grip from the Eagle's hold and step down from the lunar module onto Mare Tranquillitatis - Sea of Tranquility - the Moon. I don't watch the momentous event since television is far too much of a luxury for my family but the daily newspaper has it splashed all over and short wave radios crackle Armstrong's celestial testimony over and over for weeks. Whilst Neil and Buzz are stomping around collecting moon rocks, the BBC news-reader also mentions every once in a while that the giant who had dreamt the dream of making this "giant step" possible had been shot in Dallas six years earlier.

In our school, my South Indian science teacher who has the hots for my Goan history teacher, join forces in new found passion and carve out their own double mission, the lesser one of which is to develop space scientists and space historians out of their spaced-out students. And so I remember one day not long after the Eagle-has-landed and has safely returned to its American nest, sitting next to my daadi maa (grandmother), telling her of this momentous event and showing her the pictures of the first moon-walkers. She reluctantly takes the newspaper from my hand, brings it closer to her eyes to adjust to her weakening vision and remarks self-assuredly:

"They're lying," and thrusts the paper back to me.

"What? How can you say that, Maa, look at the pictures, nahn? That's an astronaut, a pilot, that's him putting his foot on the moon," I retort agitated but decisive for this has come as a shock to me.
"They're lying, I tell you," she insists equally decisively, "and if I were you I'd begin to see through the jadho (trickery). Here, let me see the pictures again." She stares at the blurred images for a few seconds and says,

"So, that's the moon? How do you know? hunh? Tell me that? This sand, does it look like a desert or not, tell me that?

"Yes, it does but..." I try to interject, unsuccessfully.

"They could be in a desert somewhere, nahn? like they do in films and wear that silly costume and take pictures and shove the flag in the sand, what-not."

"Maa, that's ridiculous, how can you even say that? They're Americans, you know! They're geniuses," I blurt out, now vacillating a bit as a result of her own absolute certainty on the matter.

"Hanh bov! Koi ji taakat ai? What do Americans-pamericans know? The moon belongs to God, hahn, it's His property, it does not belong to Americans and until I see Him there first then I'll believe these fake pictures."

She wouldn't hear of it anymore and for me it became a quest, one that I never fulfilled for up until her final days I was unable to convince her that the moon had been conquered by humans.

More often than we care to know, the poetics of a place has far greater significance than its value as dirt and rock and so truths that are held dear easily mesh and melt into other truths that are also held dear. If the moon had been conquered by humans then what would she make of all the stories her mother had told her of the full moon being a forlorn princess in search of her lost love? What would she now say to the appearance of the crescent moon? - healer and forgiver of human frailties,
a time to avow and make amends; and what of the absent moon – a young daughter hiding in sorrow, having seen so much of her mother’s pain.

The Moon, Chanda Maama — a divine rock whose ambient movements and changing shapes in the skies determine many a tradition’s festivities and rituals here on earth; the moon — a friend and a foe that brings out friendly and not so friendly spirits when the nights are dark; the moon — towards whose radiance has gazed the eyes of Eve, Socrates, Gautama Buddha, Christ, and Muhammed; the moon — one absolute in a changing world.

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Sah’chai 2 - African Servants

As I saunter towards Mohmadi’s Old-Town shish-kebab abode in this fifteenth year of my Mombasa life, I am now less occupied by the narrow calamity that my team has avoided at the hands of their rivals, Liverpool of Mombasa. The game was fun and much of today’s excitement will be the talk of Mohmadi’s patrons for Faisal is his favourite soccer team and the grimy walls of his small and timeworn enterprise are plastered with crudely framed pictures dating back to the first Faisal team. A distant loudspeaker emits a melodious call of the Moslem muezzin and bestows upon the evening worshipers and loiterers an enchanting invitation to prayers, for the sun is now going down and submission to Allah is in order. I have decided to skip Jamatkhana for some street side delicacies of fresh mogho (cassava) chips and aloo bateta (potato curry). It is a typical Mombasa evening with dozens of alley-way bars coming alive with
shouts of lewd laughter amidst loudspeakers blaring high-bass African music as if in a tug-of-war with that other loudspeaker of the minaret pleading for attention and atonement. But rarely do the faithful patrons of the mosques give in to the temptations of the bars, which are cloaked in smells of local beer and barbecued chunks of fatty beef that insidiously infiltrate the streets.

Elsewhere, a few kaaria (black) house-servants who have previously slogged the day in some Indian's home are now out celebrating with their mates occasionally teasing and groping at a few sultry prostitutes who are conspicuously staking their positions outside the bars. Sometime between dusk and dawn much of what has been earned by the African servants by pounding and scrubbing an Indian’s soiled laundry, sweeping every nook and cranny of his house, ironing his family’s clothes and taking upon his affronts will be sparingly spent, perhaps, on a girl-friend, on local beer, or on food supplies, and what little is left will be saved. Once a month, those who have come into town from surrounding regions of Mombasa, like Mazeras, Jomvu, or Changamwe will return to their families with the meager wages they have saved and humorously recount the follies of their Indian patrons.

"Muniroo, your bicycle is getting too small for you," Charo, our seventeen year-old black house-servant informs me one afternoon after I return from school. He has added the "oo" to my name as a sign of affection. His humorous manner is indicative of the Giriama tribe.

"Perhaps it's getting right for you," I tease back, bringing my shoulder adjacent to his to suggest to him that his height is the same as mine. He quickly bends his knees a bit and declines his shoulder below mine. I call him a cheat which brings a quick smile on his face.

"Can I have it, please, if bwana buys you another one?"

"Why?" I ask, wondering how he has guessed that my dad is
getting me a new one soon. Maybe he understands our language after all, like those other servants in Hindu houses who over the years have picked up snippets of local gujarati.

"I'll be the bwanakuba (big boss) of my village. I'll ride to my village in this shiny thing and I'll be the boss," Charo boasts.

"You'll be the bwana-kuba of all the girls of the village, I know you," I tease. An easy African smile comes across the length of his handsome face and his right palm veils his mouth as if to hide the embarrassment of this partial truth.

"Ah, sala la ... truly, Muniroo, the bus ride to my village is expensive, but I cannot ask bwana for more money," Charo finally says, knowing that this cry for help is a more appropriate excuse sure to turn my heart. And it does.

A pact is reached that day and a month later my red Raleigh which had seen some rough adventures passes on to the ever grateful Charo, the big boss of his village and all its girls.

North Vancouver, April, 2001: Conversation with Kulsum about servants

"I wonder if they'll ever forgive us?" Kulsum, one of my conversation partners tells me. She is referring to the various African kaaria servants that used to work for her in Kenya, and her family before that. It's raining heavily and the afternoon has turned eerily dark. The patter of rain drops on the outside deck echo a drum beat to this sudden change of topic. I am way beyond the agreed upon time limit and the tape has stopped running. She gets up from her chair to switch on the lights and then asks if I want another cup of tea. I decline.

"We have not been good to them, you know. They used to come to work at 7 am, so imagine at what time they must wake up to come the
distance from their place? Even then, as I opened the door for my servant, never did I once ask: ‘How are you? how is your family?’ I didn’t even smile. I just scolded. ‘You’re late!’ even if it was by a few minutes. He was a servant, *panjoh boy* ... our ‘black’ boy, and what was the point of chit-chatting.”

I am distraught. I am cursing myself for not bringing an extra tape. I quickly resort to notes.

“Why do you remember this now?” I probe.

“Keenaroh najik acleh toh haneh ... kehrah veechar bov acleh mookeh ... the other (final) shore of my life is approaching now and such thoughts often come to me,” she whispers wistfully. “Khe’reeh olehkeh keh bhook lagi voi, toh acleh khenjoh mangan, toh bhee pankh ee’nh nah thiyeh, keh pahn olehkeh keh deel thi khenjoh deejeh ... how they used to come to ask for some food (during the work-day) when they were hungry, even then it didn’t occur to us to offer them food with our hearts. Olakah insaan nah va paanji ankh meh ... they were not humans in our eyes. Even the *chai* (tea) my parents gave them, I remember, was from our leftovers to which we simply added water. *Ee veechar achehtah toh bov dookh thiyeh toh* ... I am filled with much sadness when these thoughts come.”

“I ask

“How much time is left now for me? The shore of death is at hand. My eyes are clouded in the blindness that has taken over. I say to myself, *naar toh, keri bhool karna vah pahn* ... look how great a mistake we were making.”

§§§

There is a projective thrust built into each of our human experiences, a thrust to produce coherence. The experience of being human is a coherent experience and an experience of coherence. At the time of the experience itself, such possibilities of producing coherence may not have been available to be seen, but as we proceed
on with our lives and realize that our individual experiences are shared by others and vice versa, we begin to make attempts to mediate and articulate the past and the future to seek coherence. It is fundamentally a narrative effort, a significant theme of which is to mediate between good and evil, past and future, and self and other. All of these, before they became concepts, were once experiences. And as experiences their thrust to eventually seek coherence may force a human life to account and atone, and if possible, to amend.¹

How we mediate between an ideal of goodness and the challenges of our human behaviours away from such an ideal is implicitly tied to some version of a cultural story that we are already part of. Paul Ricoeur explores this in his book – The Symbolism of Evil – where he argues that cultures everywhere have myths, doctrines and stories that are available (to the community) to make intelligible to themselves the difficulties of ethical demands and human experience. We always tend to follow some version of a cultural story to mediate between such ethical demands and our spontaneous disposition towards human actions, and hence stories have a powerful place to mirror back to us our intentions and perhaps solve some of the incoherencies we may feel about our life.² It’s in the fragments of stories such as these that the cultural notions of truths, and more significantly, the truths about good and evil, and self and other, are made available.

§§§

Sah’chai 3 - Roshan, ninety-year old conversation partner

“Ajeh, vai neh sam’bhran varoh kehr ai? ... today, who’s there to sit and listen?” Roshan offers softly in kutchi in response to my asking her if she has told anyone the many stories she is now recounting to me. An hour of potent
conversation has already gone by in the company of this diminutive and gentle woman around whose frail and fragile figure enclouse the soft curves of the sofa making her appear as if she has been carved out of the cushiony throne itself. There is not much movement within the small space she occupies, perhaps an occasional glance towards me or a minor gesture of her tiny hands. The small and bent frame is devoid of muscle as if life has extracted a toll leaving behind only brittle bones whose once thriving marrow has been replaced by painful stories. I notice that all the while we have talked, her angular fingers have caressed the tasbih (prayer beads) in a delicate bead-by-bead progress: thirty-three counts, a pause, thirty-three counts, a pause, thirty-three counts, until one whole alternation of the ninety-nine beads have been completed only to be repeated again. I wonder which of the ninety-nine names of the Almighty she has etched into each bead such that no sound ever needs to be uttered and each bead is embraced in an infinite silence of prayer and gratitude.

"Kinkeh time ai? Badhai, poteh poteh meh pia ai ... who has the time, everyone is immersed in their own lives?" she adds after a long pause. Tears have welled up in her eyes. I nod my head in agreement for this isn’t the first time I have heard this grievance. It was Sheroo, at another time who had said: “Who has the time to sit and listen to old people’s mutterings and putterings,” and long before that my father had complained to no one in particular that “times had changed and so had his children’s hearts.”

I wonder whether this last bit of Roshan’s grievance is meant for the ears of her daughter, Meera, who has decided to sit in on the conversation just in case her ninety-year-old mother needs something, or needs reminding of something. It has only been a year since Roshan has moved into a senior’s residence closer to where her two unmarried and middle-aged children live. Before that, she tells me, she lived downtown in a senior’s place where she had been better looked after. There were sixty-five Ismailis in that place, she tells me, and here in the new place there are only five, and the home-care person hardly visits. Roshan’s need for independence is obvious from her descriptions of the old place: “At the downtown place I didn’t feel alone. There were other Ismaili seniors around me and we would visit each other. I really enjoyed it. We had our own mosque bus that was available all seven days. On some weekends the bus driver would take
us to Stanley Park, treat us to pizza. I used to cook my own food as well ... chicken curry, kadhi and kheechree, and vegetable curry. At five in the evening we would all come down into the lobby and sit around waiting for the bus driver, but we enjoyed talking and waiting. Everyone would have some news to share.”

It’s on her children’s insistence, she adds softly, that she decided to move to this new place, so that “my daughter wouldn’t have to come so far to visit and bring food.” The daughter appears a little uncomfortable with this new piece of information and shifts ever-so-slightly in her chair. She stares at her mother in a half vacant smile, embarrassed and unsure whether she should add something in her own defense but decides otherwise and gradually the uncomfortable moment passes.

§§§

Mombasa, British East Africa Protectorate, Circa 1900’s

The old lorry was bought on hire-purchase, but it looked reliable enough and would serve Kassam’s purpose for now. His new produce and merchandise business had improved substantially and the increasing roster of steady buyers required him to use a more dependable vehicle to make his deliveries. He had definitely moved a step up from those early years when he had first arrived with a young family fresh from Kundal in the Kutch and Kathiawad region of India. Mombasa was going to be his new home, a place to plant fresh seeds, a place of hope. Hadn’t his own Imam’s holy edicts guided him to this place? and he rejoiced in that thought which gave him the resolve to make it good here.

In those early years, Kassam’s days of daily labouring were tedious. By 7am, he and the other young Ismaili apprentices were already hard at work unloading the daily deliveries of wholesale produce, cleaning the store, re-arranging piled-up merchandise, or making errands for Dhanji Murji, their uncle of some distance and
their imperious boss. Their hectic pace was interrupted perhaps by a quick break for a home-packed lunch which consisted of two chapatis, one tomato and an onion. If they were lucky they would find time for a quick tea at Musaji’s place but that was rare for such breaks were considered frivolous and Dhanji Murji didn’t take it lightly to minutes being wasted drinking chai.

Kassam and his wife, Rehmat woke up early to perform their daily ablutions. This was one moment when Kassam felt a sense of calm. By 3 am both husband-wife were at the majestic Old-Town jamatkhana where they stayed until after the meditation hour of Baitul Khayal and the time of the morning prayer were over. By 6 am, the couple were home for some early morning nastoh and chai (breakfast) with the rest of the family after which Kassam left for work. By that time, the early morning sun was already casting shadows over the gently waking streets of Mombasa.

Those early days at his uncle’s shop had been arduous, but he had served well and had made a name for himself as an honest and shrewd apprentice. He had received many offers to join other Ismaili khoja businessmen and he had rejected them for his hopes for advancement in his uncle’s shop were delicately knotted with his obligation to a family bond that went all the way to India. But years had passed and no promotion or offer of partnership had come forth and he had been disappointed. That was when he decided to go at it on his own. He was not being ungrateful, he quickly reminded himself, for thoughts of these sort if they became words of a spoken nature would be taken unkindly in the close-knit Ismaili community of Mombasa.

§§§

"Haramzaadi, saali, sao nalaek ai tuhn ... bastard-woman, you’re
complete imbecile!” Roshan’s sas (mother-in-law) screams at the young va’uv (daughter-in-law). The vile curses coming from Amabai’s contorted face had begun a year after Roshan had married Amir. “I don’t know why I ever asked your father for you ... to marry my son, he could have done much better elsewhere.”

“Bai, bhool thal vai ... I made a mistake, next time I’ll make the dhal less runny,” Roshan replies, slightly embarrassed since the curses are loud enough for the long ears of the Old Town’s neighbours.

“Don’t talk back! Koothi! ... cursed-bitch, you’re good for nothing, coming from a rich family and all ... useless and ghaandi.”

Roshan, like always, fixes her gaze firmly at the floor as her mother-in-law’s daily tirade continues. She is afraid that a direct gaze towards her sas would be considered a challenge and in the past that had made the older woman raise her hands ready to strike. Fortunately, Roshan had averted her gaze away just in time and had begged forgiveness. That had stopped the sas from striking but since then her curses had become increasingly wretched, erupting out of even the slightest irritation she felt for her sixteen year old daughter-in-law. If it was not the way Roshan shaped her chapatis that was reproached than Amabai’s wrath found something else wrong in her daughter-in-law, perhaps the way she dressed or walked or even looked at Amir.

In the afternoon, when Amir returns from work, he notices a strange mood in the house. He acknowledges his mother’s offer of warm masala tea and then feigns an itch over his eyes and surreptitiously signals his wife to join him in their bedroom.

“You’ve been crying, no? Something happened? Ghar yaad acheh toh ... are you reminded of home?” he asks in his gentle manner.

Roshan remains silent for she knows that her husband’s soft disposition will not make him take sides in this matter. It would only aggravate her sas further who was probably listening to the young couple’s conversation. Besides, Roshan respects her husband and to put him through this test so early in the marriage would only make matters worse.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I’m not feeling well, that’s all. I’ll be fine,” she replies in a hushed tone.
On the other side of the closed door a figure ever so silently moves back towards the kitchen.

§§§

"You know," Roshan's voice trails into the tape-recorder, "I can't even remember my own wedding? I must have been around fifteen at the time. The only thing I can say is that moonji life bov kathanr vai ai ... my life has passed with much hardship, and the curses of my sas screaming at me echo even now as I speak. She would go on and on, ah ... Ya Allah ... Oh God ... it was painful. Poor soul, she's now gone. She's roohanee (a spirit)." The traditional code of never berating a departed soul holds her back from revealing the injustices of time – souls know of their errors in after-life; it is the living that still are mired in guilt and anger. And yet the urge to lament, to tell someone of her dookh (sorrow), impels her to cross the fine balance of tradition and its codes, and tell her story. She pauses to take a sip of water and then continues.

"When we sat down to eat in the evening, if there was fish, my sas would offer my narand (sister-in-law) and my husband the best parts and to me ...," she pauses, "to me she gave the head, it was always the fish's bony head that came into my plate, but I would eat it in gratitude." Roshan speaks about it as if it had happened just yesterday.

"It must have been hard, not having any support?" I inquire, wondering if her husband had been of any help.

"Yes, it was very hard but my husband was good to me until the day he died," she replied getting the drift of my question. "He was a saintly man and on his last
breath were prayers for me and our young children ... *anhu'ov dua karatoth keh bachaa
tokeh hatherehe meh rakhnaa ...* it is my prayer that our children will take you under
their care one day.” I was only forty-five when I was widowed and since that day the
only thing that has kept me going is my God, my faith, and my husband’s prayers.”

I let the silence of the room echo back to Roshan, prompting her to look harder
within.

“He died at home,” she continues, “and our children were small. We had no
savings, nothing to live on. Most of our life together was spent moving from one town
to another as a result of his work. But we had nothing to show for it. Soon after his
death, I had to borrow money from my niece, no-one else was prepared to give me
anything. I worked at odd jobs, cooked for some Ismaili families, knitted baby clothes,
and made *tasbihs*, sometimes twenty a day which I sold for two shillings each. That’s
how I put food into my children’s stomach. I also paid my niece back the money I
owed her. You know, I’ve made *tasbihs* for forty years.” A smile comes across her
face as she looks towards me. I realize that she is proud of this last bit of
remembered morsel and nod in amazement. And then it occurs to me that she is
proud not in the way someone would be proud of completing a difficult task. Making
*tasbihs* for forty years, in her case has been all about putting together beautiful
prayer-beads for people from whose mouths the words of the Almighty will be
uttered for ever.

§§§

Over the years, Kassam and Rehmat were amply blessed with a healthy brood
and with that came a strict father’s hopes that all his children and especially his
daughters would learn a profession. It was his young Hazir Imam's wish as well - to move with the time. India, in many ways still a distant home for him, also reminded Kassam of the burdens of poverty and despair he had left behind. Life without proper education he felt would not serve his daughters well in the future and so as his wealth increased so did his resolve to give the best to his daughters. Tutors were hired to teach the girls gujarati, history, religious knowledge, English, and even music. To make sure that the daughters became independent, a special teacher was hired to train the girls to ride a bicycle, something that was not done at the time.

The rule of the Imperial Raj in British East Africa, Kassam used to tell his friends and family, would bring many changes to the colony and those who were going to be prepared would reap unimaginable rewards. And Kassam had other important things to teach his family. In the evenings, after Jamatkhana, the family ate their meal together for Kassam believed that "hakreh tham meh khajeh toh dil thiye, nakar judah judah dil thai vineh ... if we eat on one table together then our hearts also become closer, otherwise our hearts separate and we know less of each other."

After supper, he invited his children out into the compound where he placed himself on an inderoh (wooden swing) and asked the children to sit around him on the floor.

"So tell me, children, what ginan (Ismaili holy hymn) was sung today in jamatkhana?"

Silence. The children had been far too busy fidgeting with their purses or coins and had missed the ginan completely.

"What? what's the use of going to the jamatkhana if the very meanings of the ginans are not heard and understood. First, you must know your dua (prayer) and then the meanings of the holy hymns," and with that he would explain the poetic verses of the hymns that the great Pirs had sung centuries ago. Kassam, by now was considered some kind of a sage himself and there were stories that when he sat down to recite the evening prayers in jamatkhana, ghatpat candles would light up all by themselves.
The children sat in awe of their father, they loved him beyond all measure.

"And how should you sit in prayer and meditation?" he inquired and immediately answered: "Sit with one mind and don't be distracted by other thoughts which will always come. Repeat silently, 'Pir-Shah, Pir-Shah, sacho nam Pir-Shah, ak nam Pir-Shah,' and slowly your mind will attend to the rhythm and then become quiet."

Then, when the children's attention was sufficiently drawn to his soft but commanding voice, Kassam changed the topic and addressed his daughters:

"Now tell me, who'll be the nurse from amongst you? and who'll be the teacher?"

"I'll be a teacher, bapa," young Roshan replied while her sisters remained silent.

"Yes, you Roshi-maa, you'll be my teacher."

§§§

"My father called me Roshi-maa," says Roshan as a soft gleam appears in her eyes. A gentle smile spreads across her small face. "He wanted me to become a teacher. He was proud of me because I made good use of the tutors unlike my sisters who weren't interested in learning," she adds and then pauses as she remembers something vague in the distance of lost memories. I let her enjoy the images of these recollected moments. Her pauses are like lulls just before a storm and I wonder what scraps of treasure or debris the waves would bring this time from the sea of her life experiences. I am suspended like a hungry sea-gull waiting to pounce at the first joyful morsel revealed among the scraps. But the moment of fond memories doesn't last. Roshan's experiences of a troubled life cast somber shadows over whatever joys she may have felt, or hopes she may have had, and she reverts to other images of pain. I
realize that for Roshan, this above all is what needs telling and I let her speak. She sighs, her fingers still caressing the beads of the *tasbih* and continues:

"The only thing that kept me sane from the onslaughts of my *sas* was my job as a teacher. At that time I had only one child so it was easy. I'd take the bicycle and be gone for the morning and in the afternoon I'd spend time with my child who had been under the care of my *sas*. That was bearable, but soon more children came and she told me to give up my teaching and stay home and I did. From then on, life became unbearable ... oh, I must stop this kind of talk." The dreadful memories of the past had been transformed into moments of *Kismet* (fate) for her to bear.

"Roshan bai, your children have been so successful and your grand-children adore you, can you tell me what's guided your life? I mean, what has mattered to you?" I ask, hoping to pull her back into the present moment. It works. She slowly turns her head towards me and says:

"*Sah’chai*. You know what it means, *sah’chai*?" she asks.

"Truthfulness?" I answer in English, somewhat unsure of what it actually meant. I usher a few descriptions. The word cannot be explained, I realize.

"It could also mean faithfulness," adds Meera from afar. I nod.

"Our *iman* – our faith in the Divine – is part of this, " Roshan continues. Then, as if she realizes that this, as well, isn’t enough, she adds, "and to make the *iman* strong we must offer *dasond* from what we earn, whatever we can afford. The ginan says: *Ek ana deso taneh savah lakh leso* ... give one cent and in return receive the abundance of the universe. Earn with *sah’chai* and give with *sah’chai*. There should be no doubts, no doubts."

"*Bapa* (father) used to tell us" Roshan continues, "that no matter what amount of money or gifts you receive, take a portion and offer it as *dasond*. From a
very young age we were told that *dasond chokhee voonhi kapeh* ... the offerings must be pure. *Kudhrati*, in some divine way, our lives improve. It says in the ginans: *Dasond khadhe ranjeh toh viseh* ... we will encounter all sorts of illnesses if we eat what is first to be offered to the Divine."

**Field Notes & Reflections**

"*Munir, are you offering your dasond in time?*" my mother once again asks on my recent visit to Toronto.

"*Yes,*" I reply and see the lie shaped in that word.

"*Not a morsel of food (anaj) should be eaten before that which is the portion of the divine is taken out,*" she adds.

I nod in agreement.

"That's the foundation of life, remember that. Our faith becomes firmer. To-day you're studying and income is not that much, I know that. But give a little, and say that when it becomes better you'll give what's really due, and teach the children to give."

"*Yes,*" I silently promise.

And then the promise withers in the distance as I return and plan my meager monthly budget and notice that I have very little to offer.

"*But offer first and you'll notice that all of a sudden there's a lot to give and a lot left over,*" my mother had said.
“I have lived this life in His trust,” Roshan tells me as we approach the end of our conversation. “That is the only way I could have lived it. I am sure there are others whose lives must have been very happy. But in my life I have seen much dookh (sorrow).”

“What would you want to share with the future generations of Ismailis,” I ask, trying to draw the conversation towards a meaningful closure.

“I would say to them that they take matters of faith seriously. But this generation hardly has any interest in these matters. I would tell them that offering dasond, attending jamatkhana, saying our prayers three times, these are the huqams, the firmans of our Imam.”

“And how would you like to be remembered?”

“I want to be remembered for the good things I have done in my life.”

## Sah’chai

Truthfulness; faithfulness, fearlessness. To be true to oneself; to be good; to live in the universe in harmony; to offer to the Divine that which is due; to care and commit beyond oneself; to be honest in one’s life dealings; to offer dasond without doubt; to make tasbihs for forty years; to share meals together, to hold on to truths that make you dream; to remember the injustices committed and atone in conversation and story; to stay beside someone in need; to value all life; to include all, and exclude no-one; to sit and listen to the stories of old people and all people; to be fearless; and to become an eagle and fly.

And still this mysterious Indian word remains undefinable.
The tacit permission to voice an utterance is a paragon of social constructionist discourse. The warrant to voice is a form of citizenship within a community and with this warrant arises a challenge of stewardship of a tradition. There is an implicit assumption of difference and a supporting declaration of an allegiance: That we are different in our mental interpretations of our individual worlds; we observe, reason, and act differently; we have moral values that may differ; we may have lived similar experiences but have felt them differently; and in all this our passions and intentions may collide. But we give allegiance that we in community will have a warrant to voice, and will be present to listen without evaluative judgements, not merely because we wish to communicate our differences, but that by and through our voices, we will master the discourses in which we are situated, and through this mastery, we will enter into arguments of a higher order, arguments which point us towards common places, places where we can begin to give form to our multitudes of experiences.

But there is more to this. For the central theme in this argument is that our very temporal identity requires the narrative strategies of both history and fiction in all its full expression. We live out of the future, but understand ourselves out of the past. Whether I choose to call this a ‘voicing’ activity or a remembering activity, the aim I believe is the same: we are not merely engaged in the tellings of a past, but rather in the gatherings of our heritage of possibilities. Seen another way, my own personal retrievals of the past ultimately move towards a collective retrieval such that we become engaged in a movement from memory to tradition. The question then is not simply: “Who am I to become?” but rather, “Who are we to become?”

Every conversation situation can ultimately lead us to a story or stories that provides us with, what Shotter calls, an ‘organized practical-moral setting’ that has emerged out of the intentions of a multitude of participants. Some of these participants are physically present, others are present behind the scenes as hidden characters and voices. The setting is thus a place of ‘moral enablements’ to be
used in community as a place of joint action and moral feedback

§§§

Missed Blessings - Roshan falls and hurts her back

Except for a few dying plants and some fake ones, the hospital room seems to have little life and whatever courage I can muster to remain is challenged by the strange wheezing sound coming from one of the beds near the window. The woman is asleep and evidently very ill with all kinds of tubes attached to her body, and digitized machines flashing numbers and lines foretelling a serious condition. But it is not her that I have come to see. It's Roshan. I walk over to the bed where she lies asleep, her tiny figure in a fetus position underneath one of those standard issues of hospital blankets. It is strangely cold in the room. I pull up a chair, one of those vinyl ones with a metal frame, and ease quietly beside her, so that her face is right in front of me. She appears serene.

She must have felt a presence next to her, for she opens her eyes and in a flash recognizes me. “Areh, Munir, kiareh aivoh tuhn? ... oh, Munir, when did you arrive?”

“Just now. How are you feeling?”

“Fine. The doctor was just here. My back is healing, but I'll have to stay here for a while.” She tells me how she had fallen down at home and hurt her back, and then changes the subject and begins to ask me about my family. We talk for a while, and fall silent. It's been nearly three months since my conversation with her and she seems so much older.

“You're a good boy, Munir. Mowla tokeh hamehsa sukhi rakheh ... I pray that the lord always grants you happiness,” she tells me.

“Amen,” I reply, and accept her blessings.

“Boodha maras ji dua bōv pahn'keh kuhm acheon,” my mother used to tell me. “Visit them in hospitals or nursing homes whenever you can. The blessings of old people really help us.”
There is something about Roshan that seems to comfort me, a hidden reservoir of strength, and this is one of the reasons why I am here. It feels strongly like being with my grandmother, the one who had refused to believe that the Americans had made it to the moon. She passed away in Mombasa in 1997. But then it could also be my way of reconciling the distance I had created ever since I had left Kenya nearly twenty-five years before.

§§§

"Munir, phone Maa (grandmother), here's her number again, and be mindful of the Vancouver and Kenya time difference. Your night will be her morning," my mother reminds me with a call from Toronto. "How much longer will she be with us, nahn? and she has been asking after the children. Their voice will cheer her up. Phone, don't forget!"

I did not forget. In fact, I remembered every day that I still hadn't phoned, and two weeks later when my mother phoned again to say that, "Maa has finished her earthly journey," the impact of my indecision hit me. How could I have withdrawn from her story and not made her a significant part of mine?

In moving to such a distant land, had I also distanced my heart? I had known of her greatness of spirit and the countless ways she had offered herself to the service others; I had known of her unwavering devotion to the Divine; I had known that she loved us all, dearly; I had known that she yearned to hear the distant voices of her great grandchildren; I had also known that she was of an age where one's gaze is increasingly towards the coming shore of death and away from the shore of life; I had also known that for her, home meant staying close to her husband's grave, and life merely a devotional affair with the Divine.
At ninety-six years of age, my grandmother was the last living vessel of stories in our family. And, yet, I had removed her from my daily stories, making her a distant and occasional character, merely in thought and receding from the heart. What's the place of such heroines in one's self-making and in the self-making of great grand-children? What are these heroines to one's sense of home? Who are these heroines as carriers of virtues? What is it in our movements that often leads us to erase the stories of those who gave us life? How many stories have been snuffed out in this way?

How many blessings missed?
ina, meena, dhikha

for the moment i am rajesh khanna
delivering my heart and adolescent loins,
snared by the softness of her pink sari and luscious lips,
soft belly and sensual hips;
she has become desire
and this evening I will be rajesh,
sharmila, be my lover, my drive-in queen.

like a suckling son
banished from his mother's bosom
to ease her burden,
she wrung the earth of all its water,
made it barren and dry.

she asked him to be patient with her,
to fondle her with his toil,
and let her bloom in her own time;
she pointed him, shoved him to another land
across the ocean abundant and black
until they gathered at porbander
joined in struggles of water at hand.

ina, meena, dhikha
jai tama nika,
maga naga naga
dhikha, bikha, rikha
rum pom poch, eh rum pom poch.

today I will not wiggle my arse like Kishore Kumar that is, indian singer
actor, buffoon, genius.
i'm dharmendra and to sweet hema
i'll let my glance reveal
my mohabat, my pyar.

he tells me of a voyage of one moon cycle,
supplies of spices, lentils, and rice;
rusty charcoal-sigdi, chappals, and a bundle of clothes
under an ambient sky of million stars.

he tells me of sorrowful partings
soft petals wrenched from young blooms
porbander left behind
misty eyes now fixed yonder
into the embrace of unblemished horizons.

she speaks of a quiver
her heart both here and there
with sweetness of freedom couched inside a smile
that remains veiled in moon less nights.

in moments, she is already forgetting
the land that bore her,
the mother that suckled her,
and now in the tender bosom of a new lover,
she is easing herself into a land which beckons her.

matineé, naaz cinema
moist eyes, masala chips.
five times sangam,
randy raj, velvety vayjanti.
dost, dost na raha, pyar, pyar na raha,
popcorn, aloo batetas , and coca cola.
six times ram aur sham,
tender waheeda, desolate dilip,
wrecking ruin in every heart.

he whispers again
of stories shared with boys from junaghad
lazing on murky decks of kutchi va'hans;
he remembers ocean nights of songs and raas.
his eyes brighten, a pride revealed,
in kismet, fate, blessing
he remains thankful
for having made the journey.

he tells me of first sight of land
lined with bungalows of masters and maidens
all white.
she tells me she was only eight
already plucked and ripe
betrothed to old or very old, it mattered not.

i am indian you know?
made of hindi films and songs
where the mouth moves but another sings
of pain when friends are no more friends.
i am no more indian, you know?
of rajkot, jamnagar, and kutchi lands,
of sour yogurt, rotlahs, and raw ghee.
i am indian, you know?
of mombasa, toronto, and english tongues,
of modern lands, honest ed's and white pashas.
i'm not indian you see,
that one was left behind in porbander,
countless moon cycles ago.
...Now, let me add the last and by no means final layer of complexity that constrains my vision of a whole human life as a moral narrative. I am a modern selfhood in that I am an individual agent with the means and freedom to exercise my individualism. I exercise it within the various segments of my partitioned human life as I wander across multifarious modern institutions and practices. Soon, I begin to envisage human life as being lived individually -- perhaps even essentially as such -- even though I live it amongst and jointly with other lives. I find that the extent of my self-government is limited to my own encased and personal heart and the comfort of my home is where I champion my own private causes. I have come to believe that it is through self-mastery, through self-fulfillment, through inward strength, and by self-invigorating the "I", that I will ultimately see myself and hence find the occasion to update my biographical project.

This has become a new way, an authentic path of becoming a reflexive somebody in the modern world: whereas at one time I may have merely observed and thought things, now I find that my practices are in fact guided by the things I think and observe. As I disengage my modern self and let it float towards its own inner quest, I become aware that my language and my discourse has also changed (or is changing) to allow for this new stance. I am drawn to use metaphors of mobility such as rootlessness, journeys, float, path, home, and movement; or, use metaphors of body, such as dissect, project, and self-government, as if they have become ways of speaking
of a modern person who lives in-between cultures, traditions, and histories. The "I" that I traditionally was, a first person entity tied to kindred traditional narratives has become a "self" or a "selfhood," or an enigmatic first person "I", that appears to be an objective entity free of the older more subjective horizons from which it once used to seek its bearings. Or, so it seems. 15

Therein is presented yet another constraint to my vision of the narrative unity of human life. The individual self in pursuit of its own modern journey seems to feel less inclined to draw upon those who in traditional times may have been vital in giving the self its own identity and purpose. The modern self seeks disembeddedness, time alone -- it wants no encumbrances. Yet, if "I" have traveled this journey in time and space, I have surely traveled with others in community who have before me offered the journey a telos of itself and a horizon from which those yet to follow may perceive as well as seek their bearings. Yes, as a modern selfhood I am compelled to travel as an individual with my own stories and telos and yet, whether I like it or not, whether I realize it or not, I am already also born into a story or stories. These larger traditional narratives are more than mine, with all the essential characteristics of embeddedness and emplotments that began long before I entered the scene.

These connections with traditional horizons paradoxically both constrain and propel me as a modern individual, for their characteristics inevitably intertwine with my own personal and individual narrative. In seeking disembeddedness from traditional horizons, I find a strange urge to know and understand the stories in which I am embedded. I cannot perform one without performing the other; I cannot go into my own horizon without also flowing with the current of that historical horizon of my forbearers. I
realize that I am never more than the co-author of my own narrative and only in fantasy do I live what story I please.\textsuperscript{16} In short, I am pulled and pushed in directions that arise out of the very teleology of historical narrative forces -- traditional and modern.

I, then, realize that in order to cohere and find intelligibility in my own narrative even though it is that of a disengaged modern self, I must also find intelligibility in the kindred stories I was born into and share with others who have journeyed before and beside me\textsuperscript{17}...

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§§§
Shamshu - “Life is about Flavours”

Life goes on

Malek and myself, we were connected,

she was made for me

magically,

there were no doubts.

Sometimes

I feel

the need of her,

Her smile,

contact,

I miss her.

The way she sat
where you're sitting,

How she'd come

down

the stairs,

foot steps,

I can hear her,

she was my friend

I was her partner.

Her noise

is

in everything;

It's

impossible to let go

this is the fifth year,

she is still part of me

I'll show you

her saris,
I touch them
once in a while.

The moment I saw her,
I fell
in love
1948,
I was twenty,
It clicked,
"I want to marry your daughter," I said,
She was a teacher.

Nothing matters,
We were in love,
Four years we courted;
I was in Uganda,
she in Kenya.
"When will you marry my daughter?" the mother asked.
"My word is my bond," I replied.

She is still
part of me,
The way she ate,
combed her hair,
an angel, she was,
I told you that.
She had purpose
in my life,
I still don't
know
what it was.

My potent conversations have made me cry. I have cried with the man, I have cried for the man, I have cried for myself, until every backward moment remembered
has offered us both a forward hope. I listened. The words stumbled out of his mouth, whispers first, then louder, often in melodies, and sometimes in melancholy. “I wish I could go back in time,” he says. “Why?” I ask. “I’d like to go back to be with her, like she was the first time I saw her. I’d do many things different, very different. I’d lift her right to my heart.”

“More than what you have done, already?” I ask.

“Yes. I am human too, you know? I have my faults, but I have a lot of beauty in me which cover my faults, and I know it,” he says. Tears flow. I hold his hand.

“Nobody is flawless, we wish we were flawless. You know, maybe Malek is not here, but I can see her every moment I want her. You know how?”

“How?”

“I know flavour. I know flavour so much. Life is about flavours. I know the flavour of Malek.”

I was
a mechanic, you know?
fine
tuner of cars,
like a doctor,
who just listens to the body,
I listened,
to the pulse of the car.
Tuning a car, it’s like
life,
everything is marinated together
The engine
has to purr
    like a kitten,
and I would know
every stroke.

Life goes
    on,
I keep on
    moving,
go, go, go,
I go
to jamatkhana,
    everyday,
I cook,
    I do laundry,
that's the way it is,
    Allah is great,
    He knows.

I don't know
    how my life is going to be.
I take it
    one day
    at a time.

If I am
alive
Today,
    It's a blessing.
Tomorrow,
if I have to
    close my eyes,
I'll go.
Metaphors abhor vacuum and gather around whenever our common language breaks down and is unable to deal with emptiness. Shamshu's life is lived in the silent realms of a man consumed in love - not with his wife, but with life that was symbolized in Malek, and now the experience of his emptiness fans a deeper desire - to make it all right again.

There is an ancient tradition in Japanese carpentry: Proceed with painstaking slowness and detail, bending and curving wood to perfection such that what is seen appears as if it could not have been any other way. But, always, in one tiny corner hidden to the naked eye, leave behind a flaw, a deliberate error, such that no gods are left jealous.

Flaws and imperfections in human life honour what remains incomplete. They play host to imaginations, telling us that nothing is ever pure or need always be perfect, and that ultimately all things are in their proper place and are right.
Each night I listen to his taped voice and ask it to tell me more than what I hear. Each night heals the gaps in my life. I miss my wife, too. I feel the emptiness as well. I have flaws I wish to hide. To be saved by a voice and blessed by a tear, to know what is beloved to you, and why. That is grace.

"I am a good cook, you know?" he says. "I make pickles too. Would you like to have some of my spicy lemon pickles? I'll give you a bottle."

"Thank you."

He opens the fridge, pulls out a small jar and says: "What would you call pickles? When you eat pickles, it brings flavour in your life, doesn't it? Then what is flavour? It is a pickle of your life. It wakes you up. Life without flavours, a beautiful woman, a wife, a partner, you know there is no flavour in it. That's why so many marriages fail. They take woman as wife. I take her as my partner, we share and make flavours to remember."

I make a mental note of the present tense in which he speaks. I am in a shrine, I realize. The framed picture, large as life, of Malek, his wife, in the hallway is not merely an act of remembrance but of reverence. Surrounding the picture are smaller ones of his family at various stages in their lives. Mementos and reminders that once, in this home, there was life.

**Flavour n.** 1. a distinctive or characteristic taste. 2. an indefinable characteristic quality. 3. a slight admixture of a quality.
Night after night I endlessly follow Shamsu’s path. Details of love, details without love. A sacred grotesquerie. Fragments are also secrets, I remind myself, and secrets are hidden teachers. I didn’t know until now that ‘flavour’ is perhaps a mixture of the Latin word “flatus” which means, blowing, and the word “foeter” which means, stench - and then assimilated with the word, savour? Blowing-stench-savour!

“There are so many things in me you can know,” he says. “I look forward to the years ahead. But, I wish I could find a good partner. Not to replace Malek, of course, but someone to share my life. I have got so much in me to give, it’s just there for someone to take. I never tell this to my children.”

I flinch. He doesn’t falter.

“Why not?” I probe.

“It’s hard. They won’t understand. Perhaps my son, Moez, knows of my feelings. You know, I am so close to them. How can I tell them?”

The culture speaks and raises its towering head once again. At seventy-five, how can the issue of finding another partner ever be discussed with the children? The mother’s memory needs to be preserved. What will the community say? I let the contradiction of being close to his family and not being able to discuss his feelings, pass. I have faith. The conversation will reveal more of these feelings in its own time, that is, if I have time.
"I am not lonely, you know, I am alone," he sighs and changes the subject. "You know what keeps me going? Another challenge. Everyday is a challenge for me. This is the thing that makes me feel: go, go, go. There is always something that keeps me busy. I listen to music, cook, mend, do the laundry, sit on the net too. You should write to me, I'll give you my email. If there is no challenge, I'd wither up."

§§§

A biographical narrative has a potent force to become a cultural document. Conceptions of time, body, death, love, marriage, and even the very notion of conversation, can be revealed further by linking narrative to culture. To what extent can a modern self mediate its disruptions alone? Can it? Or, does it do it through the family? the community? What place, if any, do non-secular institutions play in such mediation? And even secular ones. What is the place of the Divine in the self's struggles? Narratives, especially narratives of disruption, whether an illness, loss of a beloved, or, loss of home can show us the self's struggle to find continuity and normalcy. "People maintain continuity with the past," says Gay Becker, "amid the facts of change by interpreting current events so that they are understood as part of tradition." And it's in the living of everyday life, in the mundane and ordinary routines that people find structure, footing, to face the disruptions.

§§§

Shamsu's narratives are tellings of disruptions, particularly the loss of a beloved and the loss of home. In his case it is not only the narrative form that is being used to configure his present state and afford it some meaning, but he employs metaphors liberally to see particular areas of his life differently. The overarching
metaphor for a meaningful life is one that has flavour.

“To have flavour is to not crave for things given up or lost,” he says.

Shamsu points to a cultural preference to mediate life not alone, but through family, and particularly through a partner, an “angel.” But he also points at a cultural taboo of not being able to take on another partner at his age. His language is infused with metaphors that tell us how he culturally perceives life itself or his place in life: like a mechanic who fine tunes engines; like a kitten that purrs; like a pickle that adds flavour; like a flower that withers if not cared for; like a doctor who listens to the body; like fine marination, like a challenge. This reveals to us all the possible emotions he may be feeling as he passes his time alone, and without a partner, and his need to recapture the flavour that once was his wife. But more profoundly he points to us his deep need to transform, to integrate his sense of self, and to make meaning of life still to be lived alone. By looking at life as “flavour” he finds it easier to cope. He knows flavour. He will be alright now.

§§§

“Metaphor,” says Becker, “lies at the intersection of what has been and what can be.” And in this it is an invention that not only relives a past and finds meaning in it, but also interprets it and then sets off towards creating a new future.2

§§§

Time plays an important role in Shamsu’s life. He has lots of it on hand, but it is linear and fleeting: “I take it one day at a time.” Yet, time is also available to be
revisited to recollect flavourful moments. To say that he wishes to go back in time to change things in his relationship is a strong statement about what he feels about his actions in life and about his unsorted feelings. A moral dialogue seems to be playing inside him. He seems to want to rewrite his life story. Why? What unsorted feelings lie hidden inside the statement: “I am human you know. I have my faults but I have a lot of beauty in me which cover my faults, and I know it. Nobody is flawless, we wish we were flawless?” Shamsu chooses not to pursue that path in conversation, and I choose not to persist.

August 17th, 1996, Vancouver

Fridays were special for more than the usual religious reasons, or perhaps because of them. Malek and Shamshu were bound to an old pact, a ritual that went back years, ever since they came to Vancouver and settled by the waters of False Creek. First they had to go do some thaat-maat at their common hairstylist, nothing short of the complete works—shampoo and styling for her, and shampoo and trim for him, and then a cup of coffee somewhere special. They found that after all these years they could still talk to each other. They talked about the past, their children, their future. Then they would head home to get ready for the Friday prayers at the jamatkhana.

That day, Malek, who usually took her time to enjoy these outings with her husband, was in an unusual rush to get home. She had tried her daughter’s line in Toronto in the morning, but no-one had answered the phone, and now, with the day dragging on, perhaps she would not be able to speak to her daughter after all. Mother and daughter had always been very close and the Friday call had become a tender habit. And then, there was the food-offering that still had to be prepared to
take to jamatkhana.

"Come on Shamsu, hurry up and finish your coffee, I still have much to do."

"O.K. let's go. You go sit in the car, I'll buy the flowers," replied her husband.

This was also one of those special Friday things that the couple splurged on. A little while later he emerged with three carefully wrapped bouquets.

"Three to-day? Why? What's the occasion?" she teased her husband.

"Because you're so special. One bouquet we'll take to jamatkhana."

Driving home, Malek coyly asked: "Shamshu, which sari should I wear today?"

"The yellow one, it looks nice on you. That's my favourite."

The August afternoon heat had turned the downtown prayer hall into a veritable furnace by the time the congregation gathered for prayers. The small jamatkhana, unlike the newer ones in Burnaby and North Vancouver, had no air-conditioning or ventilation system to boast of, and a few portable fans were employed to provide relief and they, of course, did nothing but circulate the same muggy air. Keeping the windows open usually helped, but the noise of the street traffic below intruded on the ceremonies, and so only a few were left open.

Shamshu and Malek, like always, tried to arrive half an hour earlier than the prayer time of seven-thirty; he had his duties as a volunteer, and Malek needed to find a comfortable chair near the exit door. She found it less stifling there. Over the years her persistent problems in managing her weight had led to aches and pains in her joints, and she found it impossible to sit on the floor like before, which of course meant always hoping that a seat would be found. The congregation in this jamatkhana was largely made up of the elderly who all scrambled for a comfortable chair to sit on. On Fridays, the competition for chairs on the ladies side was severe, and the elderly often arrived an hour earlier to procure a seat of choice, and it wasn't unknown for a few of them to turn nasty with each other.
In the rush to make it on time for her preferred place near the door, Malek hurried with the preparation of the food offering and then tactfully changed into the yellow sari, which she modeled in front of the mirror before calling her husband. She enjoyed getting his opinion, and he loved giving it to her. “It looks specially lovely on you today, Malek,” he commented. She smiled. Her husband always had a way with words, and she adored him for that.

On the way to jamatkhana she remarked: “I am glad I got to talk to Yasmin. You know what she told me? ‘Mummy, why are you wasting money with the phone. I am coming next week to visit anyway?’”

Just before the start of prayers, a young female volunteer wearing a crisp blue uniform of the Ismaili Volunteer Corps is serving water to the elderly women who have all arrived early and are now getting uncomfortable with the heat, when she notices the lady with the yellow sari, her eyes closed and her head slightly tilted to her right. Just then, the mukhi’s voice announces the call for dua, the first prayer of dusk, and the volunteer figuring that the lady is just resting, or preparing for prayers, begins attending to the prayer-call. Latecomers are still pouring in to find a place in the now crowded jamatkhana, and the volunteer begins to direct them to a few remaining spots on the carpeted floor.

“Bandho! Dua keh raso alamaria,” responds the jamatbhai to the mukhi’s call for prayer, indicating to the congregation to come together into an attentive silence.

“Bismillah,” the mukhi commands the reciter, and soon the dua begins. The clock on the back wall shows the time at precisely seven-thirty.

On the way to the mosque in Burnaby, Moez, Shamshu and Malek’s older son is rushing to make it to the first prayer as well, when he is overcome with a strange feeling. He knows he is late and stops the car on the roadside and begins to recite his dua. A feeling of sadness stays with him throughout the prayer.
Back at the downtown jamatkhana the prayer is well under way when the female volunteer's gaze once again falls upon the yellow sari, and she notices that the woman appears more slumped than resting, and rushes over. She realizes something is wrong and quickly applies a cold compress of wet towel, thinking that the woman has probably fainted because of the heat. The prayers continue. The woman in the yellow sari remains limp, and the panicked volunteer asks an assistant to call the paramedics. The commotion near the door has gone unnoticed by most of the assembled jamat (parishioners) who are focused in the rhythm and rites of the dua. Within minutes the sirens announce the arrival of the paramedics, and it is then that the mukhi has the prayer stopped. Shamshu, wonders what the problem is on the ladies side that has required such an abrupt interruption, and notices that the place where his wife was seating at the start of the prayers is now empty. Just then a voice cuts in: "Shamshu bhai, can you please come with me. We need you."

§§§

**Lock, Barrel, and Stock**

Idi Amin

    overthrew
Obote
in a coup.
    I didn't see
any problems
for Ismailis;
we don't bother,
    with politics.
There was curfew
in Kampala,
we stayed home
    at night,
we were
not bothered by the army.
Everything was running as usual, it was fine, business went on, there were ups and downs difficulties, but not much.

He (Idi Amin) waited, then he hatched his plan, it all started with the British I think, taking them out, the Indians followed, the events are confusing, could be the other way round. I cannot visualize that time when he told us to leave I did nothing; then came the actual order, everybody started selling things, we stopped taking customers, it was a shamble.

We were citizens, Ugandan we were.
We had
Uganda passports too,
    and *kipandes*,
    identification,
we had to carry them,
or the army gave us trouble.

Those three months,
    I don't know,
    I just followed,
whatever
the rules,
    I stood in line,
    we had to prove
    we were citizens
people were upset,
nobody's mind was working
    we just followed
the person before you,
    that's all,
    nobody knew what to do.

I had a friend,
    British,
"Come here," he wrote,
    London,
"Come here, I'll buy you a caravan,
    We will put you in,
    we will look after you,
we will find you a job."
He was a good friend,
    Andrew Given,
    that was his name.
Canadian Immigration
came,

to Kampala
they were taking refugees, I heard;
first you were given
a number
then your number came
in the newspaper,
I think
I was worried,
Our number came
very late,
we were interviewed,
they never caused problems,
we were very happy
you know this
was arranged,
by mowla bapa?

I picked Vancouver,
that's what I told
the immigration man.
Vancouver
is where I want to go.
I didn't even know
where it was.
From nowhere
I picked Vancouver,
from nowhere.

Everybody was
moving
out,
why would you like to stay?
it was mad;
you don't know what's going to happen
the hardships,
we didn't know where
we were headed,
but that was O.K.
at least
we were getting out.

We left everything behind,
    one hundred shillings
was the only thing I had
we left everything behind,
    as is,

lock, barrel, and stock.

"The mind has stopped, you know," Shamshu says. "There was no certainty where you're going to go. All I remember is that we arrived in Montreal after a twenty-three hour journey in a plane full of tired and frightened people. They were all refugees, almost all Ismailis. Most had never travelled outside the country. Many hadn't even heard of Montreal. That day it began to snow. I saw my first snow flakes. We were taken to an army barracks. But it just didn't make sense. The mind has just stopped thinking. That is the essence of moving from Uganda to Canada. Nothing mattered. There were no thoughts. The only thought was survival, that's all. The mind didn't fire. We just moved around without even thinking. There was no reaction. You know, that time, it's all blank, it's, it's, it's really blank. I know it all happened but I have no images, it's all a fuzz."

"Come let me show you something," Shamshu tells me, and takes me into the living room. He points towards two framed documents hanging on the wall. I proceed
to read them. He waits intently until I’m finished and says: “What do you think? That’s who I was. I tell you, people knew my work.”

The first document has the letterhead of the British High Commission in Uganda and is dated June 7, 1972. It is a testimonial about Shamshu’s character and his dedication to his work as a mechanic and bears the signature of the first consulate officer. The second document, also a testimonial, is from a consular staff at the U.S. Consulate in Kampala, and is dated a week later. This one also describes Shamshu’s excellent work ethic.

“They used to bring their cars to my garage. All the expats and the embassy people. You know what? it’s all about trust. I never cheated and when I gave the cars back, they knew right away that their cars had been repaired. The engines sounded different.”

“I know it’s difficult to remember that time,” I ask, “but tell me how you felt then, when you were leaving, and how you feel now thinking about it?” I ask.

“You know, suddenly leaving the country of origin is not easy, where you are born and bred. There is shock. Your roots, where the graves of the family are, it’s not easy. The sadness, whether you think about it or not, the cloud is there. It’s always there. Even now ... oh yea ... it will never disappear. I mean how could it disappear? The roots are there, your parent’s graves are there, you know. You can’t forget your parents.”

§§§

How many years before the body forgets an experience suffered? How many experiences before a story makes sense? How many stories before life itself provides meaning? And who is there to listen? For it is my belief that suffering
arises not only as a result of embodied experiences of disruption, but also as a result of not being able to articulate that disruption -- to speak or write about it in a storied form. Whilst I make a strong case for narrative as a primary methodology by which to “see & feel ” the self’s attempt at providing order to events over time, I must also emphasize the fact that most disruptive moments are first performed by the body, i.e. they are embodied: a person cries, is hurt, feels joy, is stressed, sighs, shouts, twitches, aches, sees death, sees life, breathes in pain, feels pain, is stooped, feels lonely, trembles, is going blind, feels the brunt of a father’s beatings, is in shock, and becomes silent. To all this we, the readers, are rarely present. It is only afterwards, when the recountings are done as story, or art, or even dance and song that the true measure of the events appear before us.

Disrupted lives have to relearn their bodily experiences, for whatever was once known has been altered, flawed, and confused. In this, memory plays a crucial role, and often remindings through stories, sights, and smell slowly bring a sense of bodily continuity. “The body,” says Gay Becker, “from which experience and categories of thought emanate is metaphor’s ground. Body metaphors provide a way to communicate bodily sensation, as well as social, cultural, and political meaning.”

§§§

**An Angel Flies**

“I remember that day as if it was yesterday. August 17, it was Friday. Malek had a heart attack right in jamatkhana. ‘Bismillah,’ the mukhi said, and she flew. She was gone. Right at the time of the first dua. The paramedics came and revived her heart, it came back, but she was gone. She went into a kind of coma and they put her
on a life-saving machine. On Monday, the doctor told me to let her go. How do you let her go, tell me? How do you do it? All my children were there. I said alright, we’ll let her go. I didn’t want the body ... body without soul is nothing. I told my eldest son that we should let her go. It was beautiful when they shut-off the machines. You know, before her last breath, she actually raised her hand as if waving. She was saying good-bye to me. You know she was actually with my son that day when he was saying his prayers in the car. That’s what it means to be spiritually together. She was a wonderful woman ... an angel. There is no replacement. Those kind of souls are born one in a million years. It’s almost impossible to think of life without her. Even then life has to go on. This is the fifth year.”

Field notes & reflections

That afternoon, after I come back from Shamshu’s place,
I tell my children to phone Toronto. “First phone mummy. Let’s talk to her, then we’ll phone maa and bapa (grand-parents).”

I tell my wife how much she means to me and we speak of things that have remained unsaid for a long time.
I tell my parents to come and visit, and finally firm up a date when they can come: “The children need to see and be with their grand-parents for a while. Please come.”
That night, before I go to sleep, I do two things that I had stopped doing. I tell my daughter a story, and then we talk of the time when she was little, and then together we offer prayers of gratitude for the people and things we have in our lives.

The man I am unable to show you through this text is larger than life, to whom smiles come easy, a conversation is a one-time gift that humans possess, and who in spite of the disruptions in his life, has a way to be with people which inspires them. It inspired me. “What is it that makes him so?” I ask him.

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\textbf{Allah's Gift: The Art of Conversation according to Shamshu}

“It has always been my nature to just open conversations with strangers,” says Shamshu. I could be walking and if I want to start a conversation, I don’t think. I just do it. I look at the person. If he or she smiles, that’s it. The doors are open.”

“Doors open? For what?” I ask. The metaphor intrigues me.

“To enter a person’s feelings. It’s a gift I have. It’s Allah’s gift.”

“But why? why enter a person’s feelings?” I ask, now definitely interested in what he may have to say.

“A conversation ... it’s like, when you shake hands, you know? When you
shake hands, you’re really saying that you accept each other, isn’t it? With conversation, it’s the same thing. Instead of offering a hand, they answer you back. If they do, that means you’re accepted and there is so much you can talk about. The purpose of a conversation is to give. When you talk to people you’re giving something, you’re embracing somebody without touching. That’s what it is. You do not physically embrace or hold somebody. When you converse with a person you are embracing that person with your voice, your soul. To me that’s very important because that’s my way of giving.”

“Giving what, for example?” I ask

“When you can please somebody for a split second and to see happiness in their eyes, you have already given, isn’t it? Don’t you think so? I do it all the time. Everyday I try to find one new person. I think human beings should converse more. They’re always on the go. By the time they realize, they have become skeletons, or alone, or lonely. I am never lonely.”

“And so how should you speak. I mean what part does language play in conversation?” I ask.

“Language is about getting known to each other. If our children could speak Gujarati or Kutchi, it’s a blessing, isn’t it? Imagine how much more familiar they could become with the community? Language in this case helps us keep tied to our roots. The communal traffic improves, don’t you think so?”

“Yes,” I say. Traffic, as metaphor, mmh, I wonder what that tells me about the community? That, perhaps, the ‘traffic’ is getting bogged down?

“Language covers space between two people,” Shamshu continues. “It brings its own perfume. Our language has its own perfume and English, has its own. To me, language is perfume. I don’t know any other way to describe language. Every time you speak a word it can bring things closer to you.”

“O.K. so a conversation is an embrace, and language is the perfume that keeps the embrace going,” I say, “but what makes it all interesting?”

“Look there are so many things in me you can know, right?”

“Right.”
"But, I must know how to tell them to you. I mean, how to narrate (Shamshu's own choice of word). I am a good narrator, you know? If you can't narrate and if you can't perform, there is nothing for you to go on. To narrate is to come forward, isn't it? and show your feelings. What are feelings? Feeling is narration itself. How (else) can you show emotions? By narrating. I mean with your partner you get physically entangled to show your feelings, but you can't do that with everybody. So how do you show your feelings? You narrate. Or, you perform. When you show happiness with your eyes, you're performing, isn't it? The same goes with the Almighty. If you don't perform with Him (sic), or talk to Him, how can you show your feelings. He is not there in front of you, is He? And that's what brings you closer to Him, narrating and performing with Him, isn't it? Think about it."


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There are certain things
in life,
    they happen,
for a reason.
An old man,
Mr. Wedrick,
at United Church
    finds me a job,
    after just two weeks
in Canada;
the Mercedes firm,
    After one year
    I am laid off
I become a prep man,
in a body shop,
preparing cars
for painting.
I stay for six months,
I leave.
I move
to VW,
they are sold,
I am asked to leave
I join a gas station,
40/60 basis, a manager

I couldn’t settle,
I had my own business
in Uganda
   it fitted
   like a glove
   in my hand
Wedrick kept on helping us,
I wish I can find him,
he’s probably gone
he was old
I haven’t
   forgotten

I just worked, whatever
all those years,
it’s all blurred,
we got
tangled
into the world
it doesn’t matter,
I told you,
the mind
wouldn’t fire.
all the way,
many, many years
   we took one day
   at a time.
one day
completed
that’s it,
next day will show
its own signs

It’s very difficult
I’d love to
go back now;
At that time,
When I first undertook "conversation" as the means by which I would engage in the narratives of people, I was situating myself within a social constructionist discourse. More particularly, I was preparing myself to swim the untamed currents of what is termed the "rhetorical-responsive" variant of this discourse. Conversations, hence, were not going to be merely verbal and single-layered devices by which I would accumulate narratives and where my conversational partner and I would talk; where I would draw out the stories and then represent them more in the vein of the typical referential-representational modes of seeing the world.

Rather, I would work with the two core assumptions of social constructionism: first, that my social reality as I know it is 'constructed' and understood from within my relationships with others, and second, that the purpose of conversation is at once a way of recreating and repositioning our places vis-a-vis each other, such that we see our places and ourselves differently. I decided I would draw upon John Shotter's work on "conversational realities" in particular, and on Kenneth Gergen and other eminent social constructionists in
general. But, it would be Shotter, who himself was borrowing from the ancient Greek rhetors and Bakhtin, who would guide me, for the engagement at hand had a teleological and moral imperative. The guiding question always remains: Who am I to become?

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Conversation as a “method,” hence, had taken on another practical purpose. It was to begin with the belief that in the manner of my speaking — whether within the primary genre of first utterances inside conversations, or within the secondary genres of utterances through historical and fictional text as conversation -- I would be committed to inform the style of future argumentation within my community, such that a tradition of argumentation would begin. Implicit to this was the giving of voice, in all its copia, to silenced or silent voices. This was not something which someone sought, for it is a social constructionist view that in background of our lives are a multitude of voices wishing to be heard. In other words there is already a conversational background behind the isolated conversations we engage in daily, and it’s there that our attention must be given. The listening act was needed, supported by the act of narrative.

Furthermore, I realized that within the scope of my own project, every conversation that I would be engaged in would be engaging me. I would be moved. I would be repositioned and whether I realized it or not, my own life would be affected. How this would occur would be fluid and dynamic -- random, yet teleological. My purpose, I determined, would be to be faithful and mindful of this process, and every
now and then share the changes that were personal to me, with you.

Field Notes & Reflections

"Flavour" and "pickles" do not necessarily mean a life without blows. If anything, most of the stories in this dissertation reveal in various ways the Blessings of life in the midst of feverish blows. Every moment presents its own rhythms, its on inhale-exhale, and its own birth-death, and yet, the Blessing is in knowing that the flaws we carry are as much a part of this flavour, as are the achievements we celebrate.

To be able to say, that "I know flavour" is to have sensed your place as a Zen carpenter in this universe. And the human outburst is not one of "I want more." Instead it is to invoke the rhythms of the universe and filter them through a simple wish — let the generosity of the spirit always reveal; let the greatness of the heart, expose; and let the expression of love, fulfill. And to complete this wish, to make it all truly "Allah’s Gift," as Shamshu would say, we must be able to embrace each other with our voice, our soul, and our stories.
Shiva's Dance

- A Hindu Hymn -

Arise Oh my beloved wife
I am thy husband Shiva-ji
Open thy eyes and look at me!
With thee I can create all things
Without thee I am powerless
I am a corpse, I cannot act
Forsake me not, come back to me!
Oh, let me see thy smile again
Say something sweet into my ear
Dost thou not see me weeping here?
Thy words will be unto my heart
Like summer rain on thirsting land
You used to greet me when we met
With joy and with smiling face
Why art thou still and without voice?
Cans't thou not hear how I lament?

Oh Mother of the Universe,
Oh Mistress of my very soul, arise!
My beautiful and loving wife,
My faithful spouse, return to me.
... Furthermore, the constraints upon the narrative selfhood of individuals of a community striving to seek a narrative unity for themselves may present to them conditions of disruptions and incoherencies. Such incoherencies impress variedly upon the personal lives of the community's young and old and may be experienced and expressed in different ways and may appear to make them feel dislocated and distressed at many levels. For example: within families embroiled in inter-generational tensions and anxieties; more recently in school environments and cultures that appear rancorous and volatile; by the community's elders who seem to live lonely, alienated, displaced, and dislocated lives; by the youth of the community who feel separated from their historical roots and their mother language; arguably, in the very language of the community itself which appears empty of its symbolic and poetic aspects; and possibly in the community's institutions that seem to be searching for a social imaginaire by which to confront many of the experiences mentioned above.¹⁸ In some cases, the dislocation and distress may be felt as an embodied rupture upon an individual self -- young or old -- leading to physical and psychological illness and even despair.

One of the significant conditions that emerges out of this fragmented narrative history is the aporia of a modern selfhood and a journeying community uncertain of their common and intertwined temporal nature.¹⁹ I may live my life forward, hinged to the immediate needs and aspirations of
my self and my family. But I really understand my life backwards, through what I have shared and experienced with my family and my community, or read about those who have travelled before me, or through the stories my grandparents and parents may have told me. To remember my past is also to place myself into the pastness of my tradition, to draw from it and bring it into the present and make it intelligible. Yet, to remember is also to respond to the past, transcend it, so that the future is attended to with greater purpose.

And so, it can also be said that out of this condition of aporia arises a possibility -- a passionate narrative quest to “fix things” temporally: the narratable “I” and those with whom the “I” is journeying this historical narrative wish to render the journey and the emerging actions and experiences -- more particularly a teleology and a pedagogy of virtues -- intelligible and accountable in its narrative sense. My life story as a whole, from birth to death, is hence felt as grounded only when my narrative is intelligible to me and to those around me; my life story is felt as whole when it instructs me towards my telos, and in so doing instructs the community towards its own telos. But, as if in a hermeneutic circle, I need to understand both stories -- mine and that of the tradition in which I come from -- as a hermeneutic knot of relationship, the understanding of one instructing the other and so on.

*Life itself seems to have become a passion in search of a narrative...*
Rehmat: “There was no-one in this world who was mine.”

Sati and Shiva

Once upon a time when there was no Time, and only emptiness and silence reigned, Vishnu the Preserver, and Brahma the Creator, the two supreme Hindu pantheons felt the need of a third force, that of the destroyer-restorer, so that together they would feel balanced and right. And so it was that Rudra, the great Shiva, was made to be born and upon Him fell the task of creating the world. But, such a task simple as it might seem for the ambrosial powers at hand, could not be done, for Shiva was only half of a whole and divine acts of the sort needed here decreed the energy of the whole. Thus it was that Brahma realized that a goddess had to be found, a purity, at once to inspire and to mellow the passions of the destroyer, and so it was arranged in a manner celestial that Shiva would find such a goddess.

Now it was the case that there lived a chief of smaller gods named Daksha to whom his wife, Prasuti, had conceived and bore sixteen daughters, and the youngest of these daughters was called Sati, and in her heart Brahma lit the fire of heavenly love so that she would become the goddess that would make Shiva whole. But Daksha was a begrudging god, even small minded some would say, and he had noticed that Shiva had not paid homage to him once, and not knowing the power that Shiva was, Daksha had pronounced a curse that the offerings of the gods would never befall upon Shiva.

Meanwhile, Sati grew and as she blossomed so did her heart yearn in
silent worship for the time when she would be joined with the supreme Lord Shiva, and soon the age came and she was given swayamvara -- to make her own choice of husband -- and for this occasion Daksha invited into his palace gods, princes, and men of great ranks.

"Choose, Sati," he said, "Choose from among those who appear before you, and upon the one you choose place the garland of marriage around the neck." But in the assembly of the suitors, Daksha had purposely not invited the great Shiva, and so Sati, her face crumbling in despair, screamed for all to hear, her love for Shiva, and then hurled the garland in the air and began to retreat into the shadows.

Now, the fire set in Sati's heart was a fire set by Brahma, the Creator Himself, and so the love that had been proclaimed with such sincerity and truth became thus a prayer and an invocation of a goddess-to-be, and it summoned Shiva into the middle of the assembly, garland already around his neck. The choice had been made. Lesser gods had not been consulted. Daksha, in great bitterness, but bound by the honour of this greater mystical venture, reluctantly gave his daughter to Shiva, and plainly made it known to all that Shiva was to remain forever a foe.

It is often said that a marriage set amidst seeds of family bitterness often blooms sour fruits, and so it became that although Shiva and Sati's love was bound in the heavens, Shiva found no peace in his greatness. He wandered in the dress of a beggar, his bedraggled wife by his side to whom the remindings of Daksha's bitterness stirred nothing less than a brew of sadness. And so when an invitation came to Sati, and her alone, of a great sacrifice being offered and shared at her father's palace, she decided to go in spite of Shiva's warnings.

"I wish to make a case on your behalf, my Lord Shiva, for to you also belong the sacrifices that Daksha offers, for you are supreme."
"Do not go, dear wife, for in this venture an absence of virtues and wisdom prevails." But, Sati, who was half of a turbulent whole needed to make the journey.

Upon seeing his daughter on Shiva's bull and in beggar's clothes, Daksha paid her no honour, and instead reviled her husband as nothing more than a vagabond, a goblin, and an ashman, and as he spoke, the universe thundered in disapproval.

"Father, Lord Shiva is a friend to all and a man of peace and goodness," Sati insisted. But Daksha's tirades continued, and with every venomous breath, he maligned the great Shiva as a destroyer of tradition, and of things as they were and must remain.

Sati, her eyes lit by the fire of contempt, thought for a moment and said: "A wife, when her lord and husband is reviled, if she cannot slay the evil speakers, must leave the place and close her ears until she hears no more. Or if she has the power, she must take her own life, and this I will do, for I am deeply hurt and shamed to have a body that was once a part of your own."

And with that, Sati released all the fire within her and fell at the feet of her father, dead.

What once was whole in Shiva thus became half again, and the half that remained revealed the true measure of Shiva's wrath, for the goddess that had tempered a peace in Him was no more, and in one fell swoop the wrath descended upon Daksha's armies and palace and destroyed it all.
Families are places where the Wrath or the Benevolence of gods, small-minded and Daksha-like, or precariously ambrosial and Shiva-like, play out their havoc in various ways, such that occasionally a balance is restored through the midst of turbulence and violence. Or, at other times, the turmoil is so burdensome that the family drowns in despair. In such families often appear Sati-like goddesses— forbearing, playful, constant, faithful, and courageous — around and upon whom are played the dramas of life, and in whom a fire burns foretelling the care-giving of Demeter herself, but also of Persephone and her dark descent into the grips of Hades, the God of the Underworld.

What makes such goddesses appear amidst stories of wrath is a lesson in wisdom itself, for on one hand it serves notice to the universe that we humans are bound to do the soul’s tasks, that we will not neglect the glorious and the possible, and on the other hand it serves notice to ourselves that the universe will withhold its ire and sustain us with its spirit provided we learn to love the journey itself. Thus Spirit and Soul, Shiva and Sati, and, Demeter and Persephone, point us towards our place in Life: we will persevere and toil in utter discouragement amidst the
Dakshas and the Hades, but we will endure, for we will be guided by the Virtues of the soul and the love of the journey, and we will trust that the universe itself will bend in invisible ways to restore all that it asunders.


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Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, East Africa, 1997

On the fifteenth of May of that year, Khathi dies. Her body is testimony to the ravages of time and stress coupled with a sickness that has consumed most of the living tissues that have so faithfully served her in times before. At her deathbed she seems to recognize no-one, for no-one that she knew in her miserable life is beside her, except of course, one son, but her memory has only faint recollections of the face. And, if Khathi’s soul could speak at the moment of release, it would probably say that the woman withered because she had not been loved.

A day later, in an adjoining bed of the local hospital, her middle-aged and youngest daughter, Nazmina, as well consumed by a sickness that has putrefied most of her legs, and a genetic disorder that has carried the foul and misunderstood moniker of mongoloid, also dies in her sleep. She had kept her eyes closed for many days as if to shun the world that had let her down. And if her soul could speak it would probably say that an unloved child is like a flower whose soft petals are mindlessly ripped off, and death is a blessing.

Thus it was that both mother and daughter released forever not only their soul’s breath, but the shackles tied to Wrath itself, but looking at the peaceful faces of the two during the funeral ceremony, no one would say that this had been the case. They would see a young son and brother give the final khand (shoulder) to the two mayats of mother and daughter on the way to the Ismaili
but at the cemetery and would conclude that their story must have been alright; after all, wasn’t the son there at the last moment to perform the final rites?3 didn’t the community gather around the two departed souls and offer salwat? and, wasn’t the fatheya prayer recited upon the graves? They would say all this and then also add that in death all that was unknown in life is known, and surely mother and daughter are in a better world where all is healed. The story could as well end here, for it could also be said that what else is there after death other than the company of worms and maggots?

But death, in invisible ways, leaves behind stories that instruct life.

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Rehmat, Coquitlam, British Columbia, June 2001

A small sprightly woman made of goliath humour sits before me. I have been invited to her house, or her son’s house, where she now lives, and one can safely say that a family consumed in harmony has made this a happy home. The son and his wife are at work, and Rehmat has just finished preparing chicken pilau for dinner, and is eagerly rummaging through the kitchen cabinets looking for oodh (frankincense). The tenacious aroma of fried onions and spices pervades the house and this is cause for anxiety. The lingering smells, she tells me, bother her son, Al-Rahim, and Susan, his white Canadian wife.

“Once I burn the oodh, then we can begin, what do you say?” she asks, and then without waiting for a reply, proceeds to open the kitchen windows. “Susan loves my pilau, but can you make pilau without properly fried onions, tell me? My son is mad about smells of spices in the house, so now anything fried, like bhajias, shami-kebabs
or *samosas*, we just place an order. I am a very good cook, but the children don’t like the smells. It’s O.K. I have cooked enough in my life.”

Her saying this reminds me of my own frantic antics many years ago to shut all open closets and bedroom doors, and open all windows when my wife began cooking anything Indian. Today, my children often imitate the same antics.

The smoke from the burning *oodh* along with the fresh afternoon breeze waltz into the kitchen and together gently lift the spirit of the room and erase the smells, and Rehmat settles down. As usual, to initiate the conversation with the older group, I begin with the question about eventful moments in their lives, and Rehmat, as if she has always waited for someone to ask such a question, takes me on a journey.

**Morogoro, British Tanganyika, East Africa: 1920's - 1930's**

Khathi would not have known much about the small village town in which she was trying to make a family with Jiwan, her husband, other than the fact that making one in Morogoro was becoming a predicament of an evil sort. Although she would have known for example, that Morogoro was the first major stop on the inland train route from Dar-es-Salaam on the Indian Ocean, to Kigoma, on Lake Tanganyika, she would not have known that before the building of the railway by the previous German colonial rulers, the town had been a village stop-over set firmly along the old caravan route that had brought slaves and elephant tusks in the thousands from the interior of Sub-Saharan Africa to the coastal town of Bagamoyo. Being a Khoja Ismaili woman living a frontier life as an Indian trader’s wife, Khathi perhaps would
have heard of the great Allidina Visram, the formidable Indian Ismaili trader, but would not have known of Tippu Tip, the Arab slave dealer, or of Sewa Hajee, another khoja financier, or of those other Zanzibari Indian financiers of the 1800's who were known to have financed the trips of Speke and Burton, besides other ominous trips of Tippu Tip.4

All this would not have been of the slightest importance to Khathi, for she was facing a bigger problem presently. All her new born children were being murdered whilst still in the ghorio (a small Indian hammock style crib) -- two boys and two girls had thus been lost, poisoned she suspected by the hands of her jethani, Amanbai, the wife of her husband's older brother, and according to Khathi, the incarnate of evil itself. The two brother's families shared the same household as well as a small wholesale business upon which many mouths depended, and although the house was designed in such a way that a common fario (compound) separated the living quarters of the two families, much of the living of daily life was done together. And so every time after birth when Khathi was needed for other household chores, Amanbai volunteered to mind the new born, and it was always under her care that the babies died, and sometimes Amanbai would make it known to Khathi to stop producing children for none would ever remain alive as long as she was around.

"It's Amanbai, I know it's her, she doesn't want any of your children laying claim one day to the business," Khathi would silently protest to Jiwan, who would respond incredulously and angrily at the suggestion, for how could it be that his brother's kind wife would be such a rakshash (monster)? But Khathi knew better, for she was the one who remained with the jethani most of the day, doing chores and preparing food, and whilst her own brood perished, the brood of Amanbai blossomed, and it was becoming obvious that a more ominous plan was being hatched by this otherwise plain looking woman.

One day when Khathi was once again with a child in her womb, in the sixth
month, that two simultaneous evils were produced - one planned and premeditated and
the other? well, no one really knows. Jiwan, before day break, said good-bye to his
young wife and other family members and left for his one day trading trip further
into the interior and as was his usual customary way, he stopped mid-day at his
favourite road-side African eating-place. He thought of his pregnant wife. Things
were beginning to look better, business was booming, and the two brothers were
prospering. This child would be alright. He would make sure. These thoughts went
through his mind as he hastily consumed a hearty bowl of mutton soup. It was
particularly aromatic and spicy, even a bit bitter, not the usual kind, but Jiwan
thought nothing of it. He had three villages still to visit. By then it would be
getting dark. He must hurry if he wanted to make it back before nightfall.

That night lying beside his wife, he couldn't sleep. Funny how he had felt dizzy
whilst at the last village, he remembered. A mild head-ache persisted into the early
morning hours, when a severe stomach-ache and high fever began to produce spasms
which tore at the very soul of his body. At first everyone thought it was just bad
food. By early morning his condition worsened, and he rushed down to the nearby
Christian mission hospital. It was here that he was told about a slow acting poison.
That same night whilst he was suffering the poison, a theft occurred at one of the
stores of the two brothers, the one which was under the care of Jiwan. Substantial
financial loss was incurred, although strangely Amanbai showed no remorse or worry
for either calamities. Within two days after having been poisoned, and after the
theft, Jiwan died, leaving behind Khathi and a child in her womb.

§§§

Eji ek sabad suno mere bhai,
mane aví sughad panth man. I have entered the good Way.

Eji his ki beti his ki dhia,
tun hon puras ghar naria. Whose child are you? whose daughter?

Whose child are you? whose daughter?
"My mother told me this. She would tell me of this story all the time."

"But how could it be that no-one in the community ever questioned Amanbai's wrong-doings?" I ask, now visibly distraught, for murders and curses are fairy-tale happenings.

"Have you ever lived a small-town life?" she asks. "No-one would believe my mother, and many of Amanbai's family made up the town's Ismailis. My mother was a paki (pure) Zanzibari. Her family was from the Island. She was all alone in Morogoro."

"So then what happened to her afterwards?"

"Up until I was born she suffered at the hands of Amanbai. She lost everything. Then, her brother, my maama, arrived surreptitiously soon after I was born, and told my mother to gather whatever money and wedding jewelry she had in her possession, and they took off for Zanzibar. Have you been to Zanzibar?"

"No."

"It's paradise. Near our house there were coconut and Mbuyu trees. The house was right in the town, and there were shops around us as well. We used to eat all kinds of fruits – embe kisungu, matufwa, and shokeh-shokeh, and on the street there were Arab vendors selling fried bananas, mandazi (large sweet fried bread), and all types of sherbet (sweet drinks), one glass was only two cents, but in those days a cent went a long way. Our house was big, and we shared a common fario with other family members. The first five years I lived with my grandfather who was a tara-kunchi man (locksmith), the best on the island, and an expert in repairing umbrellas. We all lived together, my maama and maami and their children - so many. But my mother always had in the back of her mind that Amanbai would still try to take my life, if not by poison then by some evil curse. One day she arranged so that I would be brought up under the protection of one of the sister's of the Sultan of Zanzibar. The woman was a friend of my maama, and I stayed with her until I was eight."

"You mean in an Arab home? Did you get to see your mother?"

"Yes, sometimes. It had to be kept a secret. You don't know Amanbai. Eh, salaalé! she had ears everywhere. But the Arab woman was very good to me. Then when I was eight, my mother came back to get me. At that time the Sultan's sister, I have forgotten her name, tied a black dohroh (string) around my arm and told my mother never to remove it until I was much older. It had
special powers to protect me. She said to me: 'Be very careful and don’t lose the protective amulet. If you lose it you’ll be in trouble.'"

"Did you ever lose it?"

"No, but listen. One day when I was a little older, I was invited to visit Amanbai, in Morogoro, and before I left, my mother reminded me to never remove the amulet whilst I was there. But, silly me, when I went to take a bath, I took it out and placed it near the window and when I finished my bath, the amulet was gone, goom! When I returned home, I became very sick, so sick that the Arab woman was quickly summoned to reverse the curse. She told us that Amanbai had stolen the dohroh and had cursed it with very powerful evil. The Arab woman then said prayers and gave me a new dohroh. After that I got better."

§§§

Field Notes & Reflections

What is Rehmat recognizing in the telling of this story, I wonder? The act of remembrance will have to be discussed in my dissertation, I make a mental note. It is obvious from the way she embodies this story that there is a whole lot connected between the remembering act and the imagining act, particularly the imagining of her identity. Eventful moments in her life begin from this story.

All these remembering moments are surely tellings of a recognition of some sort. I am certain the written text and the act of recognition are somehow tied.
And thus it was that with a single blow from the hand of wrath, that Khathi, now only twenty, lost everything that she cared for and could have loved -- husband, four children, home. But violent acts are often followed with birthnings of things tender, and it is in this earthly blessing of tenderness that Rehmat was born, and Khathi was made whole once again - at least for a while. Together, mother and daughter, compensated in each other's lives whatever absence of love they may have felt individually. All around them also were signs of love of the family - maasi, mama, mami, and the ever-loving nanabapa, the tara-kunchi man of Zanzibar - but also foretellings of things to come. The second great war had befallen upon the island, not to wreck havoc, but in other ways, bringing British troops of the Raj to mind the business of the Raj. And it was perhaps during the later days of this period of the great war that a man appeared on the island, and the man was a second-timer from India looking for a second wife.

"There is a widow with a young daughter. Perhaps I can arrange it so that you can speak to the father," said the local Mukhi to this second-timer. "He does tara-kunchi work, good man, khandan (honourable) and proper Zanzibari family."

Abdulla had finally found another bride. It couldn't have been made much easier. Life for a young widow with child was a life condemned to perpetual servitude, serving her family until the blessing of death descended and took her away, and so a man, even a second-timer, appearing from nowhere to save her from such a life was no less than a miracle, or so her father thought.

"You're blessed, Khathi, this offer of marriage is khooda ji karni ... it's God's doing, His way of paying you back for what you have lost," he told her one night. "My wishes will be once again fulfilled. Little Rehmat will be looked after. Everything will be alright, you'll see."

Without much probing on who the groom was, or whatever happened to his first wife, a quick ceremony was arranged. Khathi regained a husband and Rehmat became a step-daughter. The family lost no time in planting new roots, and at the
husband's insistence they left Zanzibar and went to Dar-es-Salaam. That's where
his brother was, Abdulla told them, and "we will open a dukhan (shop) there. A general
store, bales of clothes on one side and rations on the other."

Eji sat hi beti santokh ki dhia,
mane thul puras qar naria. I am the daughter of truth and the child of
contentment.

Eji thul puras mane suta melea,
mane balak meleya jhulatan. I have left my husband, the body.

Eji dudh hadhantan mane cule melea,
mane avi dev duvaria. I have left the milk boiling on the hearth,
I have come to the abode of the Divine Lord.

§§§

"I'm telling you, no more going to school! I want you in the shop!" Abdulla
screamed at Rehmat, who was now fourteen. The subject had been broached by Khathi.
Her husband's long absences from the store throughout the day were becoming the
talk of the town, and when people came into the store they would find Rehmat behind
the cash. She had stopped going to school, in fact, she had become confined amidst
the shambles of the store. There were bolts of cloth scattered everywhere, but
most of the stock was spread out on the concrete floor. On the shelves were kept
large enamel basins, pots and pans, charcoal sigdis (braziers) and cheap floral china.
Outside on the porch, in exposed splendor were gunnies of colorful spices and
pulses.

This was the commercial setting copied by most Indian merchants on the street, except in this case, every morning Abdulla would open the store, which was adjoined to their living quarters separated only by a wooden door, and then he would shout at Rehmat to come in the front, and then he would leave. At night, after a full days labour, Rehmat would succumb to sleep in the store. The new family was growing and with each new male child, the step-father’s concern towards his step-daughter receded, until he felt that she was better off sleeping in the store.

"But, bhai, she is still young. School is important," Khathi’s voice interjected demurely. This was a mistake, for no sooner did she say it, that a vicious blow descended upon her face, then another on her back, then another, until Khathi crouched away into the corner.

"Go into the house!" Abdulla snarled at Khathi, "and close the door."

Rehmat pleaded. This had happened countless times before and she knew that what was about to come upon her would be painful. Abdulla grabbed the metal hathi (yard-stick) that was lying around on the measuring table and started beating Rehmat. There was no stopping him. Rehmat had learnt not to invoke mercy, for it only aggravated her step-father further, whose drunken stupor made him see not a young girl, but a burden that he had inherited, and now that he had his own children, especially the boys, the inherited burden had to be made to serve his own needs. Rehmat thus remained silent while the blows inflicted upon her body and soul slowly absorbed the step-father’s wrath until spent of all energy, he screamed at no one in particular, and left the store.

"My schooling stopped at grade seven, because he needed me at the store," Rehmat continued, "whilst my step-brothers and step-sister were allowed to go to school. And as I grew older, I took complete charge of the store."
“And him? what did he do?”

“My step-father had gone into bad ways. He drank, he womanized, and he would take the day’s sales and spend it on drinks and give them to the other women. If I said anything, he’d beat me. Sometimes he beat me for no reason at all. If my mother interfered, he’d beat her. Moonjeh upar bov joolam kari ai ... he has done great harm to me. Many times I would think of running away, but that was simply not done. Besides, where would I go? There was no-one in this world who was mine.”

“And so what did you do?”

“I took his beatings - daily! But by the time I was sixteen I became very good at running the store. It was I who would deal with the veperis (businessmen) and the creditors. When I wanted merchandise, I’d deal with them. I would make sure all creditors got paid. They gave us stock on credit because of me. They knew my father’s ways and no-one trusted him.”

“And your mother? how did she feel?”

“My poor mother’s job was to make children and look after them, and do house work. She hardly had time for me. I tell you my mother has suffered.”

Rehmat remembers and cries. Tears well up in my eyes.

“You know, many offers used to come for my marriage, but my father, sometimes he would not even tell us, or he would decline. Or, he would make excuses about the boy, that ‘he is not of a good family’, and like that he would turn things around. You see he was worried that if I got married then who would run the store?”

“Didn’t they know about your step-father before your mother married him?”

“No-one even asked at the time. My nanabapa was getting old and my mother didn’t want to be a burden on him or her brother. I was young as well. My mother was relieved when some stranger asked her hand in marriage. You know it was much later that we found out that my step-father’s first wife died in India because of his bad ways. Some say he even killed her!”

§§§
Can a piece of text have a being of itself such that only through my encounter with it, the “true light” of this beingness is grasped and provides an understanding, or recognition of that which is being grasped? Surely there must be something life-like or life-giving present in text that is meaningful in itself and that then moves my own being towards an openness? Let us linger here awhile with the arguments of Barbara DeConcini, who using the work of Gadamer, introduces us to the ontology of art (as text) via the Aristotelian notion of mimesis. For Gadamer, the mimesis of art is not imitation of the world, but its profound self-representation, and this too is always intended for someone. The mimesis of art is thus directed towards the recognition of the one who holds the gaze, and whose gaze in turn recognizes the revelatory and creative quality of that which the art self-represents, somewhat like the Zen saying that “it is not only the one who is thirsty who searches for water, but it is also water that is searching for the thirsty one.”

What is self-represented in the text is there to be recognized, and if we are to hold on to the classical notion of mimesis, then this cognizing and re-cognizing activity is pointing us towards some kind of knowledge. For Gadamar what we experience in a work of art — what we ‘recognize’ -- is “how true it is.” We know and recognize something in the art itself, but we also recognize and know ourselves. This act of recognition of text is not merely reattaining a familiarity of what the text says, for the process involves a self-forgetfulness where I forget myself in the reading just so that I find myself again, but I’m different. Recognition always involves knowing more than what we knew before, and because we now know more, we can return to it with a response.

A tragic emotion in a text of tragedy at once creates within us a distress and an apprehension, and we feel and know that here, there is an order of being that is true for us all, that this is how it is, and from this self-knowledge we emerge as a reader with new insight. Two or more readers with entirely separate life stories may enter into this textual space of someone’s tragedy, and the text may put its
claim upon them in various ways such that an emotion may be evoked which says: “I know this as true to me. I understand this as true to me, or I feel this as true to me,” and with that tears may be shed.

Literature in all its general and characteristic ways, and especially literature that a community narrates and performs is the seamless “texting” of every member of that community, and as the reader comes into the presence of this text in self-forgetfulness, the text begins to afford to the individual and the community a sense of continuity. To paraphrase Gadamer, she, the reader, is presented with the truth of her own world, the religious and moral truth in which she lives, and in which she recognizes herself. Thus, that which detaches her also gives her back the whole of her being. 9

### Vassanji, M.G.

Silenced voices of women is one of the underlying themes of Moyez Vassanji’s novel, The Gunny Sack. 10 This fictional account of the Shamsis, a community that left North Western India in the late 1800’s and went to East Africa mirrors the historical journey of the Indian Ismailis. Vassanji is an Ismaili writer of historical fiction whose own ancestry traces similar roots. His novel, arguably the first worthwhile contribution to the community’s literature depicting a fictional narrative of this particular journey uses strong women protagonists to make one of the central claims of the novel: Stories of lives lived are found in matriarchal carriers -- grandmothers, mothers, aunts, daughters -- who whilst having suffered the Daksha-like furies and jealousies, have also done it in utter silence whilst raising families. Thus it is that Vassanji places
Ji Bai's worn out gunny sack as the central artifact of memory from which fragments of various stories are drawn out and re-told by Salim, the novel's male narratorial voice, behind whom, of course, is the authorial male voice of Vassanji himself, invoking from the reader some kind of a response. That he has chosen a young male protagonist of the new generation to tell the stories I believe is not inconsequential -- the message seems to point of an urgent need to tell stories, especially of stories where patriarchal voices have traditionally silenced other voices. Ultimately, however, it is Ji Bai herself who becomes the consummate metaphor for this carrier of stories.

My intention here is not to offer a literary analysis of the novel but to provide one example of how fictional narratives reveal what were once primary speech genres, or original utterances of a people, as complex and more stabilized secondary speech genres, for example, the literary novel, although art, theatre, works of poetry would also qualify. Hence, what may have been once original dialogues or conversations within a journey have now been absorbed and digested and offered as text with a mimetic quality. What is represented, of course, is recognized by the reader up to the extent that the reader senses the text as true in some way or another. And the text itself has its own being, its own truth. The important point is that if the performance of secondary speech genres, in this case, literature in the form of a literary novel, is done appropriately, as Vassanji seems to have done, then a whole new world opens up for the reader, and by that same argument, for the whole community.

Vassanji, of course, doesn’t leave the possibility of such openings to mere chance and takes his authorial voice quite seriously. He actively urges his reader for a response by presenting in rhetorical prose, fragments of dialogues between various
protagonists that seem to offer so much more than what appears at first reading. Take for example his depiction of how Ji Bai, a young girl at the time, first finds out that the marriage everyone around her is celebrating is her own, and then in utter shock confronts her fate in the silence of her room:

For those remaining days, as the village celebrated her supposed joy, she wept alone in a dark room and refused to touch food. On the last day of the wedding, her father came to see her.

'Where are you sending me, Bapa? Where is Africa? I know no-one in those parts. I'll never see you again.'

'I am your father, na? Trust me,' he said, patting her head. 'You'll never be unhappy. Now be good and make me proud.' She sat on his lap, and from the plate he had brought with him he fed his darling daughter with his hands as he gave her advice on conduct. 'Don't let me down, Ji Bai. Do nothing to bring shame upon yourself. Never walk out alone. Don't speak of your home outside the four walls. Always cover your family's shame. Don't come back without your husband's permission...' (pp. 18-19)

By any stretch of imagination, the young girl's question to her father: 'Where are you sending me, Bapa? Where is Africa?' reveals the utter abandon with which she surrenders her self to the will of the father. And then the contrast of young Ji Bai sitting on her father's lap and resigned to her fate, and being told how to behave, with that of the fate of Khathi (Rehmat's own mother), eagerly married off to a second-timer from India and into a troubled marriage from which she cannot exit, brings to bear the cultural forces at the time. The rhetorical in this is obvious: Is the woman's place only to surrender her voice to her husband, and then quietly bear the burdens imposed? Is she to forever remain a Sati? The response to the rhetorical will
always follow, if not right away than much later as a tradition of argument. And we
must be present to listen ... and narrate.

§§§

An Indian Knight on a Motor-Cycle

As fate would have it, Rehmat's life took a turn when one night whilst
everyone was fast asleep, the store was robbed. Rehmat had been sleeping inside the
living-quarters that night, and no-one heard the place being emptied of all the
merchandise. The following morning, a panic stricken Abdulla, realizing that the
creditors will now demand money or ask for payment in kind, lashed out at whoever
was around, and quickly made up his mind to run with the family into the interior of
the country. Thus it was that Rehmat found herself at Nyakabindi, a small African
village consisting of a few Ismaili and Indian souls, not far from the town of
Mwanza, on Lake Victoria. Abdulla, ferocious as ever, and further burdened by the
loss of honour and wealth had become unrelenting in exacting a price from his step-
daughter and wife, and the beatings continued. By now, Rehmat had become a young
woman of marriageable age, and some would say even past that, but still occasionally
a proposal would arrive from some village or town which, of course, was promptly
discounted by the step-father who still couldn't afford to let Rehmat go.

Events have a funny way of resolving the inner prayers of the heart, and
Rehmat's prayers were those of the type where half things are mysteriously made
whole. One evening, when the sun was going down over this sleepy little village, a
muffled sound of what appeared to be a motor-cycle caught her attention. It was
rare that visitors ever ventured into the village other than in beaten down Peugots
and Datsuns, and even rarer that anyone would come on a motor-cycle at this time of
the evening when every shadow gave the impression of a lion or leopard about to
spring out of the bushes. And so when the rider stopped in front of the store, a big crowd gathered, a few with lanterns to light up the event. He was of a scrawny built, not very handsome, but the rugged features and the presence of a new man immediately got the attention of Ismaili mothers looking for husbands for their daughters, and Mama Pili Pili was one of them. The name said it all -- Mother of Chilies -- and her vulgar temper saw no ends. She was the terror of the village, built like an ox and ferocious like a lioness, and it was known by everyone that once in a while she even took the chappals to her poor husband's head. Mama Pili Pili had seven unmarried daughters.

"Come tonight to eat at my house, I'll make you special curry, eh?" she said deftly, a sly smile spreading across her rotund face. And so she immediately started an invisible competition by inviting the young man for dinner that evening, showing off her not so attractive daughters.

Rehmat did not think of the man much for a few days. Running the store, buying sisal and skins, and raw hides from the surrounding tribes kept her busy. But silently she prayed. Mansoor was his name, she'd found out, and unlike other men, this one had come all the way from Mombasa - a big town on the coast, another country, and more to his credit he was traveling on a motor-cycle when he'd heard of the little village where an old acquaintance lived, and so he had decided to visit. The acquaintance happened to be Rehmat's younger step-brother. Now it was a custom in the village that every evening all the Ismaili families would go to their small jamatkhana, after which they retreated to their own houses for dinner, and later, when the evening had cooled a bit, they would gather on the porch in front of their stores and chat until the late hours. Hindus would do it in front of their stores, Bohras in front of theirs, Ithnasharis, theirs, and in the darkness of the African night when everything was quiet except for the chirping grasshoppers and distant grunts of hungry lions, sounds of families talking about the events of the day could be heard in whispers. Rehmat loved this time of the night. It felt safe.
The convoluted proposal had come suddenly and reluctantly on one such moonless African nights on the porch. Mansoor had finally summoned the courage to ask for the hand of Rehmat's younger sister, who had finished high school and hence was considered educated. But as tradition would have it, the younger one declined until the older sister was married first. Mansoor was a hopeless romantic and hence pliable, and with further indulging it didn't take much convincing that Rehmat who may not be educated, was smart and hard working and a far better catch. And so Mansoor reluctantly agreed, but not without trouble from the step-father.

At first the proposal was declined, outright. "No! Rehmat could do better! The man rides a motor-cycle, must be a loafer type. What kind of family would allow their son to travel like that?" But this time, family and friends anxious of the competition from Mama Pili Pili ganged up on Abdulla.

"Look at Mama Pili Pili's daughters? Still looking for husbands, poor girls. Here's a chance. We must take it. He is a big city boy!" they pleaded. Finally permission was granted, provided the younger, educated sister took over the minding of the store.

It was agreed that immediately the sagai (engagement) would be announced and sealed with plenty of sherbet and mithai, after which Mansoor would return to Mombasa to tell his parents, and follow up with the marriage in a few months.

"Two years passed!" Rehmat exclaims and laughs as she sketches her two fingers in a 'V' shape. "Two! He went-he went-he went...just got lost! At first we wrote letters to the Ismaili Council offices in Mwanza, then Dar-es-Salaam asking for his whereabouts, and then finally we found Mansoor's address in Mombasa. You know what?"

"What?"

"There was another woman he had eyes on in Mombasa and was waiting it out! She was a stylish, modern sort. When his parents found out that he had become engaged to me, they were furious with him that he hadn't told them,
and immediately arranged for him to get married to me. And that’s how I finally married him. That was a happy day for me but not so for him. I think it was because he was marrying a simple village girl. For the first two years he didn’t even take me out with him. He just went out with his friends. It was hard. It was as if I didn’t have a husband. I said to myself, ‘Where have I come to?’ But back home was my step-father and there was no going back ... no going back. I was fortunate to have wonderful in-laws. They knew what I was going through and took care of me.”

“And did it get better later?”

“Yes, after my daughter was born. After that he slowly changed for the better. My daughter brought good fortune, all my three children brought good fortune, but Shelina, inside her was the soul of my husband’s nani maa. My mother-in-law had a dream about that you know?”

§§§

Eji dev ke karan mane sabh kuch chodea, For the Divine Lord’s sake I have forsaken everything,
mane na janan avar duaria. I recognize no other abode.

Eji avar cinta muje his ki nahin cinta hai meri jiv hi. I have no concern for anyone else.

Eji jiv ne karane mane sab kuch chodea, For the sake of my soul, I have forsaken everything,
mane avi saran tamaria. I have come to take refuge with You.

Field Notes & Reflections

The record of soul’s history is found in images, and
whether we realize it or not, we are intricately bound to these images as they are to us. And so it is not by chance that when we, like Persephone, descend into darkness and the hand of Wrath wants to shatter our soul and gain power over it, that it begins by shattering or erasing our images. Daksha did it to Shiva, Nazis to Jews, Amanbai to Khathi, and, Abdulla to Rehmat.

And so when we combat Wrath or the Blows of life, it must be by strengthening our images that we must begin. It must be by rebuilding new images over the shattered ones that we must re-nourish our soul. But begin we must! For only then does the world make it its own business to nurture us. The response to such shatterings cannot forever remain silence or apathy. Tending the soul is the human task. The defeated need to be spoken of as much as the victorious, the abused daughter, as much as the violent father, the dead as much as the living.

There is something in Rehmat that is pointing me towards this understanding, but still I cannot quite grasp it. Is it something that she has not shared with me yet? I feel unhinged. Some things become clearer in our talk, some more mystifying. There is a presence of practice here -- a way to keep our feet on the ground, not a skill, but a
relationship. Then I realize that in her manner there is total absence of resentment. But how can that be? Resentment drives the world. It reinvigorates us through our acts of inflicting upon another that what has been inflicted upon us. So how can there be an absence of this in Rehmat? Unless resentment itself has been embraced as some kind of a good. Is that possible?

“Mowla choi toh neh, keh moth bolai neh toh koi bee baneh bolai ... the Lord tells us that when death calls, it chooses its own reason and comes to call us,” Rehmat tells me. “He was on his way to work, my husband. We were living in Nairobi then. He had just dropped the children to school and then realized that he had missed his own exit. So without looking he made a quick U-turn, that’s when the lorry coming from the other side hit his car head-on. He died instantly.”

“How did you find out?” I ask, after offering my sympathy.

“The neighbour’s wife came and told me. ‘Don’t lose hope Rehmat Bai, but Mansoor is no-more in this world,’ she said and I went into shock. The children came home and asked why daddy hadn’t come to school to pick them up, and I told them. It was all too much. Mansoor and I, we had so many plans. Life was getting better. He had gotten a raise and we were going to buy a flat. But it wasn’t meant to be. I took it into my own hands to make it right for myself and the children. My eldest daughter was a brilliant student and she had gone into depression.”

“So how did you cope?”

“...Took hold of God,
became close to Him,
and began
cooking for others,
catering,  
home boarders, two, three.

Hired two *kaarias* (black servants)  
two *ayahs* (African maids)  
began cooking by six a.m.  
First, went to morning meditation,  
then evening prayers, daily!  
during the day, I cooked.

Daily, made five hundred samosas,  
chicken and beef pilau,  
seventy-five rotlaha,  
hundred fifty chapatis,  
mandazis,  
shami-kebabs,  
machi-bhutt,  
people's lunches,  
people's dinners,  
Jamatkhana *darbaris*,  
and *sufras*

I was making 22,000 shillings per month!  
Paid school fees,  
educated my children,  
shelina got scholarship to UBC  
paid her costs,  
‘do not worry,’ I told her  
she became engineer.

Put younger ones through school,  
one studied business  
made a doctor.  
God's grace is on me;  
Here I am  
Happy!  
I am grandmother now.  
What else is there in life?

It's all His doing.  
His hand was always on me.”
“My step-father eventually suffered from a very painful illness and after he died my mother was all alone in that village. The children were grown up and the boys had moved on to Canada. So, along with her youngest daughter, my mother came back to Dar-es-Salaam. They were nearly destitute and spent the rest of their days dependent upon the welfare of the community. You know, when my mother and youngest sister died, not one of her children, except the younger son, was near her. My younger sister had, what’s that bimari (sickness) called? yes, Down’s syndrome. She too had suffered at the hands of my father.

“You mean beaten as well?” I ask incredulously.

“Areh! Ha, Yes! you didn’t know my step-father. What do you think? Anyway, all the boys were in Canada. They all had houses, one even rented out his basement. All had money. But they never called their mother and sister over. Not once! They would fulfill their duties by sending a few dollars, that’s it!

I told my younger step-brother, the one who had stayed behind in Dar-es-Salaam, that his progeny will never be unhappy because he had served mother until her last days. ‘You have given khand to the mayat. Her blessings will watch over you forever.’ That’s what I said.”

Eji sat ka sada santokh ka Wearing a sari of truth with a tie of neda, contentment,
mane cint ke ganth ganthaya. I have tied it with a knot of attentiveness

Eji sat ka gadula santokh ki To fill the water-pot of truth and the ewer of jhari, contentment,
mane dharam sinchan ki doria. I am the rope which draws up faith.

Eji bhane pir sama suno mere Pir Shams says: “Listen, my brother. bhai, mane aqi kol kararia I have come with my promise and vow.”

§§§
And so it was that Shiva's wrath descended upon Daksha who lost his head in one fell swoop. But such an act of violence could not be left untended, for Brahma the Creator's prayers and Vishnu the Preserver's gentleness prevailed upon Shiva to have mercy upon all the gods, rishis, and men, and give back to Daksha a head of a goat so that he may see the omnipotent forces that lay before him. And thus, with destruction followed wisdom, and with wisdom the hearts were touched with the fire of love, for it then became known to all that Vishnu-Brahma-Shiva contained the elements of all things and non-things in all the worlds known and not-known. "We are the tribune Self," said Vishnu in reverence. "We are Creation, Preservation, and Destruction." With that the three parts of the universe departed on their separate ways and once more fell into the solace of their dreams.

And in this triumvirate of pantheons, the place of Sati was enthroned for all eternity... for better or for worse.

Field Notes & Reflections

*Between the Blessings of Life and the Blows of Life lies a middle path. The path of Care for Life. The last time I had seen an unblurred expression of such a Care was with Sheroo. She had called it -- Sacrifice, a Surrender into Life. The Care for Life in the case of Rehmat is more celebratory.*

'Rehmat.' Why did I choose this particular pseudonym to shield the woman's real name. Or, did I choose it? No. It came to me after I had listened to her story many times over. 'Rehmat' – to be
showered with the Blessing; to be comforted by Grace; to be protected by the soul's Virtues. What a glorious name, not like the ones we give our daughters these days — the Farahs, the Nadias, or the Zafreenas!

Resent, in Latin, means 'to feel again.' Ressentiment, in French, from the word, 'resentir' — which means to sense again, provides the clue to Rehmat's path. Some, as if still flinching from the original blows they have received at various points in their lives find it incumbent to give out blows to others and so they take up stances of violent emotions, actions, and ultimately dwell in self-loathing. But the Blows of life, like the Blessings of life are also a means to re-sense our place on the journey we call life, where both rhythms encroach upon our path. I feel that Rehmat has found a way to celebrate these rhythms. Some Blows are not to be given out again. They are held close to the heart where they are turned into Blessings. 

§§§§
Main characters introduced in Rehmat's story.

TWO BROTHERS IN MOROGORO

Older brother

AMANBAI, wife, jethani

JIWAN, poisoned

Four children, poisoned - Africa

NANABAPA, Tara-Kunchi Man, of Zanzibar, Khathi's father

KHATHI, wife & widowed, dies alone

Abdulla, second-timer from India who marries Khathi

MANSOOR, motor-cycle man, dies 1979, car-crash

Son, Banker, married to Susan

REHMAT, Born 1933

Daughter, MBA, married to doctor, one child

Shelina, UBC, Engineer, married, two children

Presently living with son in Coquitlam, B.C.
...Where these characteristics of a narrative life are not evidently seen or virtually experienced by individuals, as may be the case when generations have moved or have been uprooted, the practice of the family, the community, or the tradition may have it anticipated, *sui generis*, that such examples, exemplars, and even non-exemplars (tyrant fathers, evil *dehranis*, etc.) of virtues and excellences may be performed or read in the fictions and histories of the people, or in their poetry; heard in their hymns and music, or seen in their art; or, performed in the plays and dances they enact. In here, even as times change and modernizing institutions stand as unwavering Cyclopes, people of a community are able to see themselves as they are now and as they once were.

In this I am reminded of what one scholar says:

"It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in drama into which they were born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their
actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its original dramatic resources ... telling of stories has a key part in educating us into the virtues.”²¹...
Sometimes, some memories are remembered in colours. Why it is so, I really don't know, perhaps that's how memory allocates and files its choicest experiences: “Ah, it’s the two lover’s first moment of naked touch -- that should go under creamy beige; What? the wedding day? now that’s saffron for sure; oh, that’s the birth of his first child, file it under turquoise, no, no, sienna.”

The day Tom Mboya was shot and killed cannot be recalled by me in any other colour except red.

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**Nairobi, Kenya, 1969**

The *East African Standard* of Saturday, July 5th, 1969 carries a picture of a dashing African man, immaculate in a business suit, vigorously striding across the tarmac of Nairobi’s Embakasi (now Jomo Kenyatta ) Airport. The figure is imposing, the face unmistakably flat and broad, yet princely. The Minister of Economics and Planning returned yesterday from a meeting in Addis Ababa, the caption indicates. Tom Mboya must have looked at his own picture in the paper that same morning as he arrived at his ministerial office for some official paperwork. Kenyan politics was getting increasingly fractious for the brilliant minister and shrewd strategist, and he was beginning to feel the stress of continuous political duellings and wranglings. The round of KANU (Kenya African National Union) party elections were foremost on his mind and to keep his seat he would need a lot of money. It didn’t matter to him that he was of the Luo tribe whilst most of the old guard were Kikuyus, those
things rarely bothered TM, as he was often referred to in political circles. Things would work out, they always did, he must have thought. By midday, with his work done, he strolls down to the parking lot and tells his driver to take the afternoon off and drives off own his own.

Chhani's Pharmacy, owned by Mr and Mrs Sehmi Chhani, an Indian couple has just closed for the week-end when Tom Mboya arrives. He's been their valued customer for a long time, but more than that he is a good friend, and Mrs Mohini Sehmi Chhani opens the door for him and then shuts it behind him. Lately the dry skin has been bothering him, he tells her, and Mrs Chhani recommends once again a small bottle of Alpha-Keri lotion. When would he and his wife, Pamela be coming for dinner again? she inquires as they stand at the counter and chat for a while. Outside, Government Road is busy with home-going shoppers except for the young African man in a dark suit and a briefcase clutched in his left hand. He seems to be in no hurry as he gazes at the shop's window display, as if studying the silhouettes inside. His right hand is in his pocket.

Inside, Mrs Chhani says her goodbyes and shakes TM's hand and then lets him out. That's when two shots ring out.

"Tom, Tom, what's wrong?" she cries, but the force of Tom Mboya's body slumping against her own staggers her to the ground. At first she doesn't grasp what's happened until she looks at her hands covered in blood. Tom had decided to wear a red shirt that day and a suede jacket and as Mrs Chhani holds his head, she notices the red shirt noticeably wet and soon the floor of the pharmacy is covered in blood. TM remains silent to the screams of Mrs Chhani who has already locked the doors and summoned help.

They say that two bullets hit Tom Mboya that day but only one was lethal enough to kill him. He died on the way to the hospital. Many would say that with him died the hopes of a young nation.
"He was an African Kennedy, yaar," proclaims one of my school mates the following day as news of TM's death spreads amongst the Ismaili community.

"Forget Kennedy, he's Martin Luther King Jr, and Malcolm X all put together," says another, trying to outdo the solemnity of the moment.

"This is war, yaar, total war between Luos and Kikuyus. Odinga versus Kenyatta, kaaria against kaaria (black against black).2 The whole country is going to erupt like Krakatoa," spews Salim, his fondness for volcano metaphors once again apparent.

"Areh, for-sure, but they must find the murderer, nahn? what if he's also Luo, then what? what if it's a KGB plot? I bet the Russians are in it," interjects someone else. Tom Mboya was often wrongfully accused of being too pro-American in his political demeanor, although he vehemently denied this. In Kenya, as in other Sub-Saharan African countries, the superpower rivalries had penetrated into tribal rivalries and so it was not uncommon to mention the Americans and the Russians in all conflicts petty or grand. Luos were the pawns of the Russian or Chinese, and the Kikuyus were under the wings of the British or the Americans -- at least, that's what everyone said.

"Areh, what's the difference, nahn. He died in the hands of that Indian woman and that means we better start packing our sandookos (bags), and don't tell me to be in school to-morrow," says Salim, finding yet another excuse to skip school.

"What? no school to-morrow?" I interrupt, my interest stirred up even further.

"Don't be stupid, yaar. There will be proper prayers for Tom Mboya at school, better be there," replies the first school mate and then solemnly adds, "Imagine, wearing a red shirt on the day you're going to be shot, and then getting your heart pierced by a single bullet, is that an omen of some sort or what?"
During the funeral procession, Pamela Mboya is known to have said to Mrs Sehmi Chhani: “Tom would still have been alive today if he had had a streak of badness in him. They killed him because he was nothing but a good man. He died because they knew he was good.”

During the next few months much of Kenya is in turmoil. In October of 1969, President Kenyatta, himself a Kikuyu, embarks on a tense electoral tour and makes a stop in Kisumu, a Luo stronghold. Bearing a commanding figure of an ancient fighter, the President stands on the platform besides the renowned Luo political leader, Odinga Oginga, his equally formidable rival and begins to openly berate him. Disaster ensues. Crowds jeer at Kenyatta and later as his car is leaving, they pound it with stones, something that would have been sacrilegious before. The police, fearful of a widening threat of violence fire into the crowd and seven Luos are killed. Two days later Kenyatta has Odinga arrested and then proceeds to ban the KPU (Kenya People’s Union) party, the official opposition party of the Luo guards. Kenya, once again becomes a de facto one-party state.

Discussions in my home are about what would happen to the Indians if a civil strife starts -- we should be prepared for the worst. Neighbours within the confines of Makupa Ismaili flats of Mombasa stock up with gunnies of rice, various pulses, flour, and potatoes in case a revolution like the one in Zanzibar five years before, revisits. My family follows suit. Kaaria (black) house-servants are put under full-scale observation for any hints of changes in mood or posture towards their Indian patrons. Special prayers are offered in jamatkhana throughout the country for mushkil asaan and shanti (deliverance from hardships and peace) in the life of this young and fragile country. Sometimes, my father would reproach the British Empire’s weak-mindedness to have given independence to the kaarias so suddenly and so prematurely; at other times he would speak of the madness of a new nation when it kills its brightest -- what hope is there for the future?

My roots to the place of my birth are being disturbed and it wouldn’t be long before they are completely wrenched from the African soil.
When does a man begin to rot?' asks the despairing middle-aged male protagonist, Nurdin, in Moyez Vassanji's book, No New Land. The initial excitement of the early months and years as a new immigrant to Canada has worn off. His relationship with his wife, Zera, is tenuous and unfulfilling, one of his teenage children seems distant and even insolent at times, and the daily drudgery of finding and keeping a job has taken a toll on him. Now, sitting in the darkened room of his apartment at Sixty-nine, Rosecliff Park Drive in Don Mills, he repeats the question: 'When does a man begin to rot?' In the distance the towering head of the CN Tower blinks silent messages in code, and from the wall in the gloomy room stares the photograph of Nurdin’s dead father, whose hold upon his son hasn’t diminished even in death.¹

Vassanji writes of Nurdin:

'Something had changed, he did not know what, perhaps new ideas, like the question he was asking, not knowing why. Some inner reserve was creaking, shifting it's weight ... It had been simple, life in the family, the community, so long as you did not question it. Few did; it was not worth the trouble, brought you nothing. There were a few accepted paths to take and that was that. And before you knew it you were worrying about your children, and after that, the fate of your soul in the first life, as it was called ... Perhaps he would rot physically first. He felt tired these days, old. His hair had greyed and thinned, there were lines on his face ... Notch by notch it seemed to Nurdin he had come down in self-esteem and
expectation, grasping whatever odd job came his way, becoming menial in the process.” (pp 82-88).

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1992-1993: St. Dennis Drive, Don Mills, Ontario²

All that I could think of was to keep up with the wailing siren of the ambulance in front of me. There may have been other thoughts, but all I kept on saying was, ‘Please God, not yet, don’t let him die.’ I drove as close to the ambulance so that the traffic would make way for me as well. The two paramedics who had come to the apartment just twenty minutes before had found my father unconscious on the floor, next to the bed. I remembered my mother’s telephone call, her trembling voice imploring me to come quickly for ‘daddy had done something to himself.’ It had sounded so final. I had dropped everything at work and had rushed to my parent’s apartment. The door was open when I had arrived -- a police officer standing out in the hallway. I had seen my mother, tears streaming down the face clutching the *tasbih* in her fingers repeating in hushed tones ... ‘Ya Allah ...Ya Allah ...Ya Allah ...’ invoking the Omnipresent to take charge, and had given her a quick hug. I had rushed into the bedroom where the two paramedics were frantically trying to shake the body awake, but it remained limp. “Can you please wait outside,” the man had said, without any trace of grief or urgency, and that had given me hope.

“Are you the son?” the police officer asked politely.

“Yes,”

“Did something happen here that made him do this?“ The question was bizarre amidst the frantic activity. I had no time for such bizarre questions. But the calmness in his voice made me attend to the face that had just spoken. He looked towards the stretcher where my unconscious father was being secured, and then
"No," I lied. How could this stranger ever understand the story of my father's life in this country. "No, I don't know why," I repeated softly. He flinched, as if he wanted to say something, and then decided to let it go.

"You can follow us," the paramedic interjected. "We'll be taking your father to Toronto East General ... Oh, and could you bring all the empty bottles of medication he was on, they are on the side board beside the bed."

"Empty?" I had forgotten all about the bottles. I rushed to the bed side table where my father kept all his medication and looked at the now three empty containers. The prescription dates were hardly a week old and that meant that complete doses of nearly one hundred and fifty tablets of various drugs meant to be taken twice a day to numb the depressed psyche were now all in my father's body. It was then that I noticed the note, written on a tiny, wrinkled piece of paper and scribbled in my father's handwriting. I knew what it was and quickly put it in my pocket. The police officer had come into the room and motioned me to let him inspect the bottles.

"Was there a note?" he asked after a while.

"A note?"

"We have to know if it's attempted suicide or something else. If he left a note..."

"No. I didn't find a note," I interrupted, and quickly added that I needed to follow the ambulance. They were welcome to ask questions at the hospital, I offered, and he politely relented. He would stay behind and have a few words with my mother, if that was alright.

"Yes, of course." My mother would tell him the truth. He would understand.

Here I was now, driving in a daze, mind racing through the events and trying to keep up with the paramedics in front of me.

That night, in the intensive care unit whilst sitting and watching all the
silent machines attempting to drain the poison from my father's insides, I recalled what the doctor had said in the emergency room: "We'll do our best. Your father swallowed a lot of pills. Tonight will determine how much damage they have done. I suggest you go home. There is nothing further you can do here. We'll call you if there is a change."

"Nothing further?" I had thought. I told him I wanted to spend the night with my father and he agreed. "Nothing further?" - I would whisper into my dad's ear of how much he meant to me; I would talk of the happy stories of back home and I would silently remind him of the good things that were yet to come. I would also pray. That night I did all that; my father didn't move and I did all the talking. We stayed close together. Much was said ... in whispers and prayers.

Sometime in the late hours of the night I remembered the scribbled note lying in my pocket and had read it: my father had asked for forgiveness from those he was letting down, he had proclaimed his love for his wife to whom he was giving this final sorrow; he had thanked his young son for being a good man, he had scribbled something about his older son which I couldn't make out, and then, he had spoken of the pain of being useless to the family, of being 'a nobody' in this country, and of having lost everything. I wept and read, and re-read the note many times that night trying to make sense of what had happened here. How had it come to this from being a story of hope when my parents had first planned to leave Kenya and join us here?

"We're going to join our children in Canada, they've asked us over, areh in dhaamdhoon we'll live with them," they would proudly tell all their friends, who would silently hope that such a miracle of dhaamdhoon of joy would happen to them. And when someone, out of concern, would mention how different life was in Canada, or, how today's children are not like the old stock, they would pretend to hear, and then politely and proudly reply: "Not our children, they are our jewels. We'll manage."

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In 1992, my father attempted to end his life. And when he failed at that, he tried again a few months later. And when he failed again, he merely resolved that even in taking his own life, something that he had final control over, he had failed. From then on he decided to shed all the roles that he had previously cherished - father, husband, grandfather, friend - and with a depleted personal will and a weakened body, he resigned himself to let the will of time pilot his days. He gradually withdrew himself from the family and the community, and with that he also withdrew his love from the world.

If I was only a casual observer to this story, I would probably say that this man suffered from chronic depression of some kind. I would try to find a name of a catalogued disease and then say that the man fitted the symptoms and that people who had this disease normally behaved in this way, and sometimes wanted to end it all. But I am not a casual observer. I am his son. So, the questions that went through my mind at the time were something as follows: "What was in our family life-story that had become so murky to have made him think that his life mattered little and that he had nothing to offer or add to the story? Why was it that the two units -- the family and the community -- that should have been the final catch-net to cushion his sufferings had become the very source by which he had measured his failure? How had it become that the one man I knew who loved to tell stories and cherish every experience of
life when he was in Africa had finally felt that his own story in Canada made no sense at all?"

These are, of course, a synthesis of the myriad of questions that I mulled over, as the family went about trying to rebuild a story that would for many years appear strangely blurred, unfulfilling, and even incoherent. It was as if one of the principal protagonists in the story had suddenly chosen to take himself out without revealing his reasons to the other characters in his story. Yet, this as well is far too simplistic a view, for how could it have become that the other characters in my father’s story — wife, sons, friends, grandchildren, and daughter-in-laws — had become oblivious to the main protagonist’s travails and tribulations? Could it have been that they themselves had unwittingly made his character less significant, less worthy in their own stories?

To reduce this event as one of narrative incoherency is not to diminish its importance, but to make a statement about the narrative quality of life itself: The narrative unity of an individual life, from birth to death, finds its moral grounding from the intelligibility that life offers, not only to the narrative self, autobiographically, but also in relation to the stories in which such a life was born into or finds itself in.
Arguably, perhaps no other philosopher offers us a better pathology of despair and unhappiness than Soren Kierkegaard. He writes: “The unhappy one is the person who in one way or another has his (sic) ideal, the substance of his life, the plenitude of his consciousness, his essential nature, outside himself. The unhappy one is the person who is absent from himself, never present to himself,” and then he adds, “But in being absent, one obviously can be absent in either past or future time.”

It’s this infusion of temporality that provides the clue to what makes an unhappy person despair. For, the unhappiest person is either locked into a past with bitterness and resentment, or locked into a projected future without hope and with much distress. In both cases such a person is absent to herself in the present since all that she was, is, and can become, are beyond her own will and outside ‘the plenitude of her own consciousness.’ But, it can also be said here that one who is locked into a past where there are fond recollections of memories of good times, then even if he or she is absent in the present, or to the future, there is found in living in such a past at least that much happiness. On the other hand, even if one has no fond recollections of the past and is absent in the present, but has hope that in the future, his or her life will get better again, then there is in dwelling in such a future, at least that much happiness. For in the projected hope lie the seeds of well being.

But, as Kierkegaard says, if one is of neither type, and is either simply locked into a resentful and bitter past, or in a hopeless and distressful future, then what we have here is the pathology of the unhappiest person.

Dealing with human temporality, hence, requires narrative strategies that allow us, either as individual biographers of our own stories, or as co-biographers of the stories we are together born into to recollect the past and bring it into the present so that we can amend it. Or, to project a future with hope such that our present is cushioned and grounded in the knowledge that life will be better again.
In either case, the place of story-telling as a narrative art plays a significant role, for it is through the narrative structures of stories -- historical or fictional -- that human temporality ultimately can be grasped and afforded the type of moral narrative unity that shields us from Kierkegaard's pathology of the unhappiest one.

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1980's: Ontario, Canada - "I am ruined"

Sadru's days of rotting began a few months after he and his wife, Shirin, arrived to Canada. It had been a momentous event for their older son, Anil, and his wife, Zeenat, for finally they had managed to sponsor the parents. It had taken Zeenat's steady income and her husband's not so steady one, to make this happen, a fact that hadn't gone unnoticed by Anil and his parents. Zeenat was a Uganda refugee, a tireless young woman with a forthright disposition and an urge to survive. She dealt in absolutes. Black was black and white was white. There was no middle to anything -- things had to be done as one felt them, and to be told as one saw them, and words were not to be camouflaged or minced, unlike her erudite husband who was careful of how words could hurt people's feelings, especially the feelings of his parents.

Zeenat had arrived in Hamilton without her husband when the Ugandan dictator, Idi Amin, had ordered the Indians out of Uganda in August 1972. He had given them three months to get out. Three months in which to tidy up generations of rootings. She had become a bride suddenly, the marriage consummated in Mombasa, Anil's town, around the time when the order to depart had come. Zeenat had also been one of the few fortunate refugees to have been accepted by the Canadian High Commission, and she had felt that a quick marriage would make it easier for her to sponsor Anil, later. Her new husband, a Kenyan, hence stayed behind in Nairobi waiting for Canadian Immigration to approve his visas, and by the time the two finally rejoined in Hamilton, Canada, Zeenat had lived through some formidable times. She, along with her now
dispersed family, had left Uganda virtually penniless and this moment of sudden independence and hardship had changed her, taught her to look after herself, where saving every cent and dollar had become a habit. Besides, she had seen her parents lose everything back in Masaka, where she was from. Her father had run a prosperous little store in this small Ugandan town, a business the family had built through hard work, and then had given it all up in order to meet Idi Amin's deadline to leave the country by October.

And so, by the time the couple finally rejoined in Hamilton, Anil's laid-back and easy-going style and Zeenat's cautious and frugal habits were bound to lead to future conflicts. One of the conflicts was to do with looking after Anil's newly arrived parents -- to take on the financial and social commitment of having them around. This burden of having them live together, sharing her husband, and having no privacy was far too much for Zeenat who had already warmed to the nuclear family life-style of Canada. The parents interruption, their intrusion was uncalled for, even unfair, and Anil, who wanted to keep the peace between their fragile partnership, eventually conceded to the whims and wishes of Zeenat. The parents sensing the ill-will in their older son's home and a daughter-in-law's less than welcome hospitality decided to move in with their younger son in Toronto.

Sadru had held a decent post in Mombasa, one that had seen him through nearly thirty-five years of patient service. The stream of directors and managers at the Diamond Jubilee Investment Trust Company, one of the business jewels of the Ismaili community in East Africa, had looked after him, first taking him in as a junior clerk when he had just married Shirin; then as an assistant accountant when his two sons had been born, and finally as chief accountant, all the while teasing him with minuscule salary increases, a fact not lost him. He knew he had no accounting qualifications and no proficiency in English like the younger Ismaili interns who by-passed him into managerial positions. But Sadru knew the job better than most, and especially better than those young Ismaili kids with paltry B.Comm. degrees fresh from Indian colleges in Poona or Delhi who hardly knew the intricacies of book-keeping, let alone banking. He deserved some respect for that, he complained to his wife and children, but none was forthcoming.
His two sons, Anil and Munir, had already left for Canada and life in Kenya wasn't getting any safer or easier. More than anything, Sadru was bored and frustrated. What was the point in staying here, he wondered many times -- the black politicians were ruining the country, his newly hired and presumably token black assistants at work were incompetent, his Ismaili bosses were using him to no advantage, and many of his friends had either moved on to England or to North America. Besides, the days of the Indians in East Africa were numbered. When old man Kenyatta dies, there is going to be trouble here, he used to say to a few remaining friends, and they would concur. That fat buffoon, Idi Amin, in Uganda had already shown what could happen to the Indians, and Nyerere of Tanzania had also told the Indians who was now boss in Africa by taking over their businesses and properties through wide scale socialist style nationalization policies. It was only a matter of time that Kenya would do the same, and the sooner he left the better. At least Canada was a safer place.

In short, Sadru was waiting for his sons to call him over to Canada, which like so many other sons and daughters who had come earlier, they dutifully did, but most often prematurely.

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"You've such a good job here, why leave it all and go to such a cold place? What will you do there?" Ishani, my father's boss had once asked, as the departure date drew nearer.

"I am tired of this country. Nearly everyone we know has left. It's time to go and be with the children. I am sure I'll find something there," my father had replied. "If not, then we'll simply relax and live with our children." Ishani, a modern man, educated in the West somehow seemed to know better and simply shook his head.

It took my father less than a year from his arrival in Canada to realize the immensity of his decision and his error. The excitement of the first snow flakes had
rapidly turned into dread of a prolonged winter which didn't measure up to the tropical climate of Mombasa. Their first few months at my older brother's house in Hamilton had brought out tepid squabbles which had thoroughly discouraged them. I called them over to Toronto, although I knew that my new bride might not feel comfortable with this decision, and together we moved to a bigger apartment in Don Mills. Perhaps being closer to Jamatkhana and other immigrant Ismailis may help him, I had thought, and at first it seemed to help. But the unforgiving madness of the huge city and seeing his young son now married, and on top of that, not being able to find work finally brought him to his knees.

He had made a costly mistake, he announced one evening before dinner. The fact that my new wife, Jamila, had decided to skip dinner and instead rest to tame a severe -- real or feigned -- head ache had irked him and pushed him into a melancholic mood. Jamila, a fiercely independent woman was finding it difficult adjusting to a daughter-in-law's life with my parents. It wasn't that she hadn't tried, but having to deal with my father's ongoing complaints about coming here was unfair, she thought. She felt that the new marriage needed a space for two couples to find their proper grounding. And so, sometimes, to find that space she would decide to skip dinner, or go away for walks.

"I sold my beautiful flat and gave up my job, for what? I left my aged mother in Mombasa in the care of my younger brother when it was my duty to look after her, for what? for this rakshash, monster, of a city? for this kind of treatment?" my father cried. Tears were streaming down his face, and my mother unable to bear the pain of her husband, also started crying.

"Look, a slave, that's what I am here, a slave!" From being a chief accountant in a well-known company, he had come to a large city, trapped to do odd jobs here and there. Losing his first job especially had taken the wind out of him. He had bought a new suit for his first interview (which Jamila had arranged) at a small, one-man, Jewish accounting office, and he had been hired on probation. But the use of computers and different accounting systems had left him flustered, and he had been
asked not to come back. Dejected, he had thrown away the suit. Nothing seemed to work. No one would hire him, for either his English was not up to par, or, he had no Canadian experience, or, they were looking for younger candidates.

"All excuses, excuses for my colour!" he would say. "They had warned me about this country, but I had laughed at them. How could I have been blinded by my wish to be with the children?" he would complain to my mother, when I was not home. "Look at you," he would admonish her, "having to work as a laundry woman in a hotel basement just to keep busy, whilst I sit at home doing nothing. "Anh'ov sao khalas, badhohi khalas ... I'm ruined. It's all ruined."

My mother had wanted the laundry job at the Inn on the Park just to be out of the house, and had begged me one night to take her for an interview the following morning, and when the Laundry Department-Head had finally phoned to tell her she could start soon, my father had completely lambasted her with insults. But, she persisted and eventually he relented, but I could see that a small part of him died that day. Tradition was too strong to change perceptions so quickly. It was a father's job to provide for the family -- not his wife, or his son, and certainly not his daughter-in-law.

I spent hours with my father, comforting him, telling him to be patient and to give the new country its time: "All new plantings require nurturing, daddy," I would tell him. "Besides, how much longer could you have stayed in Kenya? It's not as if they would have made it any easier for us to stay on." My parents even went back to Kenya, but that had just amplified his sense of loss and shame, and they had returned dejected and bitter. He had given everything up to come to Canada. There was no going back.

Eventually, as years went by my parents moved to their own apartment in Don Mills. My mother started a private home day-care business, looking after the children of busy two-income Ismaili couples anxious to make it in the big city. She
earned and saved more money than my father, a fact that he disliked very much. My father, like so many Ismaili men from Africa, had finally resigned himself to any type of work that would occupy his day, make him feel useful. He became a parking-lot attendant, driving out into the wintry mornings at five in the morning to make sure the lots were cleared of snow. He struggled at first, then as years went by he became proud of the parking lots put under his care, treating the tiny attendant booths as his personal office. He was finally beginning to accept his fate when another blow was dealt: He lost his job to a young rookie replacement, a "white boy."

"Nalayek, bastards! I brought them more cars into the lot, more income than all the other attendants. I didn't steal greedily like all those other guys, and they were kept and they let me go? Tell me, why? Because I'm old?"

Somewhere between those early months and the years that followed, it dawned on my dad that the years ahead would be hopeless and would not get any easier, and the years behind were all locked in memory that remained like a haunted site, and he was bitter and resentful.

When during those years my father succumbed to the rot of depression? no one remembers, for it is just as true that both my older brother and myself had also become engrossed in our own lives and families, drawn away from the persistent agonies of our father, and also anxious like many other immigrant Ismaili couples to make it in this country. At first I visited him with my family, but more and more the complaints about his life made Jamila weary, until finally I was the only one who would visit, mostly alone and sometimes with my two children -- their grandchildren, whom my parents loved dearly. Anil and Zeenat's (and their children's) visits were even rarer. My mother, as well, through years of bearing verbal onslaughts and grievances about her husband's life, had finally resorted to staying by his side in silence, praying and hoping that the sickness, "these dark clouds of depression," would go away.
He stopped going to Jamatkhana, for how could he show his face to the others who were surely to ask him what he was up to these days? "What will I tell them? That I'm jobless? That my wife is supporting me?" Besides, the crowds and all this fervent praying held no meaning any more, for how could his dahyaroo aneh mamtaroo (ever caring and nurturing) God, his Mowla, have let him down, given him this terrible illness? "Koi joh kharab nai kairoh ahn'ov ... I have never done harm to anyone in my life." He eventually gave up on life and it must have happened insidiously and with age. The once sprightly face had suddenly turned old and tired. At night he would often sit on a chair in his room and stare out of the window at the lights of the city in the distant. Sometimes he would begin to cry and most times he just remained in bed. And when he spoke, it was always in bitterness about the life he once had ... and had lost.

Field Notes & Reflections

Rebuilding a life at sixty-eight years of age is a painstakingly complicated task, if it ever can be done. Rebuilding a life so that its self-narrative from birth to death can once again become coherent in some meaningful way is an even more arduous task. It requires every significantly involved character in that fragmented life-story to re-examine their character's own personal story, to take a pulse of the soundness of the character, the emplotments, and the story's moral qualities. The task requires an unbending and unwavering commitment from the family, its young and old, children and grandchildren, who form the primary corpus of characters of the family-story to see the process through; the task thrives and is made
simpler under the virtues of faith and hope — faith, not only that this too shall pass, but faith in a divine source by which unbending commitments get extended into passions and excellences; the task demands the virtues of persistence and patience, for as sure as the sun rises and sets, so are a family’s up-days followed by its down-days; the task must be done in a community that is well-informed and is willing to see the restoring of family-stories as a communal task tied to the tradition’s practice to extend the virtues, and the excellences and goods of all its members; and in all this, the task can only be sustained in love.

That much I can say from our family’s experience.

§§§

Vassanji’s character, Nurdin, seems to face similar ghosts of the past that my father, or Shamshu in a previous chapter, or Amyn, as will be seen in a subsequent chapter, face. They have come here, to Canada, each as part of a story within stories. Whereas Shamsu, a Ugandan refugee, had to come without choice, the impact of loss felt or difficulties with life in Canada play an important role in shaping their present identity. The twenty to thirty years spent in Canada have not diminished their sense of rootlessness. For many, ‘back home,’ is the true home. And where they live now is merely some meaningless occupied space. ‘Back home’ they knew who they were, what their purpose was, and what their place was in the family, and in the community. ‘Back home’ they had moral exemplars — solid and strong-willed pioneer men as fathers and grandfathers who stood
as moral beacons. Here, in Canada, they had lost the moral compass, their rightful place in the family. They felt less as men and more as lost boys.

Vassanji, of course, uses the author’s prerogative to challenge the reader into a deeper philosophical battle. The rot, he seems to say, must be even deeper than this. Coming to Canada, becoming ‘Western’ cannot be that simple. How could it be? when the Western psyche itself has battled hundreds of years of philosophical and spiritual dilemmas to finally arrive at this so-called Age of Reason -- Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard ... ! People, immigrants, non-Westerners coming from Africa and stepping into the so-called modern world cannot surely expect to call themselves ‘Western’ and not have to fight the same spiritual battles, ask the same questions of morality and ethics that generations of westerners have dwelled in before? It cannot be made that easy. For the ultimate battle of the Western psyche is between ‘Reason’ and ‘God.’ And can an unembellished non-Western Muslim God survive against the onslaught of ‘Reason’ – the pantheon of the Western psyche? Can we, the immigrants survive? and what price will we finally have to pay to become ‘Western,’ to become modern?

And, is this price ultimately responsible for “the rot” we feel in our lives? This is how Vassanji writes:

“You know,” Nanji told Jamal ... “the only choice, real choice, man has in the world is whether to go on living ... or to commit suicide, end this absurd existence. Have you thought of that? Compared to this all other questions are trivial, frivolous, irrelevant.”

“Bana! Wow! You’ve hit me between the eyes, man. Who else could have thought of that!”

“It’s not my original idea, I assure you,” Nanji protested in
embarrassment. Jamal, without the benefit of a liberal arts education, showed a naivety sometimes that was ... as unsettling as his commonsensical to-the-point reasoning. "... If you really choose ... to go on living ... then you live with that choice facing you every moment of your life. You are truly alive. Most people go on mindlessly of course, they don't choose to live. That's because they do what they are told or made to do ... And think of this: when death comes unasked, when it takes you by surprise, it will rob you of even this free choice, because when you thought you were choosing to live, it was only letting you live. The only way you can exercise free will, defeating it, is by taking your own life." (pp. 75-76)

And the only reason such free will is rarely exercised, Nanji goes on to say, is "that the body has a greater desire to live than the mind to perish."

And then he adds:

"It seems that to become westernized, which is what we've opted for by coming here, we have to go back and battle by battle relive all their battles - spiritual struggles. How can you otherwise assimilate generations of experience - only now we've reached the Age of Reason..."

"But isn't that better, Nanji? Our God is not dead, we are better off."

"Can we survive here, with our God ... can He survive?" (pg. 77)
To understand my father’s predicament as merely an illness thrust upon a bitter man is to miss the point of human temporality. Coming towards a future as a “Being-toward-possibility” is not that straightforward, for I am already crafted into a situation – a story. I am, hence, also a “Being-from-the-past,” a having-been, and this always orients me to recollect, reflect, and interpret. It is because the future is vague and from where so many of my projects get realized that I am also always inclined towards where I have been. These two instances: recollecting out of memory, the “having-been,” and anticipating a future, the “yet-to-come” are always locked together in the instant of the present. Even my language through its grammar is tensed to accommodate this past-future tension. This, Barbara DeConcini says, is an ontological condition in the way that “Being” cares-for-itself.7

For our purposes, the point to be made is that without being able to recollect and remember the past and bring it into the present, the biographical self encounters a sense of loss and disruption as it comes towards the future. Stephen Crites explains this pithily: “To become a self is to appropriate a past, and that takes digging. Even if I am urgently interested in a new beginning, the evidence of modern psychiatric literature as well as older spiritual writings suggests that I cannot begin afresh by forgetting my past, but by recollecting it.”8

The storied “I” that is reflexively re-storying itself, hence, has particular narrative strategies available in the way it deals with the past and the future, that is, in the way it recollects one and leans towards another: my interest in the future determines my ability to recollect my past, and vice versa. In that sense, as Kierkegaard intimated, I may live out of the future, but I understand myself out of the past.

To the extent the “self” is moving into the unknown future, a recollection and configuration of these experiences is not merely important, but also a narrative act of coherence. A life experienced is always provided as narrative, but a
narrative that does not cohere, either in the way it recollects its past, or anticipates its future, cannot make sense of the experience of life itself. To put it in another way, for someone to understand me, they have to understand my stories; when my stories are obscure and incoherent, then I am misunderstood, thus alienating any chance of an augmented and intelligible biography. The act of coherence is also in a way, an owning of the events and episodes of a lived past and as such part of the updating of the “I.” It is fundamentally a step towards self-transcendence: “Only a self can amend itself. To amend myself I must repent myself, and only what is avowed, owned, can be repented.”

But Roshan’s words, in a previous chapter come to haunt: “Today, who is there to sit and listen?”

The rotting in my father began even more forcefully when he regained consciousness after a troublesome night. Along with that came moans and tears, for even this last task, that of taking his own life had been a failure. At first, he went through an intense period of regret, for this final act of free will and victory over life and death, the very act that was supposed to have freed his perceived burden on his family, had instead put upon his family a hundred-fold increase. The tablets, the massive dosage of brain poison, had slowed the brain, and with that the movement of my father. The resident psychiatrist, at first, was resolved to keep him for an indefinite period of time.

"Please, don't let them keep me here. I'll never do it again, I promise," he had pleaded to me one night.

Baited by love and pity, and naiveté about the nature of his distress and
illness, I conspired, foolishly I was to realize later, to make sure that he would leave the hospital and be looked after at home. I coached him on what to say and how to behave when the psychiatrist visited, and it worked. The release was given with the condition that out-patient therapy would continue, and my father and I left for home -- to that very place that had let him down, and that he had let down. This reckless endeavour on my part would go on to teach me a valuable lesson.

At first I spent many hours with my parents. We spoke of all the times we had missed the opportunities to love each other and of all the times that these would still be available. My mother, her home day-care now thriving, felt that having more little children around would help her husband, and so from eight the roster went up to twelve. As weeks went by I began to spend less time with my father and more time at my own home with Jamila and the children, something I had held in relief in order to look after my dad. But, living in an apartment, where the dining and living rooms had been turned into play areas, my father was once again left alone in the bedroom, to think -- to think with a mind that was incapable of clarity, for his depressed psyche still remained troubled. He began to get angry with my mother, he would scream obscenities at the world, he would cry, and he would sleep. He would pity his condition and regret every dollar his wife earned. The family was at a loss, for the out-patient therapy was not making any progress: how could one express one's inner pain to a 'white psychiatrist' in a language not of the culture?

One day, hardly a month later, my father did it again. This time the dosage was increased and the note left behind had a greater resolve: he would make sure he ended it! What my father had failed to realize was that the tablets given to him were not designed to kill; and once again, the paramedics came, and the police, and a much determined resident team of hospital psychiatrists. This time around the drugs had further weakened the body, so much so, that my father had to take a moment to understand what was said to him, and respond. No out-patient therapy was allowed and I, frightened by a previous connivance, agreed to commit my father to the
psychiatric ward at the hospital. Those months "in the inside" began a gradual process of healing. And it took the toll on the entire family: there is no greater feeling of loss, other than death, than to see a parent, father, husband, and grandfather, dissolve and disintegrate as a "self", a character, and withdraw his love from the world.

Everyday my mother and I would visit. Anil, who lived in Hamilton occasionally came with his family. Grandchildren were brought in during these visits and the grandfather slowly and painfully began to "see" the valuable possessions in his life. I sat in during his daily sessions with the psychiatrist, learning their motives and ways, and comforting my father in rebuilding a personal narrative. As weeks passed, a hazy future gradually began to appear. A horizon was taking shape; a future with a tiny bit of hope. He made friends with other similar "storied selves" at the hospital, and he realized that his was not the only story of pain and anguish. He met in the ward people who lived in lost worlds and confused stories from which they rarely came out. He came to know of mentally ill fathers and mothers whose children never visited, and who had simply abandoned their parents. He began to help them, talk to them, laugh with them. He recalled the good and bad moments of his past and somehow reconciled them to his present condition. He began to have an interest in the future and in his grandchildren, his sons, and his wife. The day he was released, he came out freshly showered and shaved, and with the beginnings of a re-written story. He also came out with a hope that with his two sons, his wife, and his grandchildren, he would write many new stories.

My father, who will be seventy-seven this year, lives a retired life now and many years have passed since those incoherent times. My parents moved away from Don Mills some time ago leaving behind a life that was painfully connected to a "lost immigrant" narrative. This year is their twenty-first one in Canada. I will not say that he has no regrets of the life that once was in Africa, or that he has completely recovered: old age had also crept in, prematurely. I will not say that Anil and
Zeenat are frequent visitors. I will not say that I am close by him today. But, I will say, however, that he sees enough of a continuous leaning towards a future, and that has taken away the rottenness, the uselessness, and the worthlessness. He still needs his pills to bear the gloomy days that sometimes visit, but having a future has softened his present. When he talks of his past, there is less bitterness and more memories of joy. Whenever I talk to him about my research, he listens, advises, and prompts me on - "I am proud of you, son."

As I write this, the text is configuring my own story, my own sense of pain and regrets, and as the tears roll down my cheeks, I believe that the greatest act in any human relationship is the act of loving. And, one of the greatest virtues is the virtue of choosing Life, and then passionately and wisely caring for it.

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Despair is a place of emptiness, an absence of presence. It is shapeless, inert, foggy – a body and soul stripped away of hope. There are no images to comfort, no shrines to offer hope, and no gardens to show colours. The very connection to life is lost. There is paralysis, a forced cocooning into non-time and non-space. There is only experience of non-experience – no reflection, no beginnings or arrivals, no friendly faces or wayside sanctuaries, only a perpetual maze. In psychiatry, despair is called depression with symptoms of inattentiveness, slowness, lack of focus, apathy, insomnia, and spontaneous mood changes. Despair is a captainless ship in a night fog awaiting a hurricane, faltering, drifting, absent of horizons. Despair is an abyss, the thickest of all confusions and fusions of anxiety, melancholy, and pain. Despair is not being able to turn the Blows of Life into the Blessings of Life. Despair is absence of the virtue of Faith. Despair, as Kierkegaard calls it, is being unconscious of being Despair.

But for me the truest of all descriptions of Despair and its greatest agony is not to have a continuous story to live by. It’s not to have a character, not to see images
of yourself in others, not to be able to explain experience, not to have your own subsequent chapters, and not to be able to subscribe to a cultural story, any story, out of which a past can be redeemed and a future leaned towards. Ultimately, Despair is not to be able to temporalize human life.

And Despair needs a patient friend to be there when it finally becomes conscious of itself.

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Field Notes & Reflections

The legacy of my father's illness left a loss in the family that I can only explain as the loss of a strong father character that resilient family stories require and less than often have. If there is one lesson that I can share with the reader it is that the loss of such a figure cuts deep into the family psyche. It feels as if a crucial part of the moral narrative unity of the family story has become unhinged, a bond not there, a weak glue of emplotments, and this remains the unfinished task – to make the story intelligible, not only for the sake of my parents, but also for my sake, and for the sake of the grandchildren, to whom strong moral exemplars are becoming few and far between in the modern world.
...The arguments presented in the various sections of 'A Disquieting Journey' build upon a tentative thesis:

Communities in movement across modern institutions and milieus, and across cultural or physical geographies suffer conditions that while causing disruptions in the embodied self-narratives of its members also provide opportunities to repair such narratives and make them intelligible. This “repairing” or “fixing,” I am saying, is done by actively engaging in the recounting or voicing of stories of the community’s members.22

Towards this end, the implicit purpose of the narrative-form itself is made available, which is to account for and understand the copia of human experiences and events and give them a unity and intelligibility, *sui generis*. Out of the intelligibility of a community’s recounted individual and communal narratives or fragments of such narratives are obtained or recovered moral imaginations, in particular imaginations relating to the virtues and the goods of life which define further the community’s standards and enhance its excellences.

These moral imaginations are made available to me and to those with whom I live in community to “see ourselves” -- in fiction or history -- as we attend to the question: What sort of person are we to become? This teleological question implicitly propels us, individually and as a community on a
narrative quest to seek and define the goods of life that make the whole life intelligible – from birth to death.

I propose that to not aspire towards the voicing and remembering of every day stories, and for the purpose of my work, to re-present these as a living tradition of argument, dialogue, and self-reflection, is to bequeath current and future generations with fragments of incoherent narratives and hence, a muddled present and a vague future. It is also to let the self-floating modern “I” become wrenched further from its traditional bearings and become narrow in its own moral imaginations, particularly in the way the “I” determines and defines a virtuous life. In other words, it is to say that the modern “I”, in as much as it appears to stand bravely alone, is hardly that, for it always stands in relationship within larger stories it was born into...
PART TWO

Praxis
Reveries of a Ghetto's Grace

a muezzin’s prayer salutes the rising sun
as the morning breeze waltzes the harbour’s
stench across the gullies of the ghetto,
in concert with the gurgling spit of a hindu’s phlegm,
frying of sweet cakes and coconut bean curry,
farts of old arabs and pious ablutions of morning sparrows,
heralding the song of life waking to another march
of grizzled mud-caked feet in the shadows of palm
and innocence.

atop a kitchen table a blanketed bundle stirs,
groggy eyes, protruding ears on makeshift cradle,
he mingles naked to a battle ground of matriarchal-generals,
daughter-soldiers garrisoned around the morning hearth;
a bottle-hawker’s cry echoes a quest for a bargain
of glass treasures exchanged for tattered toggeries,
bartered for crumbs out of an indian’s
parse pantry blessed by cockroaches
the size of ghetto rats.

“You peed on the table,” the mother scolds,
whose chores push the child into a corner
of children far too many to steer and bunked
in one room in white petticoats and dirty underwear,
strewn like flags of families falling out of crevices
of mud and coral tenements of colonies and neighbours
the colour of sailors and conquerors,
natives and slaves, threads of screaming voices
captured in a sly wind of quarreling stories.

The black girl of sheared tongue and simple frock
leaps into the porous compound of children and chickens
scurrying and hurrying amok;
“Amana, Amana, mad woman, mad woman!”
she begs and mimes a hungry story
to make her day go easy from silence and servitude
dished in various spices and portions
of toils and tasks that fill the morning with shades
of blessings and blows of measures unfair.

Reveries of unhip fathers and mothers
renewed by rotund daughters and balding sons,
decaf lattés and dancing mountains afar;
shapeliness of stories and mortgages and cinnamon muffins
making “thump” against the tides of clouded horizons
of relapsed journeys and indian weddings
that brings a child into the northern world
to carry a future of ancient deeds,
under the shade of a ghetto’s grace.
...This is a good time to summarize the various sections of 'A Disquieting Journey' presented in Part One: Blessings and Blows. I have argued that modernity and the modernizing influences of its institutions and practices in general, and the movements of communities across time and space in particular create conditions that may constrain the way a modern self seeks its bearings and understands its whole life as a moral narrative.

Hence, the way modern institutions and practices segment a human life into episodic moments or patterns sui generis; the way geographical or cultural diasporas of people disrupt their once valued references to their traditional horizons; the way embodied movements across time and space fragment connections to embodied senses and sense-making, at times causing despair; and the way a modern individual self seeks its bearings and defines its identity from internal resources tied to self-mastery and self-fulfillment rather than the traditional sources once used, were a few main conditions presented.24

The constraints faced by such a modern self emerges against the backdrop of my conception of what it means to live a single life, from birth to death, as a quest in search of a unified narrative. I argued that the narrative unity of a single life presupposes the intelligibility of its narrative quest, which is to seek and understand the goods of the whole life.
The narrative quest of a whole life, I said, defines itself and comes to understand the purpose of its intentions, passions, and excellences from the teleology of a single life, and in relation with the teleology of the community's narrative, and those traditions and stories which that single life is already born into.

Furthermore, I proposed that to quest to know what the goods and excellences are, is also to know what the moral imaginations of the community are, and particularly the practices and the virtues. This I said may be found in the stories of a community's people who have suffered the four conditions in their own general and characteristic ways. I also suggested that out of the condition of aporia that narrative disruptions present to a modern self, arises a moral starting point to begin to cohere or "fix" such narratives. This, I said, was an implicit impulse of the narrative identity a la Ricoeur, available to make the biography of one's own self intelligible in its narrative sense.

Two paramount assumptions support this tentative thesis: First, the understanding or intelligibility of my moral narrative depends not only on the general stories in which I am born into (the universal, the historical), but also intrinsically lies in the struggles of the life situations and daily actions or Praxis (the particular, the present) of "I" as the actor situated in my own stories. This insight into Praxis in turn becomes the heritage of understanding within the greater stories. The Praxis of the everyday are as much fertile grounds for understanding one's narrative unity as are the historical actions of the community.

Second, any understanding of one's narrative always lies inside language and discourse, and its relationship to history and any understanding of, say, 'parenting' or
'cultural disruptions' cannot be undertaken unidimensionally and univocally. To understand why one is facing struggles as a modern parent or why the generation of young adults appear so completely different in their outlooks, requires in some sense a corresponding historical perspective as well as a theoretical one.

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If there is one thing this dissertation has pointed out so far, is that it is in everyday family stories that I can begin to find a moral starting point -- the particularities of moral limitations and strengths of the institution of the family itself and the characters within -- and it is in this place that I can also begin to know the "practical moral setting" from which further "signs of direction" or "feelings of tendency" arise to pursue any future joint action. It is in family conversations, both as primary utterances or as complex secondary utterances in other genres^25 that language and discourse arouse a possibility of narrative construction. Hence, implicit in family stories are found characters who struggle and plots that become unglued and then once again get configured. And, even when they don't get configured as a moral narrative, as in the case of Abdulla and Khathi (Rehmat's step-father and her mother), then, even in the ensuing tragedy I can find lessons about the human condition. It ultimately reminds me that:

If I am to know myself, sense myself, take myself seriously then it is not only from the image I have of
myself as a solitary individual, but more so from the images others in my family or in my community have of me in relationship. For only then will I feel that the reality in which I live is as much mine as it is theirs, and that the story I inhabit and feel as mine, is also theirs ...
AMYN: “Make money, more money, and more money.”

FARIDA: “We are facing emptiness.”

The Journey bends for them in sympathy.

“Women!” it lauds. “You have carried great stones tied to your pachedis and saris and you have pursued burdensome ventures in history. Yet you have hoisted your loads joyfully on my path and you have carried your consignments of purpose hopefully. You are wise, for you have found tasks that are right and true for each of you in your journey.”

“Munir Bhai, listen again and write with your heart,” the voice from the past whispers a gentle intrusion.

“Sakina?”

“Hush.”

“I cannot write anymore.”

“Hush...write.”

We cannot escape, each one of us, the carrying of stones and tasks through our life journeys. We cannot escape the songs of our souls as they sing of the burdens on hand and all the broken stories still to mend. We cannot escape from our greatest demons that surprise us at every corner and show us
how little we know of ourselves. We cannot escape the rhythms and rhymes, the blows and blessings, and the harvests and famines of the Spirit that the Journey lays on our path.

And yet, it is wisdom, the venerable matriarchs tell us, to find just the tasks to carry. It is wisdom to let the broken stories slow us down so that we can finally attend to the music of our moods; it is wisdom to be subjected to the human condition and feel alive; it is wisdom to understand that the tasks that hold us back in darkness are also august stages that foreshadow the coming of light's grace.

“You must attend to the story that follows, Munir Bhai,” the voice whispers. “Attend to its wisdom, for in its darkness rhymes of light are being formed; Confront its descent and align to its blindness; And above all be inspired by its hopelessness.”

“Yet another story?” I ask.

“Yes, another gift,” whispers the little spirit from Jamnagar.
Toronto, July 21, 2001

The oncoming exit off the Don Valley Parkway is a relief. The perennial joke that this main thoroughfare slicing across the heart of the city often “feels like a parking lot” seems almost true as I make an impatient retreat out of the jammed lanes that have taken me in their grip for almost an hour. My pulse is beating faster, my mood is restless, and I have been in Toronto only since early morning, having taken the late night flight out of Vancouver. Where are they all going to? I wonder, as I hurriedly manoeuvre a quick turn into a side street of rows of bungalows. The map on my lap takes me on a circuitous route of streets and avenues, until it finally delivers me into the driveway of a modest looking house, almost colourless and strangely somber. I feel anxious and somewhat apprehensive. They must have better things to do on a Saturday afternoon than be engaged in some kind of “research.” Strange how the word “research” adds an air of importance to this personal excursion. The door opens and Farida flashes a warm smile and waves to me to come in. She must have been watching out for me.

“You made it, Munir. We were wondering whether you got lost or what?” she said, sounding almost happy to see me.

“I forget how big this city is,” I reply with a trace of nostalgia. I had lived here for nearly twenty years before moving to Vancouver to pursue my Ph.D. Farida leads me into the kitchen where the lingering aroma of fried samosas and a kitchen table carefully primed to indulge a guest bids its welcome. Strange how all my conversations have been around family kitchen tables -- Sheroo, Fazal, Shamshu, Rehmat, Nurbanoo and many others.

Just then, Amyn, Farida’s husband walks in and offers his hand. The handshake feels limp and cold on touch, almost lifeless. He issues a warm smile, welcomes me to his house and invites me to the table. The unshaven face makes him look much older and frail. Farida hovers around the stove for a few moments and then joins us at the table with two small bowls of fresh tamarind and coconut chutney and a plate of crispy samosas.

“I didn’t know whether you were a vegetarian or not, so I made both --
chicken and vegetable, and there is masala tea on the stove," she says, and then settles into a sedate pose.

A strange silence suddenly envelopes the room.

§§§

Like the down-and-out characters in Samuel Beckett’s book, “Waiting for Godot,” characters in conversations can often wait for some sort of an end-game whilst missing the activity of the moment. There is no Godot coming, there never was. It is an illusion. Yet, as they tarry, flashes of tiny Godots appear inside words and stories of the waiting characters to reveal their daily activities together. Astonishingly though, the constant reminders of what or who they are waiting for brings them back into the moment of their experience. “They are waiting for Godot,” they remind themselves. And before our very eyes -- eyes with which the characters themselves do not ‘see,’ we notice that they have imprisoned themselves inside their own metaphors.

§§§

“You’ve got me thinking about what you just said,” I tell Amyn, “about not feeling like visiting close family in Vancouver, or, even here in Toronto. Why do we feel this need to hunker down at home?” I am not surprised that he has said this. I, too, feel the same. Why is it that inviting or visiting family has become such an unwelcome chore over the years?

It wasn’t like this when we had first arrived in Canada, proudly bearing our immigration papers, bundled up in gaudy and vastly oversized winter coats, lost to the wonder of the first snowflakes upon our lips. “So this is snow,” we had giggled like children. The tumbles we had taken on those icy side-walks of Don Mills were shrugged off with an embarrassing smile and a sideways
wobble of our head, as Indians often do -- and then we had hurried down to Honest Eds or the local K-Mart store to purchase our first oversized winter boots that had just come on sale.

Every week-end, it was common for families to mobilize around an Indian meal. Stories would be shared on how we were all coping finding jobs (or keeping them), or living in cramped apartments, or faring in our studies. And even before coming to Canada, I remember as a little boy, in Kenya, having my daadi-maa (grandmother) or fuis and maasis and chaachaas knock on the door for an unannounced visit. The kitchen and the servants were immediately put into action and a few dozen bhajias or puris were instantly produced along with fresh masala chai (tea). A guest was a gift, a time to spread stories, gossip, laugh, and even cry.

Now, the families hardly met.

Amyn: It’s the life style today, you work hard and you know you need a couple of weeks to recuperate, and one way I find, to recharge the battery is to go away and do nothing, rest and relax. If I was to go to Vancouver to see my family, I have to out of courtesy go and visit everybody. You can’t visit some and not visit the others, that means you’re running around from one family to another. I can do without that.

What is this word “lifestyle,” I wonder, as Amyn goes on to explain his reasons for avoiding family visits. His voice seems to be deplete of any zeal — a series of sighs and sentences and then the word -- “lifestyle.” I have often heard this word used by other East African Ismailis: “Areh, heedaji lifestyle toh maaree chadeh ... Oh, the lifestyle here is a killer!"

“What do you mean by lifestyle?” I ask. “I mean what are you feeling
when you use the word itself?”

Amyn: Life style ... is like working very hard, going after the material things. To make money, and more money, and more money. Buy more things and more things. Here, to go to work it takes over an hour. The life here is, by the time you're done with work, the number of hours you put in, then you come home, then at home, of course, you have to participate and keep the household going. It becomes very hard. You would not be burnt out back home, whereas here it's a big problem.

The metaphors spew out (recharge battery, burnt-out). The sudden shift of emotions makes me feel uncomfortable. This is the first time I am in conversation with a couple and staying alert to what is being said for whose benefit is an interesting challenge. Not everything is being uttered for my ears. I decide to wait and let the conversation lead me on.

“And this life-style ... what does it do to you?” I ask.

Amyn: There is no happiness - none, none. Here, commuting takes a lot out of you everyday and then you're putting in long hours, so by the end of the day, when you come home, there is not too much energy left to do too much more after that. Here, not many people get chance to go to Jamatkhana during the week-days, Monday to Friday, only Saturdays and Sundays, that too if there's no other social plans.
Farida: We are facing emptiness! (she interjects). When you compare the difference between relaxed and stressed, my experience when I was in Nairobi, you never felt competition. There you never felt threatened by someone else’s business. Here you have a job, but there is always a threat, especially in our business (a technology company). The company is either going to go under, or there is someone in your group who is after your job, or that they are going to reduce the number of people, plus the technology is moving so fast and jobs are being reduced. You’re living in an environment right now where you have this constant pressure, and that as you get older there is an added threat that after fifty it’s harder to find a job.

There is a desperation in all they are saying, an emptiness at its core, more a kind of resignation than an irritation. The very language of this conversation seems to have taken a spirit of its own. It feels markedly hopeless from the ones I have had before -- the elders, inspite of hardships along the way, retold their lives with honour and hope and with a sense of faith that paid equal respect to the sufferings and joys along the way. Perhaps old age makes for a humbled narrator.

I cannot but think of Fazal telling me about his father, fourteen year old Jamal, arriving at Mombasa’s old harbour entirely on faith and hope and finding his way into the wilderness of Eastern Africa; Or Rehmat’s young life in
Dar-es-Salaam with her abusive father and later, as a widow with three young children, resilient to forge forward in hope; Or, Shamshu and his epiphany during our conversation that “life is about flavours” after telling me how he had lost all direction to his life when ordered to leave Uganda. “I had only ten dollars in my pocket when I landed in Montreal -- I tell you it’s all a blur,” he had told me, tears running down his face. “I wish I can find that Air Canada stewardess. She gave me ten dollars to keep in my pocket just in case.”

“And what of my mother, Moti? She suffered through it too. And my father who was far away when I left your world,” the voice whispers.

“Yes. Sakina. Yes -- Moti and your father, and your grandmother and Sheroo. They lived their path in honour. And faith.

Why is this conversation without hope? I wonder. Where is it taking me? Why has it come to me?

Amyn: Back home you didn’t worry about household and it didn’t take an hour to go to work. As a young boy, lifestyle was different from what it is, here, now. There, life was relaxed. I see myself totally different from my parent’s lifestyle. They worked hard, but in a relaxed way. There, because they had more time they could spend more time with the others.

Farida: Back home, you had your own little shops. There wasn’t this competition. You did your work, you worked the whole day. Lunch time my dad
came home and you had an hour or two for lunch, where there was fresh food cooked everyday. And food also plays a lot of difference in how much energy you have. My mum used to make lunch. We would have fresh lunch, vegetables, one curry and rohtli, rest for an hour and go back to work. (In the evening) everybody went to Jamatkhana. Then we’d have fruit together and sit and talk.

Amyn: Back home I didn’t see there was anything that would stop you from going to Jamatkhana seven days a week. I would go seven days. When I was in the boarding school we had Jamatkhana everyday, early morning meditation and evening prayers, and it was compulsory. When I was home I used to go everyday.

“Yes! yes!” I want to jump in and tell them of my memories of ‘back home’ and then decide to stay quiet. No need to interrupt now.

But I wish I could tell them about how my family had meetoh-ghodree (pillow-blanket) nights under the open sky. We would hurry home after jamatkhana, have a light supper and then climb on to the terraced roof of our flat and lie for hours, whispering and sketching the night sky with our fingers. We had our own names for stars that made obvious patterns and so the three legendary soccer players: Pélé, Bobby Charlton, and our local celebrity, Ali Kajo, made up Orion’s belt. A quick prayer (salwat) would be offered whenever a shooting star plumed a sudden yellowish stroke and disappeared. “I bet it’s landed in China,” an innocent prognosis would be jointly offered.

The night sky over Mombasa throbbed an eternal ambience (except when
the monsoons arrived) and the Milky Way actually appeared gelatinous and chalky. My mother would tell us stories her mother used to tell her, and then my father would tell us about his day at work. Sometimes my parents would reminisce the innocence of the early years in Mombasa -- families huddled in tiny mud and stone tenements in the Indian ghetto of Kuzé, near the old harbour. “There were eight of us sleeping in one room. Mombasa was still a jungle. There were lions at the outskirts of the town, you know,” they would remember. “Are you sure this is true, Mummy?” I would ask, and she would reply, “How can your mother tell you untrue stories?”

This was home and if someone had told us that in another ten years we would be gone, entire families dispersed into another world, we would have called it a cruel joke.

Farida: I remember, every night, with my dad, we used to sit and talk. Having dinner we would sit and talk. It was nicer that we saw him at lunch time, we were able to talk. Even when we went to boarding schools, when we came back home it was nice talking to everyone about our experiences, it was nice going to Jamatkhana. There was a more relaxed atmosphere. Your parents were not so stressed, your mum was always there. She didn’t work. Lunch time, evening, when you needed to talk to her she was there. We spent a lot of time talking (as a family).
In narrative discourse, time reveals itself as the care of our being and space reveals itself as the form of our being. The act of remembering is implicit of this discourse through which our temporal (and spatial) identity itself is articulated. We know “Who” we are and not simply “What” we are through our narrative rememberings. “We possess ourselves only as the journey from birth to death, from past to future”3 and from this we may realize that our rememberings are to a large extent conditioned by our anticipations.

I wonder what their anticipations are? Amyn has turned quiet. The remembering is pushing him into a melancholic mood. I sense that the way of life being described by Farida is not what his own family is currently experiencing. There are silent conversations going on between them -- perhaps about the way they hope their life would be, or, perhaps about what a father or a mother’s place is in a family -- what sharing stories means, and what having a family is all about.

**Amyn:** My kids are not close to my other family members. They hardly see them. And, once they get older, then their interests are different. Recently we celebrated my daughter’s 21st birthday, and my sister’s kids were here, and my son was sitting by himself as if he didn’t know them at all!

**Farida:** Back home when you went to Jamatkhana you always had your aunts and uncles watching over you. I remember once I had not gone to mission class, my aunt who was a volunteer, she slapped me
so hard. They had the liberty. Aunts and uncles took care of you, they watched out for you. If you did something wrong, you knew you were going to be caught.

When I became a teenager, if you talked to boys the whole community knew. And my grandmother was always after me -- "I've told you not to talk to the boys!" So people were watching out for you. We spent a lot of time with my naani-maa and my maamas, even my fui. They all watched out for you. If you were going wrong you knew you were going to get caught.

Here everyone is so spread out. I have a sister in Ottawa, her children and my children haven't spent that much time together, so they are not close. I have a sister in England, his son and my son are not close. The bond is not there.

Should I tell them that I have only one brother -- five years older -- and over the years we have gradually become silent? He has three children and I am a chaacha to them. To my children he is their wada bapa -- an elder-father. There was a time when wada bapas and chaachaas meant a lot within an Indian Ismaili family setting. They were considered as surrogate parents. Now, I scarcely ask after my nieces and nephew, or, my brother, ask after his.

Should I tell them that at times I reminisce about how intimate my cousins and I were in Africa? And how the North American children born to these once intimate cousins have become distant from each other -- in space,
but also in hearts. My children hardly know my wife's family, which, after being ordered out of Uganda, fanned as refugees all across Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden. I am sure there are personal reasons why families become unhinged. And it leads me to wonder how my own moral narrative quest can proceed without bridging the distance between my brother and I, or strengthening the narratives of my wife and children and the stories they are born into.

The metaphor of "emptiness" intrigues me for it informs the very argument about how narratives become fragmented and deplete of their moral qualities. Are there other forces at play here -- forces implicit of our contemporary times?

§§§

One of the foremost distinctions of North American modern family life is the separation of its private space from the space of public institutions, especially from the secular institutions of society. In fact, it is the private-public distinction more than the nuclear family distinction that best distinguishes a modern family from its historical or traditional type. There was a time, as my stories of the past clearly show, when the family served as the very foundation of social life. Through its connections to the community, a family was at the center of the institutional order. Institutions existed because of families and stayed relevant only as long as families demanded their presence. "Historically, there was no segregation between the family and the totality of the institutions in society."4

§§§

What has the separation of private family space from the public institutional space meant for the contemporary family? -- a family often made
of single parents, parents in conflict, parents struggling to make ends meet? More relevant for me as a parent and husband is the Praxis implicit within the narratives of the parental space itself. I realize that as I quest towards finding practical moral settings within conversations and stories, I cannot stay silent to my own impulses to find explanations that will enable my own moral narrative quest. I also become aware that this narrative quest cannot remain myopic — my wife’s quest or that of my children, or of my own parents and brother are mysteriously embedded to my own, as are those of my colleagues of past and present.

And all this draws me to understand what it means to possess power within the modern family space.

$$$ The parent-child relationship that was once a concern of the whole community has in modernity become to a large extent a private concern of the nuclear family in relation to the greater economic, political, and communal structures of society. What happens in my home is between me, my wife, and my two children and is of no concern of others in the greater institutions as long as I am following a generic, modern, and middle-class script of family discipline, however loosely I may be defining it. Social research tells me that this is a culture specific, modern condition of the middle-class of North America. The family and especially the parental space as a result of this separation has become isolated from the supervision or gaze of not only its immediate community, but also from its once close extended family. Have I stepped and perhaps even worked myself into this script ever since I arrived from Africa? Is this the aporia that Farida and Amyn feel?

$$$
There was a time in our own historical journeys when parenting was shared and where I was under the care of my entire family -- grandparents, chaachaas, chaachees, fuis, maasis, etc. I ate at their house as much as I did at mine. I played and prayed with them, as much as I did with my own parents. If I was caught with an unlighted cigarette butt pretending to be some swashbuckling Indian actor, I was promptly scolded, even punished by uncles and aunts. And if we mourned the loss of one of us, we mourned as one continuous family and community -- continuous in the line of those who had come before and those who are yet to come. “I,” as a developing narrative, belonged to all in the extended family and even the community, connected by a spiritual umbilical chord.

In short, somebody was always home.

Aportia -- an “emptiness”, “no happiness” -- a perplexity. Farida and Amyn have worked hard and have pursued “money, and more money, and more money.” They appear free to act as they wish in their own private space, but this has only left them unhappy. Why?

“Tell me about your life since you got married. Tell it to me in chapters,” I ask, inviting them to become narrators.

Amyn: Chapter One would be moving to Canada. I would say the momentous event when it all began was the Uganda exodus. We came a year after we got married ... in 1974. Settling down in Toronto. We bought our first house, eighteen months after we came to Canada. At least four times a week we would eat out, go home, no cooking, no dishes, nothing taxing.

Chapter Two would be when we started the family, when Tameeza was born in 1980. It
totally changed our lifestyle. At this time I was pursuing my CGA (Certified General Accountant) courses. There was family and there was also studying. It was tough as well.

The third chapter, when the kids were younger up until now. This is my third chapter.

The fourth chapter is the life when children move on. For one we won't have to worry about the kids as we have to today. Because they have to be on their own, let them be. In the fourth chapter there will be change, but the chapter is clouded.

He speaks without much enthusiasm. I notice that he has reclined into his chair, pushing it further away from the table. His answers remain brief. Could it be that this quick synopsis of his life in chapters has brought something into his immediate vision? -- something that perhaps disturbs him? Farida moves in closer and rests her elbow on the table before she answers. She seems excited at the way I have proposed this summary and eagerly opens up.

Farida: I would say my first chapter is when we moved here, before Tameeza was born. We lived in an apartment, we both had jobs, we spent more time together, going out, going to the movies, traveling. Our relationship was easier, not having kids, we didn't have the kinds of arguments we have now. At that time we saw more of our relatives. It was a nicer
period.

But after Tameeza was born our life changed, and with Alim four years later, it got a lot tougher. With one child it wasn't bad, but with Alim's condition it was harder trying to bring them up, trying to work, and being a family. Both the second and third chapters were difficult.

This is (still) my third chapter. I can say that I am at a point when you learn to accept things and you learn to go with the flow. With Alim's condition, the years were a struggle and now what will happen will happen. I am not struggling anymore and saying, "OK, it's fine."

In my fourth (next) chapter I'll definitely be doing some kind of volunteer work and have more time for jamatkhana, and time for myself. I see things getting easier, less stressful from the point of rushing to work...and to get into meditation or yoga and maybe more time with my family, extended family as well.

I don't see myself having the material pursuits, all those gadgets, at least for myself. But I do want them for my children -- they are younger and with all this peer pressure, I'd like them to have it.
Field Notes & Reflections:

In my reflections I am taken to the ginan which Sheroo, my first conversational partner, had briefly sung to me and explained. She had talked about how our spiritual quest has gradually subsided as our desire for material pursuits has taken over -- especially after coming to Canada: “Today, who is Maa (mother) and who is Baap (father)? Who is Khooda (God) and who is Insaan (human)? Today we have lost their meanings. And the meanings of what is family, faith ... and mohabat (loosely translated as, love).”

“.... Seven things have been fashioned by the Creator, and those are the ones which endure.
The first is His heaven, the second His throne, the third the scales and balance. The fourth is the tablet, the fifth the pen, and know that dozak is the sixth. The seventh is paradise. Listen, my brother, as I praise that everlasting abode.
Wealth is transient, life is transient, and transient are beauty, riches and youth. All representatives of the world are transient. Faith alone will endure for ever. Your tongue is engrossed in tastes, and your body in delights. So many are the things which you consume.
Through consuming so much you make your soul wander. In no way does your welfare lie in this.
To ensure your welfare you should practice good deeds, oh brother, or you will be consumed by further cycles of return.”

§§§

Have they been betrayed by their ideals? The mood on the table has once again changed. A sense of some sort of loss that the couple feels is obvious. Moods have a kind of inhuman quality. Farida and Amyn seem to be drowning in a mood of emptiness of passion. And yet, can it not also be said that our highest ideals cannot be held by us forever? We are, after all, “masters neither
of time nor our future.”

“Tell me what you’re feeling right now?” I ask Amyn. “Why is the future so clouded for you?” I choose not to mention about the absence of his son in his chapters.

Amyn: Well, there’s a lot of pressure at the moment, so anything that lessens the pressure, it’s good for one self. People get heart attacks, it is due to the pressure, pressure you put on yourself or that others put on you.

What do you mean by “pressure?” I ask him. The metaphor seems to imply an embodied stress and from the point of view of a personal narrative, perhaps an indication of some kind of struggle with a plot or plots -- but what is this plot that makes him see his world through such harsh metaphors?

Amyn: To do more, to do more, whether you create the situation about doing more, or somebody else. It’s this having to do more. It’s about the life itself. The time it allows you -- the free time. One of the things is to have in old age some kind of security, build some kind of wealth reserve so that when you want to retire you will have enough. I have to. Somebody has to think about it. These things ... when you find out that the house is paid off ... you know these are little things but something that will make our life easier.

Farida shifts in her chair, clearly at odds with her husband. She looks straight into my eyes and interjects:
Farida: Not for me! I am hoping the future is going to be a better one! Definitely more time for myself and my family, and I do see my kids very much there. Although they may not be full-time with me, they will be a big part of my life.

Field Notes and Reflections

“How can I revisit this chapter when I feel I have written all that I can?” I tell my committee at the end of a grueling session.

“Breathe! By taking one final breath, Munir,” my supervisor calmly responds.

“In matters of Spirit, no path is ever straight and the greatest part of our effort is merely to intend towards its mystery and submit our heart to its impulse. The path surely opens,” whispers the voice of little Sakina.
Julia Kristeva’s recent book, “Hannah Arendt - Life Is a Narrative” catches my eye at the University’s bookstore. Two hours and minus twenty dollars later, in the comfort of my sofa, it mysteriously becomes clear that the path of *Praxis* and the path of Narrative are accomplices along the same life journey – from birth to death. The very possibility of narrating arises out of the act of birth (natality) itself – a supreme moment of *Praxis*, and “life does not fulfil itself unless it never ceases to inquire into both meaning and action.”

But for what purpose? I question. Why the impulse to narrate? And why the urge to reveal the presence of *Praxis* through this narrative reflex? Could it be that the act of natality and its journey towards death is a political act? – an ontological act that illuminates the possibility of the human being, of human existence. Could it be that generations that are born into the human world are both the seeds and fruits of *Praxis*, and by coming into the world they are meant to complete past enacted events and actions through stories which give the human story its meaning? Could it be, also, that ultimately the events of my life and my actions will find their completion through the stories my children, grand-children, and great grand-children will remember and tell of me?

*Praxis*, loosely translated in ancient Greek means “an activity of action” – action concerned not with things, objects, or works to fabricate as means to an end. The Greek word of antiquity that valorizes the swallowing of human vitality towards fabrication or production (or consumerism) as a means to an end is called *Poiésis*. *Praxis* has another purpose – ultimately it is to reveal all acts of Life, acts as ends that exhaust themselves with action that is full of meaning – action through which the virtues are recovered. But where am I to turn to see the full revelation of *Praxis*? my questions persist.

§§§

Often the grace of a conversation presents a rhetorical gift to the interlocutors and a space opens for healing. A conversation assumes a political
locus that reveals the character of Praxis in full view. But, it cannot happen without a spectator, a witness to the story, one who later recounts it again and re-presents the experience as a dialectic.

And so when Farida continuously brings her son’s condition into the conversation, I am finally resigned to ask: “What is this condition that your son, Alim, has?”

Farida: Alim was always a very active hyper child. Ever since he was small he was a different child. By the time we took him to Sick Kids (hospital) and all that, I had two, three different doctors with whom I did allergy testing. I thought, maybe, it had something to do with food. They said he didn’t have any allergies. Sick Kids, they told me because he doesn’t have enough physical activity in his life, he is getting anger outbursts and things like that. And then in Grade 2, I started getting complaints from the teachers that “he is getting into fights and arguments” and stuff like that. But then, in between, I had been visiting doctors. In Grade 5 they told me, “Oh, he has got something... yeast problem.” Everybody told me different things. One of the doctors, she recommended that he should be diagnosed for A.D.D. He was diagnosed in Grade 5 (with ADD).

At first I thought I had misheard her. “A.D.D. -- you mean, Attention
Deficit Disorder?” I ask.

Farida: Yes, I always knew ... a mother always knows from the time he (Alim) was born that there was something not quite right. And then I started working with doctors and we (Amyn and I) never were in harmony about how to handle Alim, how to bring him up, about the doctors and everything ... and it got steadily to the point where I have sort of taken over almost looking after Alim ... and coping with Amyn.

We were not working together, like they say when there is a problem in the house, sometimes you come together, sometimes ... yes, you do come together, but sometimes you do fall apart because you cannot decide on how ... you cannot work together or come to an understanding on how to handle it.

She pauses. Amyn remains quiet. A plot is unravelling its mystery and I decide to remain attentive to the voices of the characters.

Farida: There is anger. There is frustration. More so because I think he (Amyn) could have tried a lot harder, and the other thing is he reacted like that
because he didn't understand. I'd been to more counselling, more sessions, of what actually ADD is, how to handle it, or how to understand it better. I don't think he made a hundred percent effort. I remember when Sick Kids was offering those classes, I used to go. He wouldn't come with me. I would read up a lot too. He just wouldn't.

The couple is in turmoil over their son ... they are not even looking at each other as they speak ... they speak of their son as a diseased object ... the samosas are getting cold ... is there some more tea coming my way? I am restless. I decide to force Amyn into the conversation. “Do you have anything to add?”

Amyn: It was just a question of ... from my point of view, we didn't have an agreement on how to, as far as Alim goes, like to raise our kids you know. I didn’t have an agreement on certain things that she would allow him to do ... like you know it was always an excuse ... he is, like you know, “an ADD child” and he is this, and he is that. That excuse, I didn't believe had anything to do with it (Alim’s behaviour). And then, of course, Alim would make a meal out of it. Farida always had an excuse ... ‘Oh, he is an ADD kid’ ... so you know (she) let him get away with anything.

I nod. The way the acronym A.D.D. has crept into this conversation
seems to suggest how easy it has become for parents to remove their focus from their son as "son" and on to a person that needs mending. I decide to prompt further on what Amyn means by his son's behaviour.

**Amyn:** He would get violent, start throwing things around the house and stuff like that.

"And you -- how did you deal with that?" I ask

**Amyn** I used to get very angry.

"Just angry? Any physical violence?"

**Amyn:** No physical violence. Never laid hands on him. I would have liked to, and then I ... I ... used to get very angry. I would shout and wave and all that ... get very angry at everything, verbally, and then Farida would start on me, so I would just shut up and let them ... you know ... (handle it).

"You mean all these years you have withdrawn from the situation? Why?"

**Amyn:** I let it be. I would let Farida do whatever she felt was right. Like you know, I would feel ... like there is no point in both of us ... like I pull my own strings one way and she pulls her strings the other way... and let the children (Alim) divide and conquer (us).

"How would you have handled it?"
"How would you have handled it?"

**Amyn:** I mean, at times, I didn't want him in my house. I felt that bad. It was totally from the behaviour, his behaviour. You know sometimes I couldn't control myself. Anything, but out of my house. I felt that angry. Like ... mothers tend to make more allowances then fathers do, you know.

§§§

The root meaning of the term 'to parent' comes from the Latin word – *Parere* – which means to be the source of something, to originate, 'to be the origin from which something springs.' This seems to imply that within a parental space lies already the seeds and the fruits of *Praxis* – the capacity, the ability, and the natural gifts of moral action to be the “good earth” that Humberto Maturana speaks off. To be the “good earth” is to be already aware that as we live our experiences of life, as we struggle with the limits of our power, we cannot know all the time what consequences our actions will bring upon us and those around us. But, we can be certain that our actions will always be irreversible; we can be certain, also, that our actions will have unpredictable consequences. To act then is always to act with this awareness.

For Hannah Arendt, the place where humans come together to turn ordinary life events into extraordinary occasions deserving of our attention and care is the space between relationships. She extends the Greek word – *Polis* – to describe this place. *Polis* is the appearance of a place of togetherness, of relationships, the in-between space – a place where the heroic in human relationships can be recovered.
As I narrate Amyn and Farida’s conversational encounter, I realize that a parental space is a preeminent political locus where the actions of all words and deeds are announced and Praxis is made known.

“Was it his behaviour that made you feel angry, or was it that you’d expected your son to turn out in a certain way and he didn’t?” I hesitate to ask. The question is forthright and is meant to shift their focus from their son as object and on to them, as parents. Amyn quickly responds and tells me that it is his son’s behaviour. Farida ponders a bit and responds:

Farida: As parents we have very high expectations. I think that comes from the community. We expect too much out of them. We’re not ready to accept the children the way they are. Even from my own background, my father paid a lot of attention to ... he was willing to go any lengths to get his kids educated. He paid such a high emphasis on the kids as far as education was concerned, and I’ve done the same thing for my children. Tameeza still tells me, ‘But mum, when I didn’t get the right report you put me through such (pain).’ I would drill her ... her reports were very important. I wanted her to excel in everything. But I think it came from my background, the way I was brought up. I place the same amount of emphasis.

And then if you go to jamatkhana, you
hear firmans ... excel ... excel ... excel!
which is not to say that is not right. But
then we expect so much. And then there is
always that competitor at jamatkhana, who
says, 'my daughter has done this, my
daughter is going to this school.' I was
like that earlier, not now.

So everywhere we are surrounded by this
excellence and when they don't excel we
are disappointed. In our community there
is too much of this.

I feel like voicing an agreement, but decide not to. Instead, I simply nod.
I am sure all parents have similar ambitions for their children. It isn't as much
that we want our children to excel. It is that often we ignore the signs that
sometimes our children are finding it difficult to cope, that sometimes all they
hope for is someone to comfort them and to tell them that their path will
open in its own time. Easier said than done. My own angry impulses with my
son come haunting and I realize that my innocence is hardly unequivocal.

"Alim is at that crucial age," I ask, looking at Amyn. "How are you
dealing with the situation now?" He chooses to remain silent. Farida chooses to
speak.

Farida: I have accepted it. I
understand it better. Everyday for him is
different, and I try to keep focus. Yes, in
the younger days when I didn't understand
it, I used to get angry. Rage is a big part
of it (in his life). When all the frustration
of it (in his life). When all the frustration at home, at school, with his friends, builds up, they do erupt. That's the only way ... if they don't erupt ... It comes to a boiling point. It has to erupt. I am sure that if we (as family) were better read, or we had better knowledge of it we would have handled it a lot better. But since then, I think I try to keep in focus in my mind that for him life is much worse than it is for us.

In her task for attention to her son's plight, Farida realizes that she has not been that innocent. I am upset with Amyn for his silence. It is so easy to forget that we are greater than the totality of our moods, which do nothing but squeeze our precious life moments. "Say something, anything!" I want to tell him. "Show me 'Who' you are. Announce yourself, however tentatively it may be." I wait. He remains impassive. He'll let his wife speak. Turning to Farida, I ask: "How does Alim cope?"

Farida: Alim doesn't talk. That has been part of the problem. He does not communicate his feelings. It would have been a lot easier if he sat down with us (and said), 'Mum this is how I feel, this is going through my mind.' He will totally not accept that he has got A.D.D. He doesn't want to know about it, doesn't want to discuss it. What goes on in their mind is
very hard to deal with, like even coping with school is a major, major struggle. I mean as parents we say, 'He is lazy, he is not doing it,' but you don't know what is going on in that brain of his.

I think you have got to have a lot of compassion with these children.

§§§

Field Notes & Reflections

"Attend to its wisdom, for in its darkness, rhymes of light are being formed," the voice whispers and reminds.

"Compassion - what is it?" I ask.

"It is a meditation in integrity. It is loving what is incomplete - a broken child, a puzzling marriage, not becoming disabled by shame," the spirit replies.

"Is compassion a feeling?" I inquire.

"Compassion is acted before it is felt, compassion opens the door to a stranger before the knock is heard; compassion cannot be possessed. Compassion is modest and tender; compassion dances to the beat of drums inside your chest; compassion just is."
Compassion \textit{n.} 1. pity inclining one to help or be merciful.

\textit{Compassion for her son cannot be born out of pity. For Farida, the virtue of compassion seems to have been born out of her own experience of suffering.}

\textbf{§§§}

If \textit{Parere}, as a parenting act is suffused with potentiality, then \textit{Praxis} is what makes the \textit{potentia} within the parental space take its spirit. The deep need to be a parent presupposes all other needs in the quest to act as a parent. But what does it mean 'to act,' especially in a world where action seems to have lost its original meaning? The verb 'to act' traces its roots to antiquity through two Greek verbs – \textit{archein}, which means 'to begin, to lead', and \textit{prattein}, which means 'to pass through,' 'to achieve', 'to finish.' The verb also traces its roots to two Latin verbs – \textit{agere}, 'to set into motion', and \textit{gerere}, 'to bear.' 

\textit{Praxis} in parenting, hence, contains both a beginning of a journey, the struggles, and the bearing of results. It involves leading, but also finishing. It implies a network of relationships of people speaking and acting together. It also bears fruit and helps bring forth the best of the virtues out of the relationships that struggle through the journey together. \textit{Praxis} and \textit{Parere} require a meditation in gentle, steady, and attentive repetition of intimacy and compassion.

\textbf{§§§}

"Tell me more about your son's rage that you mentioned before," I inquire.

\textbf{Farida:} Oh, he would just pick up anything, and his language would become
anything, and his language would become abusive. He will use the 'F' language at us, or at Tameeza.

**Amyn:** Usually at Farida, not me ... (quickly interjects)

"You mean he takes out his anger on you?" I ask Farida.

**Farida:** Not so directly, but sometimes he'd say, "Shut up" or "Fuck-off," or he'd get angry. He used to pick up things and throw them. I wouldn't say at me directly. Once when he had rage, he was so angry ... it was bad ... and he picked up a knife. Then he started banging the knife on things and walked around, (banging it) on the kitchen counter ... maybe to scare me. But he didn't try and hit me with the knife. Then he ran outside and went to the garage where there was big saw. He came into the bedroom and he started to ... not at me ... but he was going on the bed. He was getting angrier and was banging the saw on the bed. Amyn was out.

"What did you do?"

**Farida:** I started praying. I tried to stay calm. He kept on banging the saw on
stay calm. He kept on banging the saw on
the bed. If the saw had hit me, I don't
know, I guess I would have been helpless.

“How do you cope?” I ask, clearly unsettled by her recountings. Amyn’s
interest has perked up at his wife’s disclosure about their son’s behaviour.
There is almost a satisfaction in his look, one of: “I told you so.”

Amyn: You can’t cope. I’ve warned
Farida a few times that today it is verbal.
Tomorrow, I am not there and he is big,
and he could always beat you up and even
your life could be at risk.

“And yet just when your voice is needed in this relationship, you choose
to remain silent,” I want to tell him. Instead, I focus my eyes upon him and
remain silent. Amyn explains himself further.

Amyn: There is nothing I can do. You
just shut down.

“Shut-down? Why?” I ask. He seems to be trapped inside his metaphors.
To make sense of the world using metaphors is one thing, but, to live the world
trapped inside metaphors is quite another.

Amyn: The reason is very simple. We
don’t agree on how to handle it so there is
no point in arguing about the same thing
everyday. Farida handles everything,
whatever she thinks is the best, and that’s
Farida: There is no relationship (between Amyn and Alim). There is no father-son relationship. The coping has come to ... he stays out of it and I handle it. That's the way we have coped.

Then for the first time Farida turns towards Amyn and begins to address him directly.

Farida: The thing is that to understand your son better, first you have to get full information. You must be willing to spend a lot of time doing research. What is this thing (ADHD)? What he suffers? What is his pain? What are his concerns? and then you have to be there to support him. First of all you have to build up his self-esteem.

She says this in a voice seldom used so far: trembling, almost with genuine sympathy. Amyn listens. I notice that he wants to say something, but then resigns himself into silence. Farida, at this moment, has no desire to let her husband speak and continues:

Farida: You've got to understand that situation, first have some compassion
for it. If you don’t have understanding you’re going to have anger for it. And then you’ve got to sit down and talk to him. For me also it’s hard to sit down, but I try and catch the times he is with me, for example when he is in the car. That’s when he can’t say, “I’m going to my room.” I am there if there is a situation with the teachers. I make them aware. I say, “I know that you’re having difficulty with Alim, but this is what he is suffering from. Please see him from that point of view.”

And then you’ve got to encourage the child, say something important. There are days when I’m angry, I do lose it too. But there are days I do make a point and say, “Alim, I love you,” and I give him a hug.

To know of an action in a story is not only to know more about the action, but to know the “Who” of that action – it is to make available and reveal to the interlocutors themselves their own relation to their actions. Praxis “is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act.” Yet, Praxis has another compelling desire and that is to condense exemplary moments towards one paramount virtue – the virtue of practical wisdom or Phronesis. This single virtue acts to remind the actors that the practical wisdom concerned with acts of Praxis has as its purpose actions that are admirable, just,
and good for humans.

What do characters in a story give us? They give us Ethos – the character of their Spirit, and by virtue of ethos they reveal Character as virtue itself. But it is by virtue of their Praxis that characters in a story reveal their disposition towards the virtues.

I spend the remainder of my afternoon between Kristeva, Arendt, and Gadamer until my daughter asks “What’s for dinner, dad?”

§§§

The ordinariness of Farida’s impassioned plea suddenly offers the conversation the clarity of a point of view that can only be felt as an exuberance. I cannot believe the turn of events. The kitchen table conversation has suddenly become an animated interlocution between husband and wife seeking relief through the gesture of love. The object of their concern is not just their son, but their own personal relationship. In the personal realm of two tired lovers, the woman is making the case for the lost image of love itself.

I recall a writer’s line somewhere that when we lose our images, we lose our dreams and our gods. We lose both what we worship and the direction in which we pray.

Amyn remains unresponsive to Farida.

“Wake up! Why are you asleep?” Sheroo’s voice intrudes to remind me of the inner poisons that lower our awareness. How can it be that one partner offers such clarity and the other an absence of the shapeliness of things? Is the descent so deep that we become ignorant to the world dying around us? The woman rises to save the world. The man? ... I cannot finish the thought. All I can do is ask the right questions.
"As a family script, if we are to write the story in the future, how are you, seeing it?" I ask Amyn.

Amyn: At the moment I cannot visualize this. As I said I don't know how things will unfold as far as Alim is concerned. Probably that will have a major influence on how things will turn out in the future.

"But will you be the co-author of the script?"

Amyn: I cannot say that I could be the one who is directing the behaviour or whatever. In fact, I don't think I even can. It all depends on Alim how everything turns out.

"So the entire future script is dependent upon this father-son relationship that's not working, and yet there is silence on your part?" I ask, mindful of my place in this conversation.

Amyn: There is nothing I can do. So I've left it up to to Farida ... and when Alim is twenty-five years old and she will still continue giving him an allowance, and he will still be at home ...

Farida: But you cannot think like that! You've got to think the child in a positive way. People change, people
Amyn: I don’t know. Can you guarantee me?

Farida: Amyn, why not? Why can’t you see that things will get better. If you think he’ll still be around ... your thoughts will direct him to act like that. You’ve got to keep talking to him and giving him that feedback ... as a father!

Amyn: But did you see his results (report card)?

Farida: I don’t care about his results! (raising her voice). What I’m talking about is how do you see Alim in the future? You can’t just say, ‘OK, I’m not going to do anything’ ... you have to ... this is what parents are for, to guide the children. How much of that are you giving? Then, of course, if there is no guidance he will be like that. But you can make a stand today and say: ‘I’m going to make the difference in my child. I am going to find out what this condition is and make a difference ... make it better.’ You can’t just sit back and say: ‘He is going to be like that ten years down the road!’ He can actually be anything ten years down the road!
God never brings a child like that ... there are reasons why these difficulties come to you ... to learn different kinds of lessons in how to cope with anger, how to have compassion. And I think ... I do think that Alim in some ways is a grace. If he wasn't my child perhaps my relationship or my spiritual life may not be where it is.

Many times in the earlier years I did question ... why? ... why have I had this kind of child in my life? Now I don't question that. I don't resent that. I am willing to work and even if takes sacrifices on my part, I'll always be there for him.

**Sacrifice n.** 1. doing of an act to propitiate a god; presenting a gift, slaughter of a victim; giving up of something for the sake of something else, the loss so entailed.

*Like a woman anchored in an impotent tangle with her lover; like a mother stained by the emptiness of kinship; like a Sati without the purpose of a Shiva – Farida takes an oath of Sacrifice. The victor is the virtue of Motherhood; the victim, the virtue of Woman.*

**Sacrifice v.** 2. give up prized possession or devote oneself to ...

*“Unto me a child is born,” Farida seems to say, “and in his body and in is one life lies my own story – the story of fertility, of labouring, of the blessing of life, and of the endurance of the deeds of Mother. No prized possessions can equal this gift – not even you, my husband!”*
As I write, Hannah Arendt dwells in my thoughts. Her defence of life, her loud hymns to the uniqueness of each of our births is ultimately “(T)he miracle that saves the world.” She then goes on to say: “It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their ‘glad tidings’: ‘A child has been born unto us.’”

§§§

Field Notes and Reflections

“And what to make of a child born broken?” I ask.

“That child is yet an even greater miracle that saves the world,” Sakina whispers.

“How?”

“The child makes us attend to the purposes and the impulses of our life. We are presented with the mysterious truth of the twoness of everything: The frailty of human life, our fears, anger, and obsessions.

And pressed against that is the voice of eternity extolling our boundlessness: ‘To cope with the first, I give you the capacity to Forgive,’ it says.”
There is no such thing as a small effort towards the good. A woman's awakening during this conversation has shown me how virtues are recovered from acts of small efforts. Yet, I remain troubled by the man, the father, who has made a choice to remain silent. Can there be one final question that can redeem this silence?

I turn to them and ask: "When you started your marriage you must have started with a hope, an image. You would have had a sense of direction. I know that the ship goes off-course along the way. But, I also know that eventually the captains determine that they are off-course and make changes. Do you see yourselves coming back on course? Coming towards the hopes that you started with?" The carefully chosen metaphors are meant to engage their thoughts towards their life as a hopeful narrative.

**Amyn:** Well ... I'm not ... you know ...
I am just taking one day at a time. Some days it is very difficult to imagine what it will be down the road. I guess ... I am at a point when you know ... it is one day at a time. Just hope for the best, that's it.

He offers resignedly and the moment of redemption passes.

**Farida:** I ... I ... I ... see the future (she blurts). I see that there may be difficulties, probably a lot more than I'm coping with now. But, I hope ... one thing I hope for is my health and that I have a few years where I can still make a positive difference in my children's life whether it is Tameeza or Alim. It is going to be difficult and I am prepared to face
that. I will be there for them in whatever capacity it need be. That ... maybe ... maybe five years down the road they may not realize, but one day when they are older ... like all the things my mother was trying to tell me ... at the time it never had that much impact on me, but as years have gone by there are many things she told me that have made a difference, I do remember her teachings. I hope that even if my kids don't see the difference immediately, or maybe not in five years. But ten years down the road, or when Tameeza is forty, fifty, she will remember "who my parents were."

Mother n. 1. a woman in relation to a child or children she has given birth.

And much more than that, she is the catalyst that awakens us and in a moment of Care, fills us with the sight of the world we have come into; mother is the earth we fall down on and not feel pain. She is the love that restores the world over and over, bringing blessings of love through her wounds of love.

Mother v. 1. give birth to; be the mother of. 2. protect as a mother. 3. give rise to; be the source of.

She is Queen Isis that forever searches for the fragrance of her lover's pieces — in her child, her husband, her labours, and in her soul; she is the mother that murmurs in the silence of her reveries: "Is my son happy now?" "Is my child warm enough?" "Does she have enough to eat?"
Praxis is the condition of action that reveals the human agent from his or her daily activities. Narrative is the impulse that extracts the praxis and holds the agent accountable to the question: "Who Are You?" Praxis ignites relationships and leaves behind no object – no thing, only deeds of action and speech. The Arendtian regret is: It is the human condition of contemporary times where Poiesis has replaced Praxis and where grand and cold-hearted narratives have squeezed and even obliterated everyday human stories. In this we find ourselves unable to recover satisfactory meanings of our world. We find ourselves unable to unshackle the ‘Who’ from the grand narratives that hold us hostage. We are, in effect, in a struggle to reknow our character, our ethos, and make it once again the supreme story-teller and the revealer of the virtues.

Graciously I accept this conversation as having led me into the hermeneutics of Praxis and Phronesis: "What is it to be a parent? What is it to suffer the consequences of parenting? Who is the ‘Who’ in the daily affairs of raising children? Who is the "Who" in the relationships of family?" Another writer writes it as follows:

"The power of phronesis requires the willingness to make the ethical ground of one’s actions subject to examination. True confidence requires the courage to face and deal with the possibility of deep failure, that is, the courage to engage the aporia ... This engagement requires courage because one’s self-understanding and identity
are bound up with one’s actions.”

**Father n.** 1. a man in relation to a child or children from his fertilization of an ovum. 2. any male animal in relation to its offspring. 3. an originator, designer, or early leader. 4. a venerable person.

Is that ‘who’ ‘father’ is? When a word fails us, we revert to the concept. When the concept fails us, we revert to the metaphor. And when the metaphor fails us, we become numb.

I say, that Father is the layer of our paths; the unwinder of tiny knots that slow our daily progress; the changer of diapers and the flier of kites on a quiet beach. Father is the other half of a glass half empty; father is the earth by which we stand up when we have fallen. Father is the man the boy once was — a story-teller, a prankster, a dreamer; father is the character that makes a home which keeps the rain out and the laughter in. Father is ...

“Sheroo will like that,” Sakina whispers.

“You mean ‘Who is Maa and who is Baap?’” I reply.

“Of course, silly,” she giggles.
“Burnt by fire”


“Areh, saa’la! If you don’t pass, then everyone will call you dhuboo. Is that what you want to be called for the rest of your life? Dhuboo jo duh!” my mother snapped, her otherwise sprightly face turning woeful. I am only thirteen. “Areh, saa’la” is normally a harmless exclamation of the Gujarati and Kutchi people of India. In a tame way it could mean, ‘Why, you!’ but I have heard it also to mean many other things. And dhuboo? this one is an entirely different story.

It is the week of final school exams and the entire Indian Ismaili community nestled in the lazy and timeworn East African town of Mombasa is hanging on the edge of a social precipice, a moment of kar-aar-mar, do-or-die, and it matters not that their children are sixteen, twelve, or even eight years old. This is not about age. It is about honour. Not the kid’s honour, of course, but of the family. Nothing was more fearsome than to be pointed out as the parents of such-and-such dhuboo. And so mothers more often than fathers would vigilantly stay awake with their children until 1 am, 2 am, and even whole nights, making sure that the poor son or daughter didn’t fall asleep and miss out on memorizing some obscure facts about some obscure white man in some obscure foreign country. Fathers, of course, being the providers, needed the sleep and moreover, their role in the event usually would come later.
Only the very hooshyar, the very brave or smart kids dared to go to bed early, for then there would be no alibi in case of a failed grade. Every kid who was close to the “dhuboo” category needed an alibi. Others did it just in case the memory failed or the gods were not in favour that day.

“But you know, by-god, I was up akhee (whole) night before the exam. You know I kept memorizing on and on and on ... look, I can say it even now, mummy ... ‘Doctor Livingstone lived in Ujiji, near Lake Tanganyika, and died in the year ...’ Were you not in your room, awake? I heard the tasbih (prayer beads) and the holy words. I don’t know why I failed,” the one with the alibi would plead to the mother.

If you had to plead, then better first with the mother, then grandparents, and then, and only as a last resort the father. You see, at that time fathers were a little too quick on the draw with their hands and would carry sotees (wooden canes) for just such an occasion.

“You know, he completely napassed his exam, a fail, that’s what he got. Areh, beechara parents, how terrible they must feel, nahn?” the community winds often howled, like an old testament plague singling out those who were of the dhuboo tribe. “Look at his cousin, Latif, wa’llah? He always comes number one, nahn, and even Jamil came in the first ten. Areh, their families must be so proud,” the same winds would whisper in support of the non-dhuboo tribe. ‘Areh ’ and ’Nahn’ at the two ends of a sentence were a linguistic equivalent of pressing a point, like saying: “Why, he always succeeds, No?”

Dhuboo, the most ominous word in an Indian Ismaili kid’s lexicon at the time. And dhuboo jo duh was the ultimate affliction for an Ismaili kid: ‘the head honcho of all dhubools.’ To be called that would be tantamount to becoming a huhjaam, a barber, and cutting people’s hair and shaving beards for the rest of one’s life. Khalas, finished, branded! Dhuboo, officially meant, ‘dumb’, or one who couldn’t hack it in school, or for that matter in any space where some...
form of intelligence was in order. Unofficially, I am sure it meant 'becoming a barber.' Mind you, being hujaam was an honourable profession during the days of my grandfather and before. I mean, people's hair and beards always grew and someone had to cut them. That's steady money, even better than a civil service puhaar (salary) and no 'colonizer' to watch over you to boot. But, not any more. Now, it was all about becoming a somebody from vilayat (a foreign place), the place where 'modern' people came from - a barrister from none other than Cambridge, or a daaktar from London. There was also Amreeka, where names like MIT, Harvard, and Yale drew pangs of envy towards those fortunate ones who had made it there. Times had changed.

"You are Ismaili! You know what that means, nahn? Well? do you?" was my mother's traditional line of attack and it felt like I was being cornered for the final ambush. She had this knack for rummaging inside a young boy's brain every now and then, digging and shoveling, looking for some place to plant the 'being Ismaili seed.' "Your wadho bha (older brother) has worried us enough. From you, we want no worries, no veeyadhi, you understand?" Older brothers or sisters always took the brunt of the mother's agony.

Kutchi people, sometimes had the most ominous metaphor for expressing a 'worried' sentiment. They used the word 'baaree' which literally meant, 'burnt by fire.' You knew that if this word was used by your mother in any combination in a sentence, then it was serious. 'You baaree my heart,' 'baaree my spirit,' 'baaree my liver,' the combinations were endless and ruthless. Often, my poor mother's renditions would begin at the breakfast table, continue through lunch time, snack time, dinner time, and then, as if to make sure that I had not missed on the meaning, tactfully whispered as she tightly tucked the mosquito net along the edges of my bed and said good night.

"Education and hard work is what matters these days, hahn, you see? ... every minoot (minute) counts, for once here then it's gone, never to come
back," she would continue the following morning, on cue as if the previous night’s sleep had just been a momentary break in an ongoing lecture. “And sports, hahn, don’t forget sports. Kasrat (exercise) for your muscles, prayers for the atman (soul), and your education for the akal (mind). That’s what matters for Ismailis. You don’t have the three, you are like dhoor, like sand. That’s why our school crest says - ‘Progress is Life’ - don’t you see beta, we have to progress.”

Ismaili children were fortunate to have a modern school in Mombasa, run by a madly competent or competently mad ‘Brit’ expatriate dictator. The school crest, showing a torch and a book was attached to every white shirt, which with the khaki shorts, white socks, and black shoes made the boys into proper grammar school candidates. Spot checks during morning assembly would have Mister Crockery, the high school principal, out on a caning spree if even one white shirt was missing the green and red emblem of modernity. First, progress had to be stamped on your clothes, then it had to be learned, and then, if all else failed, boodhio (Old Man), as Crockery was unadoringly called would make sure it was caned into our senses through our skins. Bless his soul, for without this man’s intervention we would all be huhjaams today.

“Did your grandfathers cross such a big ocean and come to Africa so that their children would have to go back and become farmers in India?” my mother would press on for several days after the exam results had come out. “We are lucky to be here. Look at all your bapa’s (grandfather’s) cousins who decided not to come over. Look where they are now!” I, of course, hadn’t a clue as to what the family on the other side of the ocean did, or even looked like, and I suspected, neither did my mother. Indian mothers, like all mothers, simply have a whole repertoire of make-you-feel-guilty lines. My mother, who had crafted her style from her mother, a woman of shamanic proportions whom we called Baa, always had to bring the old country into the picture and all
those who hadn't found the courage to take the va'han or steamer ship for whatever reasons. I could never muster enough courage to tell her that just because I got fifty percent in maths, the whole family didn't have to return to India. I mean that's ridiculous. Now that would be a dhuboo thing to do, wouldn't it?

The right tack during these moments of my mother's almost missionary-like lectures was to pretend to listen, deflect any eye contact, and never answer back, otherwise, my father would prematurely enter the event and then by-god, there would be trouble. It was also just not an Indian thing to do, answering back to your mother. Yet, I remember feeling that her words carried a meaning beyond my adolescent years. I knew inside of my youthful heart that the words "Ismaili," "progress," and "dhuboo" were somehow linked to something from the past. And so, I usually listened to my beautiful and kind mother who was always 'burnt by fire' when my exam results came out.

§§§
...If it is that my biographical narrative makes sense to me as a moral unity, it is also because my human actions make sense to me as being moral. And by human actions I do not mean an individualized form of occurrence that has been reduced to its analytical unit, like "a human action" void of any context. Action always seems to have two contexts with which it seems to identify itself. The first is my action's relationship to my intentions which have emerged causally and temporally out of a setting or settings which is the history, and the traditional and cultural stories I am situated in: After all, I was born into a family who also happened to be already Ismailis, who also happened to be already Indians, who also happened to already have travelled out of India at the end of the nineteenth century, and who also happened to be already caught up in African nationalism that had also emerged out of the history my ancestors walked into and even co-created. I was also born into all the cultural and social attributes that the stories carried, and I was also born into various plots already in place.

Hence, my intentions, whether I know it or not, are bound in complex ways into this first context such that I choose actions out of many possible ones available to me in relation to the setting and make it my story within a greater historical story.

The second context in which my actions relate to my intentions is the role or roles I am situated in, not only in their
historical sense, but also in the short-term relational sense. Hence, I am born a younger son into a family of already three; I am married and, hence, a partner to someone; I have two children, hence I am a father; I have students, hence I am a teacher to someone, etc. etc. The short take of all this is that my actions are rarely born without intentions that emerge out of one or both of these contexts.

The concept of intelligibility of my narrative, thus, comes also from the way my actions make sense to me with respect to my intentions, goals, motives, and desires. But, more than their making sense to me as agent or author, they can be called intelligible when they also make sense to those I am in relation with within the two contexts mentioned above. In other words, I call my narrative intelligible when I can put my actions under the examination of other characters and where I can become accountable to them and their plots. It's this sense of accountability for my actions that makes Praxis such a profound paradigm by which to engage modern day aporias.

I now realize that good action as an end in itself is action that is undertaken in order that it is just, admirable and good for humans. For such action is always potentially available for examination, not only of my own biographical project, but also of the relationships I am involved in, both personal and universal. Praxis is my accomplice toward creating a moral narrative, for just as I am engaged in the project: “Who am I to be?” I cannot do it without also being engaged in the project: “Who are we to be?” It is Praxis that helps me extract the “who” out of my personal and historical narrative and it is my narrative that ultimately survives my death and reveals my praxis to the world, hopefully as a compendium of exemplary deeds worthy of remembrance.
In all this I must bear in mind that “we are never more than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please ... We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making.”27 And if I care to reflect on this, my actions are engaged in a circular kind of thoughtful concern for the moral eloquence of my narrative, which is itself engaged in a thoughtful concern of my history. It is not difficult now for me to see that the personal telos that is implicit in my own story is in complex ways tied to the telos of the tradition or the stories I am born into.

And so before I can ask the question: “What am I to do? What am I to become?” I must have asked and perhaps even answered a prior question: “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”28

What then is Praxis? what then are the virtues in a narrative seeking a moral unity? and, ultimately, what is tradition over time? A living tradition engages in inter-generational stories precisely because they encompass arguments about Praxis and its deeds across generations, leaving behind a heritage of understanding. In this the youthful voices of those who are yet to come into the fore-front of this historical narrative of the journeying Indian Ismailis can also become a setting from which I can learn about “who” I am to be...
THE JOURNEY IS FOR TWO
(a ginan and a story)

Eji parem patah raja man-sudh,
tir ghar radea de rani.

raja rani betha mohol man
raj bari paradhan panc vir.
hukam aveo re vira gur tano,
have kem revay.

hukam aveo jan be tano,
trija kem levay.

balak podhareo satie parane
calea dev ne duar

aradh mejale rae ji avea,
tiyan harani dhavarave bal.

balak dekhine bai ne pano cadio,
tene tajia piran.

hukam avio vira gur tano,
have kem revay.

hukam avio jan be tano
ek thi kem jevay.

cadav vichavi bandhi ganthadi,
lae calea dev ne duar
sona niun diviun age jagmage,
betha tribhovar sam.

utha readea de rani amia pio,
bhore dhavaravo bal.

pir samas gaji bolea,
sanbhala gat jamat.

(Ginan by Ismaili Pir, Shams al Din sung to me by Sheroo)¹

§§§

In the city called Love, there lived a King who thought he knew what the world was all about. And so days and nights were spent trying to understand the wrongs and rights of his subjects and land, and soon the city came to be his only reason – a mysterious mission. His wife of a while and Queen, on the other hand, thought all this was far too trivial and bland: “I’d rather be the Queen,” she said, “of the palace where I am daily seen.”

Now, it’s one thing to have a Queen and a King, and quite another to have a ruler. For in this city called Love, the task of power and reign lay in the hands of a virtuous gang of five Ministers, and rule they did with might and insight rarely seen.

One day to the King and Queen came a summons from a Guide that a journey had to be taken to a place afar. The invitation was only for two, and so “now what to do with our little child,” said the Queen, “for he is the third?” But the summons was only for two, and in sorrow
and pain the child was put to sleep, and towards the abode afar both King and Queen made their way.

The summons was only for two and the third had to stay.

Midway, a strange sight of deer suckling her fawn drew King and Queen to stop and stare, and the Queen reminded of her child left sleeping in the cradle, felt her breast heavy with milk. “I must stay,” she said to her husband King, “I cannot carry on, for I yearn the child and the sight of deer and fawn give me solace to stay here all alone.” With that the queen’s breath weakened and she sat and rested, and soon she dozed into a gaze forlorn.

But the summons had come from the Guide, and the summons had been for two, and said the King in worried tone, “I am only one, now how can I go when both were asked to come?” And in a knot he tied a sheet of cloth and picked the Queen and made the journey as two, for the Guide had summoned two.

Soon it was that the castle and palace of afar came into view and there He sat, this Ruler of Rulers, amidst Lamps of glittering gold.

“Oh Master of three worlds, how are we to see thee?” cried the King of the City of Love, for we started as two, but one has dozed into a gaze forlorn.

“Arise, Queen of the City of Love and drink the nectar of this place and Me, for you are the one who makes the two whole and by which I am to be seen. The journey is for two and two are needed to take the task on hand.”

“And so the story goes,” says the man in luminous night, “and hear it well, for it tells of a story inside a story and needs both reason and soul. Come, my community, my confreres, come and sing this tale with me, sing this song that Shams the Guide has invoked, and rejoice!”
Symbols used in the Ginan by the Pir:

King
Queen
City
Child
Five Ministers
Guide
Summons
Deer
Fawn
Ruler of Rulers
Lamps of glittering gold
Nectar

Awareness/Mind
Heart
Body
Worldly desires in which the heart is enmeshed
Five Ismaili Virtues: Truth, Contentment, Forebearance, Remembrance, Faith
The Ismaili Pir, Shams.
Spiritual calling
The World
Worldly attractions
Divine Presence -- Light of the Imam
Spiritual ambience
Divine Union
"Pirbhai's Blessings"

A Vahan crossing the Indian Ocean - Circa 1895

The suffocating gasp of the baby sleeping next to its mother went hardly noticed, except perhaps by young Pirbhai who thought nothing of it and closed his eyes. It was still dark. The winds that had filled the main sail during the night had died down and a strange quiet had settled on the boat. Pirbhai liked it that way. Faintly, from the deck below, he heard the murmur of the crew getting on with their early morning ablutions and then he fell once again into deep sleep, dreaming that he was falling into the luminous face of the full moon.

Then in his dreams he heard screams, at first muffled and distant, then louder and annoying, and Pirbhai was jolted awake by a woman's wailing. He saw his mother curled up at the edges of the slimy deck, his baby brother wrapped in a bundle held tight at her breast. "Kamal is not breathing! ... my baby is not breathing!" she was screaming. The image of his mother's terror-stricken face under the bleaching force of the morning sun scared him. He cried for his father who was trying to pry the bundle from his mother's arms.

"Give him to me, bai, give Kamal to me," his father pleaded, but his mother was gripped by shock and clutched tighter at the soft blanket. Pirbhai ran towards his father and was nearly thrown off balance by the Kutchi captain's hurried stride. The mother's terror had spread all across the tiny vessel, and other khoja families had begun to gather around.

"Move, move, everybody move," the Kutchi captain shouted at no one in particular. "Areh, Hassanbhai, what's the matter? what's the problem?"
"Babu, babu neh khnai thai ghiuhn cheh! The baby...something...something is the matter with our baby," Hassan replied, his voice betraying alarm.

"Janbai, please let me have the baby," the captain commanded gently. At first the mother didn't move. Then, stirred by the commotion around her and the unfamiliar voice in front of her, she slowly released the motionless bundle into the arms of the captain who carefully gave it to Hassanbhai. She looked at her husband's face which couldn't mask the anguish and Janbai knew that her baby was dead.

The images of his strong father darkened by the brown of sun-burnt skin cuddling the bundle; the terror-stricken eyes of his mother swaying under the force of sudden sorrow; the ballooning sail and creaking sounds of the careworn boat; and the captain's resolute orders to his crew to make preparations for the dead body slowly entered the young boy's memory. He had begun to quietly sob. Pirbhai was only seven. The unfolding drama on this small sail boat on its long journey from Porbander, in India, to Dar-es-Salaam on the coast of German East Africa would only make sense to him six years later. But by then he would have become a young man of small means. For now the sense of sorrow that had descended upon the voyagers reminded him of the face of fifteen month old Kamal, who only yesterday had laughed at his older brother's antics.

"Look Kamal, beh...eh...eh! Beh...eh...eh! - that's a goat. Kaal kaal kaal! ... that's a crow," Pirbhai mimicked and Kamal waved his arms in glee.

Janbai was busy grinding millet on the grindstone to make the evening's batch of rohtlas. This had become Pirbhai's routine for the past three weeks - looking after his little brother whilst his mother prepared the meal. The heavy stone ghuntoori (grindstone) and the sigdri (charcoal-brazier) his father had decided to take with them had proved useful for other families as well, and Pirbhai was proud of the fact that his father had insisted that the heavy apparatus be taken on board even when the captain had refused at first. Then, last night, before putting Kamal to sleep, his mother had felt the forehead of his baby brother and had noticed a slight
fever. "Pirbhai, go get me quinine water from Hirabai." He had watched his mother give the sour medicine to his restless brother who had squirmed and spitted half of it out. Pirbhai had laughed.

"Maa, he'll be fine, nahn?"

"Of course. Now you go to sleep."

Pirbhai was suddenly awakened from his reveries by the captain's pleading voice. "Hassanbhai, please, you must listen to me. It's not wise to keep the child's body on the boat. The sun is too hot, and soon it will begin to...," the Kutchi captain was explaining when Janbai screamed from the corner of the boat. "No...no...my baby will come with me to Africa," she moaned and then begged.

"Hassanbhai, Africa is another two weeks. Please make Janbai understand, nahn? It's not possible, not possible."

"How can I tell her? Our little jewel is gone," Hassan muttered. He walked towards his wife and sat next to her. And remained silent.

In one corner of the deck, where they bedded every night, Pirbhai noticed little Kamal's body, now covered with a soft cotton cloth to keep it cool from the harsh afternoon sun. He could not understand what the captain was telling his father, or why his mother was insisting about taking little Kamal to Africa. Of course his baby brother was coming to Africa. They were all going to Africa.
In an Indian Fusion Café – Yonge Street, Toronto.

The restaurant, when I arrive, is in fact “sexy” as the two young women had told me, but also empty inspite of the flurry of activity on the streets, and I make plans with the young Indian proprietor to provide a quiet corner. I explain why, which he finds exciting, and then tell him to furnish us with some fresh bhajias and chai once the women show up. “Keep it coming,” I tell him, “but cap it at twenty-five dollars, O.K.?” and he wobbles his head, pleased and appreciative at the same time.

“Sure he’s my grandfather,” Nafiza says equably. “But, I have to admit I don’t know him well.”

I have asked the two young women to describe their relationships with their grandparents.

“I don’t understand?” I reply, clearly not pleased with her response.

“Well, I couldn’t sit here and have chai (tea) with him. I think I’d feel uncomfortable. I’d get up, or ... like I’d want to turn the TV on. When I see him in jamatkhana it’s just, ‘Ya Ali Madat ... blah, blah, blah.’ It’s just very small talk. We greet each other and then just walk away. I kind of don’t know what to think. It’s always been like that for so many years.”

I say nothing. Her self-assured manner, her eloquent command of the English language, and her forthright responses have seduced me into silence. In her mid-twenties, Nafiza reminds me of a mature woman whose grip upon the affairs of her world appear uncannily consummate. The other one, Shaireen, nods
her head in approval at what Nafiza is saying. "I think you need a lot of patience with them," she says, almost diffidently.

Nafiza, who is more outspoken of the two, continues: "Both my paternal grandparents lived in England (after they left Uganda) and passed away, so I didn’t have much of a relationship with them. My maternal grandmother as well died and my relationship with my living grandfather is much more formal. He gets really happy to see me, but we don’t go into much conversation beyond that."

"How old is he?" I ask

"He is in his eighties. But I think he is at that stage where he is kind of ready to go, and he is lonely and lives on his own ... refuses to live with my family, or my aunt, or anyone else. We don’t have room in my house, although we are willing to figure something out. He is really stubborn and kind of independent and then he complains that he is all by himself and ‘I am ready to die,’ and all this kind of stuff."

"And what about your parents? I mean are they close to their parents?" I ask both of them.

"Mum’s not close to her parents. I don’t think either my mum or dad are close to their parents," says Shaireen. "Mum’s mum lives about five minutes away...they don’t spend that much time together ... mum doesn’t visit them that often and dad doesn’t experience that often with his parents (who are in Toronto) either."

I look towards Nafiza.

"I think being close, it’s about connection. My mum’s not really close to my grandfather, her own dad. I don’t know what their connection is all about – my mum doesn’t visit him very often, and that makes me
mad!” she says, her voice breaking. “My mother won’t even wake up on Sunday morning and go see bapa, whereas my dad will. That’s not even his real dad. At times that angers me that she doesn’t take much of an active role.”

By now it is becoming clear that neither of the two young women have a meaningful relationship with their parents nor their grandparents. They have tried, they seem to be telling me, but their parents, their mothers especially, have not made it easier. It’s been a struggle. And then being unable to converse at any great length in Kutchi or Gujarati is of no help either. And the grandparents cannot speak English. Mostly I get the feeling that these two women’s grandparents have moved into the background, as if side-lined characters who have very little to offer to the biographical narratives of their children and grandchildren.

I decide to remind the women of their place in an ongoing story of events from India, to Africa, and then the exodus out of East Africa to Canada. Surely their roots must matter to them? Nafiza laughs. She casts a languid eye towards Shaireen.

“We are so rooted here,” she says simply. “I think history in general ... like we are more interested in the future.” She reaches towards the plate of fried lentil bhajias that the proprietor has placed on our table.

“What does the Internet have to hold? What are we going to be able to do with technology? that’s what matters to me,” she says with a mouthful. “We are consumed by the future. I am, that I don’t really think about history. I think a lot of young people are like that. Canadians are not interested in their own history,
Canadian Ismailis are in turn not interested in their Canadian Ismaili history.”

I recoil in my seat, my discomfort apparent to both of them. I am afraid she may be right. Who was it that had said that ‘history is dead’ or that we have come to the ‘end of history’? I search for the name in my memory, but draw a blank.¹ It seems true that our furthest gaze backwards seems to stop to the events of yesterday, and our gaze forward goes no further than tomorrow. But history is not dead, I feel like telling them. It has become more immediate. Our stories have become ours for the first time, and the fleeting and fast-paced sequence of time of our modern narratives seems to have ambushed us. History isn’t dead – it just needs more attention. I look for an after-thought from Nafiza. None is forth-coming.

“And you? Are you interested in your roots?” I turn towards Shaireen.

She shrugs and says simply, “No.”

§§§

In her book, *The Special Mission of Grandparents*, C. Margaret Hall argues that many grandparents do grandparenting more or less unconsciously or automatically.² Grandparenting means that grandparents must not only live fully for themselves, but also move towards “the most meaningful and constructive family and community well-being possible.” And, this means creating conditions in the lives of their children and grandchildren where hard-earned wisdom gets passed along. Grandparents need to cultivate a questioning awareness about the past, both in the sense of recounting traditional community narratives, but also the experiences and actions that they themselves or their parents once undertook.
as characters in the family’s history. This means that opportunities to spend time with their grandchildren must not be merely symbolic socializing events, but be used as moments where historical awareness and future orientations are shared, celebrated, and if possible, even argued. This last contribution requires that grandparents become conscious of the part they can play in “generativity” — “the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation.”

In this sense, the work of grandparents is a strategy of cultural gift giving — offering of legacies of the self, both past and present. It is ultimately also an act of heroism. And, in a modern world where the traditional notion of the virtue of heroism has perhaps lost its connections to the word, Praxis, such gift-giving puts the grandparenting act itself as an act of Praxis.

What can stories of our grandparents offer us? I am reminded of one writer who writes:

"Who knows what form the forward momentum of life will take in the time ahead or what use it will make of our anguished searching? The most that any of us can seem to do is to fashion something — an object, or ourselves -- and drop it into the confusion, making an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force." "

Grandparents’ stories are like offerings that can only be dropped into the
confusion of the life-force of the family and the community, and ultimately the world. The full measure of their recounted deeds will be revealed much later.

§§§

Field Notes and Reflections

"What about the story of the family on the boat?" the voice asks.

"Later. First, I have to tell you what the young men I spoke with said about their grandparents."

"No! First the story, Munir bhai," the little Spirit implores.

The Va'han, the Grindstone, and the Sea.

Hassan's family had started with eight in all. Now they were seven. The grieving mother could not turn away from the enduring torment of her loss and remained crouched in a corner, every now and then letting out screams. She wanted to go back to her village, she bemoaned. She wanted to die, she said. Hirabai was by her side as were other mothers and grandmothers of the voyaging families. Janbai
took no notice of their compassion. She was tramping in her own dark world, her own night of nightmares, unable to shed the image of her boy's laughter, his smell - unable to find the light that would save her. In another corner, not too far from where the women were gathered, a small congregation of men had surrounded the crest-fallen father.

"God's command is God's command. We have no say against it. We have to go," Mitha-Panju offered, to placate Hassanbhai. "The baby's journey was over. Just pray now, for his atman (soul)." Then everyone turned quiet again as they remembered the extent of the loss.

"What is written only He knows, nahn? He gives and He takes. Who are we, mortals, to question His will?" said the Kutchi captain, who had now joined the grieving men, and was increasingly getting concerned by the ominous turn of events on his boat. The crew had lost their normal zeal and there were grumblings of an ill omen. Many had died on his boat taking this journey before, he thought, but never one so pure, so young. The older ones took the journey not knowing the hardships and their feeble bodies would give up after three weeks at sea. He had since decided to refuse the older ones on to his boat. But he had liked Hassanbhai's family from the moment he had seen them come on board, and now their loss had become his own. Yet he knew that in the morning he would have to do what he dreaded. Hopefully the night would soothe the anguish of Janbai and Hassanbhai. He prayed they would be strong.

By morning the word had spread that preparations were being made for a burial at sea. A strange lull had descended upon the boat. All the families - Hindu, Khoja, and a few Memons, had gathered around the grieving parents. How can water be the final resting place? - the Muslim needs the earth, the Hindu, the fire. They were torn. Young Pirbhai, who couldn't catch on to their whispers, saw the captain mutter something in his father's ear. He saw his father follow the captain towards where his baby brother's body lay, carefully wrapped in a clean oil-cloth. His mother had started wailing again. All the women were crying now. He noticed his father
place the heavy grindstone next to the body and then was surprised when a jute rope was secured between the stone and the wrapped bundle. The first wave of holy incantations had begun, first softly, then with fervour. Pirbhai joined in, tears etching out tiny rivulets down his sun-burnt face. Then he began to sob, loudly, and couldn't really understand why he was so sad. Perhaps, he had never seen his father so sorrowful and weak? Perhaps, he'd never seen his mother in this way before? Or, perhaps, it was the lifeless body of his little brother? He watched the captain, along with some of his crew, and his father and Mitha-Panju carry the body and the grindstone closer to the edge of the boat.

"Let him stay with me, let my baby stay with me," Janbai moaned.

The women tried comforting her, but were themselves overcome by the unfolding scene, and sobbed loudly. Pirbhai saw his father cuddle the wrapped body of his brother and lean closer to the edge of the boat. The incantations and prayers had taken over the boat, drowning the noise of the wind. The next thing he saw was his father drop the bundle from his arms over the edge, at the same time as the crew dropped the grindstone. Pirbhai stood aghast. They were going to Africa, all of them. Now he was not sure anymore. He ran towards the edge and tried to jump and peer over the side, but was too short. He tried again, this time gripping the damp lip of the edge with his small fingers and using his feet to push himself up. He fell down. It was no use. Then he felt a hand heave him up and hold him tightly. It was his father. They both edged a bit forward and Pirbai looked down into the sea.

"Kamal, Kamal," he shouted.

"Kamal is gone," he heard his father say. "Kamal is gone to visit grandfather."
“My paternal grandmother lived with us when I was growing up as long as I can remember, so I think that generation was already part of my life while I was growing up,” Rahim goes on in his calm demeanour. “My grandmother is ninety. I never met my grandfathers on both sides. They passed on before I was born so I had two widowed grandmothers.”

It was nice to be around the kitchen table once again. Hanif, the other young Ismaili man in this conversational pair had willingly offered his house as a meeting place for our encounter. Perhaps they would prefer a quiet restaurant? I had asked, since Hanif still lived with his parents. He had balked at my offer. “How can we talk in a restaurant?” I was glad I had not persisted.

“What’s their place in your life?” I ask Rahim about his grandmothers.

“It’s nice to hear the stories of their life, how they moved. They were born in East Africa, but they tell of stories of their parents moving from India, stories of how communities set up in Africa, how they had difficulties. My grandmother still talks of these things.”

“Do these stories interest you?” I ask.

“It’s interesting to hear how ... like she’d pull out old photos and tell of people who are our extended families. There is a sense of grounding.”

“Grounding to what?”

“Grounding to your family. Grounding to your community in a sense. A sense of history. It gives me a
frame of reference.”

“It’s a bit different for me,” Hanif jumps in. “I mean it’s the same that my surviving grandmother has strong ties to the community, to religion, and tells stories and so forth. But what I am impressed about is how strong she is, how strongly she believes in the faith. She has good ideals ... very honest. She always offers me advice, about everyday life. I guess it reflects on what she went through.”

I decide to prompt further.

“What’s this ‘frame of reference’ you mentioned earlier?” I ask Rahim.

“If you think of yourself like one person in any city or society, it is too large to process your effect and its effect on you. So I think having grandparents and the stories behind you, you can at least frame your thoughts to them. It helps me frame larger thoughts, otherwise it can become quite overwhelming. I think the more historical footing you have, then that frame of reference becomes stronger. I don’t think it becomes weaker.”

For a moment I remain in awe. I haven’t yet heard anyone describe relationships to their past in this way. They are both so fluent in their expressions and the mastery with which Rahim uses the language reminds me of the two women, and yet the two young men have shown unique closeness to their parents and grandparents. I ask Rahim about his professional background and he says he is planning to enter medical school soon.

“A certain aspect of my personality has been derived from them,” adds Hanif. “You have those strong internal moral strengths from your parents and
grandparents that stay there.”

I smile almost relieved.

§§§

There is after all a mind to inherit, to question, and to hold accountable if we pay attention to our stories. This is at the very heart of Arendtian thought: For a true history to become a narrated history two inseparable conditions must exist. First is the presence of a relationship between people. The fate of narrative depends on this, for it is only out of evoked memory of shareable thought between people that memorable events become verbalized as plots. And this reveals the second condition – Speech. Heroic action of someone only becomes heroic after a spectator evokes it from memory and calls it memorable. A recounted story or a re-enacted event gives immortality to the agent in history. It is to the spectator or the listener who follows up on the original act that the burden falls to complete the action by conveying meaning to that action. If there is no-one to tell, then there are no heroes, no foes, no tragedies – only silence and a “danger of oblivion.”

§§§

Immortality of a child entombed at sea

is mine to bear, thrown with tears that

cleanse the morning’s despair;

its tiny soul in my heart grows

heavy as grindstone, it wails for its mother’s

breast, its father’s hopes forgotten.
"Which way should I look?" it laments.
"Look either way," I say, "look either way to
galaxies of glow-worms inside bursting buds
of empty universes; we have arrived
all in a coin's toss by the Gods."

§§§

Thysville, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1960

"Ouvrez la porte! Ouvrez!"
"Don't open, Akbar, don't open," Nuru whispers to her husband.
"It will only make them mad." A burst of gunfire erupts in the distance.
"Ouvrez, l'Indian. We know you're inside."
Silence.
"Do you know who we are? Nous sommes soldats de L'Armée National
Congolaise (ANC). Alors, ouvrez!"
The house falls into darkness.
"They have turned off the main breaker switch. Go, go, hide in the
toilet and lock the door. Hurry!" Akbar urgently commands his wife. "Take
Salim with you."

The thumping on the door makes the little boy cry. "Hush! Here, hold my
hand and come with me," Nuru whispers to her little boy and hurriedly walks to
the back of the house. It was built by her father, a gift.

Houses of successful Indian traders usually had three interconnected
buildings: The front, to do business -- retail or wholesale; the middle, the sleeping quarters; and at the back was a large cemented compound where three separate chambers were built next to each other -- an open kitchen shaded under a corrugated metal roof, the squatting toilet for the owners, and the servants' quarters. A stone wall enclosed the whole house which was kept watch at night by a black security guard. To-night, the servants' chamber remains eerily quiet and dark. Nuru knows they are inside. The security guard is no-where to be found. They are all scared, she surmises and decides not to call on the servants for help. The news of Lumumba's arrest has already spread and the ANC soldiers are on rampage, hunting for colons (whites, particularly, Belgians), European officers of the once feared Force Publique, wealthy Indians, and any sympathizer of the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC) - Patrice Lumumba's political party.

Nuru fumbles in the dark, looking for the toilet door. Salim refuses to enter and jerks his hand free and runs back to his father who has just opened the front door. Nuru runs after him, but then turns back. He will be safer with his father, she decides in that instant, and secures the toilet door.

Akbar realizes that his son is now standing behind him, whimpering, but the door is already open.

"Move aside," a soldier shouts in heavily accented French and pushes his way in. Akbar, who is at least five-eight is dwarfed alongside the man - a giant black silhouette shaped by the street light, and holding a revolver. Other soldiers with rifles enter behind him. There are six of them now in the house.

"Why didn't you open right away? Are you a Lumumbaist?" the giant screams. The light comes back on inside the house. Akbar notices sweat blisters on the man's forehead. The smell of beer hangs in the air.

"No, Sir," Akbar replies.

"Don't call me 'Sir'!" the soldier screams. "I am not a noko." Noko, 'uncle' in Lingala, was something that the blacks had gotten used to calling their
Belgian colonizers. It was either 'sir' or noko - often, even Akbar's own black employees called him that. He had gotten used it.

Akbar quickly apologizes.

The soldier moves closer and says melodramatically: "All Lumumba people get this," and runs a finger across his throat, and then lets out a laugh.

"I am no Lumumba supporter," Akbar insists.

"Then you're an Indian colon. Dominez pour servir - Dominate to serve! Your motto, yes? To serve and civilize us. Merde! All shit! That's an excuse for colonialism. You are here for profit! All of you. To rape our country, our women."

The giant moves towards the middle of the house.

"Where is your wife?" he asks.

"Why do you want to know?" Akbar replies, barely mumbling. He realizes he has to be careful now. If he shows annoyance or even a faint grimace they would react violently. If he remains servile maybe they will bully and even strike him, and then, perhaps they would leave. Or, would they? He should offer them money, he decides. No, that may just aggravate them. He studies the soldiers' movements and glances for clues as to the intentions of their unpredictable and inebriated animus. They are excitedly talking to each other in French, then in Lingala.

"Le garçon est a vous?" the giant asks in French. Akbar notices three stripes on the soldier's sleeve.

"Oui, sergeant, he is my son." The sudden respect offered by the trembling Indian pleases him.

"He needs his mother. Bring her here," the sergeant orders, and then laughs. His men find that funny and join in. He waits for Akbar to do his bidding. Akbar doesn't move.

"So where is she, your woman?" he asks, getting impatient.

"Please, sergeant, she is scared." Akbar has heard stories of Belgian women getting violently raped in front of their husbands and children.
Akbar hears a car outside and a few minutes later an older black man in civilian clothes enters the house. The sergeant looks at him and salutes. The man says something to the soldiers in Lingala, which Akbar understands a little, and immediately recognizes the face from somewhere. Akbar looks down towards his son, who has now edged closer to his father.

"Ah! Monsieur Akbar. My men only want a few cigarettes. Perhaps you have some?" he asks, in polite and perfect French.

Akbar immediately reacts to hearing his name being called out. He goes to the shelves and comes back with six cases of English cigarettes - a case for each soldier. The civilian orders the men to wait outside.

"Your wife, she is well, no?"

"Yes."

"I knew her father, Monsieur Pirbhai. A good man," he bows and rubs his hands humbly. "No-one will bother you again, but stay inside for a few days and bar the windows and doors," and with that he leaves, shouting orders to the men outside. Akbar takes hold of Salim and runs to the back of the house. The servants have all gathered outside the toilet.

"Nuru, Nuru, they're gone," he calls out. Nuru remains silent. He hears her crying inside the toilet. "Mummy!, mummy! " cries Salim, thumping on the door with his tiny hands. Then slowly the door opens and Nuru steps out.

Akbar tells his wife about the cigarettes and the civilian. "It was that same man we gave our old type-writers to. He told the sergeant that we were supporters of Alliance des Bakongo (ABAKO) and that we had given them office furnishings and to leave us alone from now on. He said he had known bapa."

"Shukhar, shukhar ... thank God," Nuru mumbles, a sense of relief spreading over her face. "We were going to throw those things away, you know? Those were bapa's typewriters."
The afternoon rain has briefly given way to the sun. We have been content with our portions so far — portions of memories and expectations. Rahim has done most of the talking. They are resolute about their future, even possessing a certain enviable savvy that they will make it. But where do they get their sense of purpose from, I wonder?

"Where do you draw your sense of resolve from?" I ask.

"Our parents," Hanif replies, quickly.

"I don't think I'd be close to anywhere I am today without my family," says Rahim. "I mean it would be very difficult to grow in society by yourself. My parents and grandparents had knowledge and guidance from experience."

"He is correct. Without my parents I wouldn't be where I am today," adds Hanif.

Rahim recalls his relationship with his parents. "I mean my parents are my best friends, from whom I can draw an idea from, or ask an opinion and expect an honest answer, but not in a typical parent-child relationship where there is difference of power or hierarchy. There are no power struggles."

I try other questions to find out more about their bonds with their family. I even quote research about the struggles of middle class North American families, and with every question I ask, they give me the same answer: In their case, family bonds would never break.

"What makes you so certain?" I ask.
"Historically (our) society, community, and religion were intertwined," Rahim tells me in his usual thoughtful manner. "And in that way families tended to stay together, where parents supported their own parents. I think that kind of mentality has passed on in my family."

"My mum believes in a strong family," Hanif adds. "Even my dad, although he lost both parents at a young age. My parents want to keep that bond."

When I inquire about their own future partnerships, and what that may mean for strong bonds, they remain unconcerned. The mentality of family strength seems to be firmly ingrained in them, they say, and their wives will find it quite natural to expand into those relationships.

"I don't think the strength of the bond between my new family and my parents and grandparent will diminish. Regardless of whom I marry and what faith she may be of, or her outlook, that mentality remains, and even expands, I think," says Rahim.

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"I'm very harsh to my mum. I feel bad afterwards. I just say it: 'Get away,' the way you'd never speak to anyone else, you can talk to your family, which is really bad," Nafiza says. "If you saw someone
on the street talking like that you’d be appalled. How can you treat another human being like that. But in intimate family relationships we do, we treat each other like shit!”

“Like shit? What do you mean?” I ask.

‘Get out of my room! Get away, leave me alone!’ I am better now, but my adolescent years were rough. My relationship with her ... I was mean, I was mean ... I look back and I hope my daughter never treats me like that. But now I accept her and say: ‘I can’t change her, but I can change myself.’”

I remain silent. Nafiza ponders a bit and continues: “My mother would often threaten me with this kitchen utensil, and it’s always like ... she would throw shoes at me and the words that would come out of her mouth were very harsh, like “haram zaadi, nalaek.” (cursed bitch, imbecile). I just saw her as mean.” Nafiza spends a long time telling me about her mother's shortcomings, her parent’s failed relationship although they still live together – “my mum thinks my dad is too simple,” she says. Then she tells me how the unhappy life of her parents has made her search for happiness.

As she narrates to me the story of her relationships with her mother and her mother’s own experiences, I see sitting in front of me hardly a morose young woman, mired in misdirected emotions. Instead, I am quite surprised that with the kind of internal family dynamics and disruptions that she has had to confront during her adolescent years and even now, she presents a joie de vivre that contradicts the context.

“But you appear so ebullient, so happy about life?” I ask.

“Seeing my parents, my mum, has challenged me to be really happy, and to wake up every morning
and say: ‘This is going to be a good day.’ I try to make everyday a positive one. I fill my life with friends and laughter. I really go the other route. I take each moment and make it really full and I don’t just waste away and in some respects I feel that she has wasted away. I feel sad. I feel she got gypped. Like she could’ve really been happy ... I don’t think she’s had a happy life.

“Tell me how you want to live?” I ask her.

“For me, I want to keep doing school. I want to go back and do a Master’s in something. I want to see the world. I want to travel more. I want to eat different foods once a month. Just be involved in different experiences once a month. I want to be able to do as much that will make me happy.”

She pauses a while and picks on her food. “We are Canadian born, Canadian raised, Canadian educated,” she continues. “We are Canadian, you know. There is so much in North American society on the self and doing things for bettering yourself, and there is this whole world out there that we are exposed to at this age. It’s all about exploring.”

Shaireen rejoins the conversation. “So many things are open to us now. I don’t think our parents had a choice back then. You get married, you look after your husband, you have kids, you look after his family (in-laws).

“You don’t approve of that?”

“No. For me even before I think about marriage, there is so much I want to do,” Shaireen says simply. “I want to do it all before I get married ... seeing the world. I don’t want to be stuck looking after my in-laws. And, I don’t want to have one career in my life. I want to do different things. Meet different people, different
cultures. My mum has been doing the same job for twenty-five years. I can’t see how one can do the same thing, the same company. I don’t know how anyone can be happy? She says she is happy, but that’s where she and I disagree. She is very worried about money. My mum doesn’t enjoy life for the moment.”

I challenge Shaireen that perhaps her mother, being a first generation immigrant in Canada felt it important to be careful with money? Shaireen shakes her head and tells me that nearly thirty years is far too long a period to take to get it right. Things ought to have changed over the years, and for the better.

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The art of a myth-maker is a good story. Myth-making fashions not merely the artist – the story-teller – but also the community it adorns. In fact, a good personal myth provides our own lives with a sense of unity and purpose. Evoked myth-making, perhaps of an unfortunate death at sea, a story of a struggling pioneer family, an arduous childhood, or about traditions of strong family bonds, is a tool of Praxis. To begin to act is also to know how our personal myths shape and are shaped by the myth-making of others. For just as Nafiza uses the myth of an enfeebled and morose mother to define her life and act accordingly, so has her own mother used the myth of subservient family relationships and a simpleton husband to determine her own life.

Myth-making allows us to ask two questions of ourselves: How true are we to ourselves in our social involvements and relationships? And, how true are we to our time and place? It is the purpose of tales and stories to re-enact mythic renderings of a person’s life and make it attend to these questions.
Whenever Pirbhai closed his eyes he could enter into a place at the edge of memory. A tiny object floats in the water. It is a human body, half-submerged, half entangled by floating sea-weed, a drifting island of chaotic lattice. It has no eyes. He opens his eyes. How many years has it been? he wonders. Does it matter? Images of his father spending his nights in solitude flash by. Why did his father have to give up so soon? But then, can any man carry the burden of such an expensive toll? A pioneer’s toll, Pirbhai called it. He would take it upon himself to support his family. The burden would become his to bear. He was thirteen. Pirbhai felt feverish every time he came to the edge, and every time he was there he got a little stronger.

The early years in Dar-es-Salaam had been especially hard - mud huts with insect ridden floors, and hunger. He remembered hunger the most. His first job had been as a night signal-boy at the make-shift railway camp before it became the main station.

"When you hear the train, you wave the lamp, Ja?" the German man had told him, in German. So he did as he was told. He laughed, as he remembered those days. He recalled the time when he had fallen asleep and had failed to wave the lamp and how the train had missed the station. For that unfortunate mistake he hadn’t been paid for a week. Years had passed and he moved on to other jobs. He remembered how a German businessman had offered him a venture near Lake Tanganyika, a good month’s journey by caravan and foot from the coastal shores. He had accepted it. It had paid so well, he had decided to stay. But, it was the Congo, and Albertville, the town across the lake that had eventually seduced him.

Pirbhai was a driven man - driven to succeed. He set up several thriving trading stores in the mining regions of the Congo, and soon enough travelled the vast country in his lorry, trading and making a name for himself. He called his family over from Dar-es-Salaam. Pirbhai preferred the Belgians of the Congo over the Germans
in Tanganyika, although he knew that the Belgian colons especially were hard taskmasters towards the Africans and the Indians. He weathered their arrogance, learnt their ways, and soon began to trade with them. By now he was married and had several children.

"We'll build a Belgian colonial-style house," he told his wife one day. He admired the way the colonizer lived. The Indian traders, on the other hand, hovelled inside their cramped little stores and makeshift homes. He had to do better than them. He would make sure his children would get the chance to experience the world.

"What do we need a fancy house for? This one is good enough," his wife replied.

"The family is growing up, and we need a nice jamatkhana."

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Shaireen has become more vocal. I have asked the two women to tell me what the practice of their faith means to them.

"I don't really question it (the faith) and I don't care. I just have no desire," she replies. She ponders further and continues. "No, I don't want to say, I don't care. There is nothing that motivates me to want to know about it." She emphasizes the word 'motivate'. "I know that when I go to jamatkhana, I feel a lot better, I feel good inside. But I don't think it's strong enough for me to want to go. When I think of ‘Ismaili’ I don't think of the religious aspect. I think more as being a member of a community. And the social aspect of it. And I like being an Ismaili not because of the religious aspects. No, it's more being a member of this community."

“What I like about it (being Ismaili),” Rahim
tells me, “and what I feel proud about the fact that I am Ismaili is that it is a very dynamic faith. Our guidance is dynamic.” His answer once again amazes me. “When you look at the more rigid sub-sets of Islam where sometimes the Koran is interpreted more explicitly, I feel privileged that we have an Imam who interprets taking into account the changing world, that many of our lives are lived in the Western world.”

“And you draw your comfort in this belief?”

“I draw comfort in that ... it has a strong sense of community, yet it is not too secular. So it is a balance. And I find that comforting, that you can draw back to it, even if not to the community directly, then to your family. You have a sense of structure and root in which to grow.”

“I love going to jamatkhana,” Nafiza says. Her eyes light up. “I love that ... like you know my days are so busy and my thoughts are so hurried and I’m moving, moving and so I find I get that half hour of peace in jamatkhana. I may not even be concentrating on the prayers, but sitting down together... being forced to sit in an environment where it’s quiet and the ceremonies are going on ... it’s ‘me’ time. It (being in jamatkhana) is the core of the person I become, the identity... my actions ... and as Hazir Imam said in his speech ... he said that Islam is about your actions, the way you interact with people.”

I nod. Her sense of perspective is very particular to her. She is comfortable in her place, unlike Shaireen who seems to be on the edges.

Nafiza looks up. “So now you know what I mean
when I say I try hard to fill my life with goodness. I think it comes from that. That’s what I love about jamatkhana and no matter how angry, how upset I am, when I get up (after it’s over), I feel like there was a break in my day. I start fresh.”

Rahim and Hanif tell me that they probably go to jamatkhana two or three times a month. I ask them how they manage to feel part of the community if they are so infrequent in their attendance?

“For me the faith, the religion is important, but not the community,” says Hanif. “I guess both of us grew up in Canada and most of our friends are non-Ismaili and mostly white or any other race and we’ve never been truly involved in the Ismaili community. I take religion as separate from the community.”

“I think the act of reflecting on your day or thanking God is natural. It’s just going to jamatkhana physically is hard time-wise,” Rahim adds.

“Oh, my mother is fanatical, she is so traditional, it’s so frustrating,” says Nafiza. I have asked the two women whether the way they practice their faith seems different from their parents’ practices.

“I try to explain to my mother that it (Ismailism) is an intellectual faith, that you intellectualize it. It’s not just given to you and that says, ‘do not do this, do not do that.’ She is old school. She doesn’t realize that you can take the faith, you can intellectualize it, you ask questions, even if those questions are, you know, out there (awkward). For her there is only one way to do it.”
"Why do you think that is?" I ask.

"I think it's just a generation thing. My parents are not alone in isolation. A lot of their friends, it's a given to them. For us it's more like: "No, we don't buy into that, we are not going to be part of something that we can't assess for ourselves – what's right or wrong. You can't just tell us it's wrong to do something. We want to know, 'Why?' There's always the 'Why?' They didn't grow up with the 'Why?'"
made us think to give the old typewriters of my father to that man ... that saved us.” Nuru calls out to her husband, who is in another room: “Akbar, do you remember that night when the soldiers came?”

“How can I forget,” he responds without coming to the table where Nuru and I have been talking. I have chosen only Nuru as my ‘research’ candidate. Now I wish I had chosen them both.

“Tell me more about your father, Pirbhai?” I ask.

“My father loved the good things of life,” Nuru tells me. “And he taught us to love them as well. But one thing I can tell you, he carried his iman, his faith with him – always. Being Ismaili was everything to him. And it passed on to me, this faith. He would follow every guidance of the Imam. You know he built a house with a jamatkhana at the back? There were no other Ismailis in the area except us. But a jamatkhana was very important to our family. Prayers were recited everyday on time. That was a rule.”

“And who presided over the services in the jamatkhana?”

“My father and mother. It didn’t matter if no other Ismaili was around. Sometimes visitors came. The jamatkhana was opened everyday – for baitul khayal (4 am meditation) and the early morning prayers, as well as the evening prayers. All of us, brothers and sisters, we’d take turns with the ginans and tasbih and dua. And when my father was away on trading trips, my mother made sure all services were performed well. Our family made up the congregation.”

Nuru goes to kitchen and comes back with a fresh pot of Indian tea and a replenished plate of shortbread biscuits.

“How did your parents relate with you?” I ask.

“You know my parents, especially my father, abhorred any kind of backwardness in his children. So he encouraged the girls to get educated, dress well ... look good. There was a lot of racism in those Belgian schools against Indians. He didn’t care. His daughters had to be educated. You know I was the best in maths, and those Belgian kids were so jealous. And, later when we went on vacation to Dar-es-Salaam, people would right away say: ‘Oh, these girls must be Pirbhai’s daughters.’ We wore skirts and could drive cars as well. Imagine? At that time.” She remembers something and laughs. “You know
Ismaili families of Dar-es-Salaam were afraid to give their sons in marriage to us? They were afraid their sons would not be able to handle the Pirbhai girls of the Congo.”

The picture of seven year old Pirbhai trying to get a grip to peer over the side of the boat comes before me. I am grateful for Nuru’s stories.

“You know, my father never forgot the death of his little brother. He used to remind us of that journey all the time. It had left a permanent impression on him, I think. My father worked very hard from the moment he landed in Africa, and my brothers learnt from that. We all did.”

Field Notes and Reflections

To extract the “Who” from the flow of time is a burden that falls upon those who follow in time. It is never easy, for there are other callings of daily life that bid for attention. The “Who” then merely gets entangled and becomes a “what” or a “that which” — simply the tip of a narrative ice-berg. The stories sit beneath waiting, hoping that someone, somewhere will re-enact them and reveal the “Who” — the praxis. And if no-one appears, then the “Who” slowly vanishes from the edges of memory. Families, communities, and humanity loses a part of itself, forever.

“What was it once to have lived well?”
“Tell me,” I finally ask the two young men, “do you have a sense of how your generation will conserve our stories? I mean a body of literature of our people, the ones who left India. We hardly have the poets, the writers, the artists ... and there is also the loss of language to contend with.”

At first Rahim’s response is almost nonchalant. The loss of language, he quickly tells me, may mean a “loss of nostalgia to something in the past,” but the traditions are hardly affected.

I let out a heavy sigh.

“Surely the language of a people and the written literature of a people - their stories - play a role in the way you or those who will come later will see themselves?” I ask. “You just said so about how it offers you a frame of reference. Now imagine if this currently living frame of reference vanishes from your horizon?”

Rahim shifts in his chair. He looks down and then up again, his gaze suddenly bumping into mine. He has understood. Hanif seems more forthcoming: “Now that you mention it, it’s pretty important.”

Rahim nods his head in agreement. “What I have found is that most of our stories are passed on by word and few, if any, have been written, in terms of art and just stories of people. Unlike the Jewish community where things are more permanent. Now I have started to scan old pictures while my grandmother is still alive and ask her about the situations and stories in the pictures. My mother always says: ‘Oh, there is a story behind this.’ And my grandmother is a resource that is very time-limited. She is ninety now.”
“I am one of the two percent (of young Ismailis) that can speak the language,” Nafiza says. “I can’t imagine talking to my kids in Gujarati. Language, I don’t think is going to be sustained, which is sad,” Nafiza tells me.

“Sad? Why sad?” I ask

“I don’t know,” she says, simply.

Shaireen interjects, “You’ll see, I’ll make sure that I do keep the language. I don’t want everything to disappear. I think something has to be there.”

“But who are you going to communicate with if your grandparents are gone? I just think it’s inevitable,” Nafiza tells Shaireen, half amused and half serious.

“Haven’t you in a sense introduced a paradox. You indicated little desire before to know more about your roots and yet why this urge to retain language?” I ask.

“Yea,” Nafiza acknowledges, a questioning look spreading across her brow.

I press on. “What is it really that you think you’re losing?” I ask.

“Your culture, your identity. I don’t know. I see it being lost more and more with every generation. It’s scary,” Nafiza says almost wistfully.

“Scary?” I echo back.

“We’re hopeful. But, I think it’s still a challenge. It’s a conflict. It’s like what is gonna happen with our kids and stuff.”

The unflappable, almost self-possessed composure that has adorned the two women all this time has suddenly disappeared. They steal glances at each other. They appear almost befuddled. Shaireen puts on a
brave face and tells me that she will make sure she keeps it all going – the faith, the stories, and the language. Nafiza looks at Shaireen’s anxious face and bursts out laughing. She had almost lost herself for a while, she realizes. She will seize the day. The future will care for itself.

“You sound like one of those ... those bhoodhi maas (old Ismaili ladies),” she tells Shaireen, to bring their spirits back up. They both laugh.

§§§

Faith  

Faith n.  

1 complete trust or confidence. 2 firm belief, esp. without logical proof. 3 a. a system of religious beliefs. b belief in God or religious doctrines. c spiritual apprehension of divine truth apart from proof. 4 duty or commitment to fulfill a trust, a promise.

And above all, Faith, is one of the five virtues of the Ismaili Pirs – a virtue that dissolves us into moments of Praxis to perceive the blessings of life, unshadowed, undoubttable – like the little Indian boy who waves a lamp in the night hoping his train will arrive one day; like two young Ismaili men who assert they will make it in life because they know where they have come from; like Nuru, who cannot believe any other way of being is possible; and, like Nafiza and Shaireen who seem to struggle with it and still know it’s there somewhere inside them.
And for a great poet considered insane in his own time, it must have been Faith...

To see the World in a Grain of Sand,
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower;
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.8

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Nuru asks me if we were nearly done. It’s nearly 5pm. She tells me she has to get ready for jamatkhana. Her grandchildren will be accompanying her, like they always do on week-ends. I have taped her for an hour and a half, and the rest of the afternoon we have spent just sharing stories, having tea and biscuits. I look at a neatly framed picture of herself and Akbar hanging on the wall above the dining room table. She has a colourful scarf gracing her neck and shoulders. She follows my gaze and tells me the photo was taken on a cruise they took to the Caribbean Islands last winter to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary. The scarf is a gift from her older brother. It’s an original Chanel, she adds, and fetches it from her room. “Isn’t it exquisite?” she says.

“A final question, Nuru bai,” I request.

“Okay.”

“What has been one of the greatest blessings in your life?”

“My whole life is a blessing,” she says without a pause. “The more I call it that, the more it becomes a blessing.”

I try to narrow her focus. “Some occasion that remains in memory, then?” I ask.

“I think it was a blessing that the opportunity to care for my aging mother fell upon me. I think it was a blessing that I was able to care for her during her last years. Only those who are blessed get a chance like that. She
stayed with me, here, in this apartment.” There are tears in her eyes. She smiles. I hold her hand and give it a gentle squeeze. There are now tears in my eyes. We both smile.
THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO
1960

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

CONGO

ANGOLA

RHODESIA

KEY
- Capital of Province
• Capital of District
—— Border of Province
——— Border of District

Cities renamed since Independence
KINSHASA, formerly Leopoldville
LUBUMBASHI, formerly ELISABETHVILLE
KISANGANI, formerly Stanleyville
WANGATA, formerly COQUILHATVILLE

Figure 5 Map of the Congo showing Thysville (Nuru's story) and Albertville (Pirbhai's story)
Pioneer’s Toll

Hope,
Two and Six in tow,
 fleeing the rocky shell of toil and soil;
bent, crooked, jaded,
faded, emaciated,
preface, surface,
and
slow.

“Jaldhi, jaldhi!” a captain’s cry,
“winds cannot wait, the sea invites,
Africa awaits”;
Two and Six on board, but you, you, and you
cannot,
old, old, too old,
frayed, tattered, obsolete,
dying.

Two and Six
a family, huddled, cuddled, baby
in bosom, foggy mass of night, daylight of heat,
smell of vomit, shit, shit, and shit;
limp, lump,
a fevered heart no more,
baby son,
gone.

The sea storms a froth,
tendrils uncoil a mother’s sorrow,
“Cannot keep corpse in boat!” a captain’s order, disease, faeces, crisis, omens, and curses; throw! throw! into inebriated froth, liquidly grave, salty abyss, between lands, and no marker.

Two and Five, and Sixth, wreathed, tethered, shackled to grindstone, millstone, ghuntoori, anchor, gravestone, soft petal, flower; a future, thrown, jettisoned, lost into silence, a price to pay, a pioneer’s toll

and a prayer.
...Integrity to one’s narrative quest, I propose, is a powerful expression of praxis that makes narrative itself a critical idiom of our modern times. Often, several veins of stories need to come together in a conversation to favour clarity: The stories of grandparents provides Rahim with a ‘frame of reference’ that grounds him to his roots, he tells me thoughtfully, otherwise the world is all too awesome a place to grasp and feel its effect upon us; the privilege to care for her aging mother, Nuru says with a small sound of appreciation, is a blessing that is bestowed only upon a few and becomes a prayer of the ancients that shields us in the present; and, a myth of a great loss at sea consumes and crushes a father, yet makes his young boy emerge into a visionary in his family and community.

Realizing the integrity of praxis, in turn, is also a quest for self-definition. By that I mean, the narrative quest is implicitly and explicitly one of identification of the ‘Who’ within the flow of time, and set within various human relationships lived in time and space. My identity – the way I strive to become a human agent in its fullness and potentia, the way I am then capable of understanding myself, and hence, defining myself, is fundamentally dialogical in its character. My self-definition cannot be done in isolation and is rarely exempt from the two contexts I outlined earlier (A Disquieting Journey-10). And, because it is dialogical, it is fundamentally a place of language and hence, also of history. I need language in its broadest sense made available to me – language of art, poetry, of gestures and songs, literature, etc.
This language is only acquired in dialogue, whether with my own culture or the greater human culture at large. Not always is this acquisition without struggle, for dialogue by its very nature is also a place of constraints that appear as I place my own narratives in relation to the narratives of my significant others, or even against the prevailing narratives of my time.

The constraints are not limiting, however, if I realize that much of what I know of the enjoyment of love, or the sorrows of life's struggles, or, of the way I, too, am transformed by human tragedies that fall upon others is as much gleaned from my own biographical history, as it is from the biographical contexts of those I dialogue with. I, hence, embark upon both distinctness and plurality, realizing that in this wonderful and turbulent dialectic resides the fate of a meaningful personal narrative and the fate of the narrative of the human condition itself.

The *praxis* of integrity of the quest, hence, is very much a virtue that is intrinsically and morally bound to the significant horizons towards which I am going, and from which I have come. The primary condition of this virtue then comes to me as a question: What are the horizons that are significant for me? -- for my identification and for my narrative from birth to death? By significant, I mean horizons from which “things take on importance against a background of intelligibility?”

The worth of these horizons must stand on their own and be independent of my will. They must be ‘permanent’ and yet fluid, as Rahim reminds me. In other words, whether I choose to follow these horizons or not, their intrinsic worth is not in any way diminished by my choice, for they contain moral underpinnings *sui generis*, that are available to me and to others should we strive for them.
The core reflective element within this dialogical nature of self-definition is, as one scholar claims, the "hermeneutics of experience." I realize that the fullness of my very identification is also tied to my understanding of myself as an "experienced" man – I am only fully myself when I experience myself in life in all its joys and sufferings, and then reflect upon the experience as it presents a truth about my new "experienced" self in relation to my old "experienced" self. And, in this I must know the limits of my experience. I must know that even at the highest peak of my success, I am only at that place where I am also presented with the limits of my human finiteness – of the ultimate awareness "of the barrier that separates him from the divine."30

True experience finds a home in one's own historicality – an enquiry into one's own "effective-historical consciousness." It is "the highest type of hermeneutical experience," one with an openness that has a thoughtful concern with what has been experienced in tradition. To call myself "experienced" means that my orientation towards my narrative is done with a thoughtful concern for my tradition, whilst I am possessed by effective-historical consciousness. I must be ready to allow the validity of the claim made by tradition upon me, and by this I do not mean merely acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in a way that it has something to say to me. I am fulfilled not by some methodological certainty, but by my openness to experience my tradition.

One of the significant horizons that guides my narrative quest now comes into view: The tradition that has made itself available to me to engage my narrative quest as a moral unity is not merely a process in history. It is worthy of itself as a "Thou" that always stands in relationship with the "I" that I am. It is not one person or a few persons against
whose narratives I measure my own. It exists in spite of myself and yet also exists because of me. It is not one story or many stories of these people. It is the story of a “Thou.” And, if I choose to reflect myself out of this mutual relationship, then the very core of the relationship changes such that all moral bonds that may have been available to me are now destroyed.31

But, that is not all. I am cautioned that a person who reflects himself out of a living relationship to tradition destroys the true meaning of this tradition itself.32 The hermeneutic in these two situations is apparent and the hermeneutic knot is unwavering: I need the tradition to know my “true experiences,” and the tradition needs me as an “experienced” person to know itself (emphasis are mine).

A picture of a “living tradition” thus emerges. It is:

“an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes many generations.”33

I now realize that this dissertation project is a quest to seek my moral narrative unity in more than one way. It is also to enliven my historical consciousness and to make it more effective and more significant as I confront the aporia of my modern self. The praxis of integrity to this quest, thus, has as one of its conditions of fulfillment, the inescapable horizon of a living tradition – of the “Thou.” I can choose to ignore it, but, in doing so I may make it and myself weaker.
"We have arrived, Dad."

Vancouver, 1999

"Don't you ever forget that you stand on the shoulders of your ancestors!" a muffled scream jets out of my being. My son is the brunt of my fury. Already fifteen, he has grown into a young man of sprightly character, but school work has lately been pushed aside. Teachers are anxious about unfinished assignments and math is getting in the way. My face, contorted in some way I am sure, must have jarred his otherwise laid back demeanor. His eyes moistened as his arms instinctively crossed over and found their protective place over his belly. I am lost to myself, surrendered to my habit of raising my voice to express an inner anxiety I feel whenever school work is left unattended. He stares and I ramble.

"Every effort you expend, every success you pull off, is a triumph for all those that have come before you. Every day passed in laziness or in unfocused effort is a promise not kept. Do you get it? It's a kind of an unseen deal with our ancestors.” No answer, so I press on, anger still pushing this one-sided onslaught. "You know what the problem is? You've had it easy. There is not enough pain, not enough struggle in the lives of today’s Ismaili kids. There is not enough rigour, either at school or at home. It's come too easy.” The words come out and seem to echo a collective voice of distant past. This is not the first time I have entered this stormy space with my son.

He remains silent.

"Always imagine that you've been given an ancient boat, which you have to take further up stream. You have to care for it and make it stronger. This boat, son, is your culture, your traditions. Do you see?” This seems like the right thing to say to bring this tirade to a neutral close. But it was not to be.

He stares. Then his eyes lock into mine. He hesitates and then answers with a voice equally a collective echo of a distant past.
"You know dad, no matter how much you shout or worry about me, my life is mine. I will grow and I will succeed. I know that you are a parent and you worry. It's like you telling me, you remember? that what matters in life is to leave behind a world better than I'd found it and how I choose to do that must come from me."

I remain silent.

"What do I have to become to do that, Dad? It is all about _that_ isn't it? I have to become something that _you_ want?" he answered carefully and politely.

"But I am already someone and I am already part of the change that my world needs." The finality of the words seemed to puncture a hole in me. But he didn't stop. "**We've arrived, Dad,** and you may still be on the boat that our grandfathers were on, but I, at least, have arrived. What's more important is to keep the promise of the ancestors by loving each other and having a home.”

It was not as much what he had said that stopped my ramblings, but the easiness with which he had stood his ground and articulated his youthful world. It was a simple world – to love and be loved, and to have a home. I had never asked him before what gave him joy or engaged him in his daily moments, and yet such social hypocrisy from a teacher/father who, with all the accumulated degrees was bent on lecturing instead of listening.

I could sense that he was worried about my reaction. He had broken ground here in our relationship, and he knew it. A gentle boy by nature, it had taken courage to step cultural bounds and voice his own feelings. Perhaps, it was the bravado of a life still to be lived; perhaps, it was wisdom; or, perhaps, he had in fact arrived. Whatever it was, it had stopped me long enough to finally listen. I was angry, hurt, and relieved all at the same time. It had taken courage to speak up to his father, something that I would never have thought of doing when my mother was getting “burnt by fire.”

Maybe, he already understood the ‘promise’ of the ancients in a far better way than I did; maybe, in worrying over this promise I had forgotten to arrive. He didn’t have to say anymore. Humbled by his wisdom, I kissed his forehead, said, “thank you,” and left his room.
A Final Reflection

A river slicing its way through time, fast in places and resting in others, is also a metaphor for a living tradition. People of a dispersed culture also live moments in which they are lost to themselves. They are moved by events and circumstances beyond the control of their daily actions. More than that, they are often moved by the power others have over them. At other times, during moments of rest and reflection, where neither terror nor disruptions reign, where a new country's soil offers a safe ground to plant roots again, a culture can also reflect upon its social inheritance, its heritage of narrative traditions, and begin an argument of what it means to be a living tradition. One's speech and one's deeds in the stories of such a living tradition, which if looked upon closely may tell of practices and virtues that have remained as beacons over time, like large stones at the bottom of a fast moving river.
Against the piercing cry of a baby just born into its world comes an even greater cry that goes like “thump” inside the wrinkled and fragile creature, as if forces of unimaginable powers have collided at its very core. This greater cry is like no other and is produced not by an object or person, and hence remains silent to most of us. But, it forges an impulse that resides inside the child throughout its life.

“And Who are you?” the mysterious cry says to the baby just born, and from that day, from that moment onwards, yet another chance is given to the world to re-present itself, show itself as the supreme bearer of its own light. A baby thus becomes a narrator, an actor, a story-teller among millions, whose impulse it remains to extract the act of the ‘Who’ from the flow of time and the sequence of events. This burden befalls us all, in small and large measures, and some of us take on the task while others let the chance slip by. The act of telling the story of the ‘Who’ becomes the virtue of praxis itself, eventually revealing a pedagogy of virtues residing as discourses within a living tradition.

And thus, my thesis takes its decisive expression:

“From my birth to my eventual death, I have become the narrative impulse that holds me accountable to the very world into which I have been born. I am forever at the service of the question posed at my birth. I am not alone in this, for I am also already born into stories that are themselves impulses set in time. All I can and must
do is be on a quest to act and to think, and to serve this question so as to bring mine and your potentia as the bearer of light to the forefront of our lives such that the world sees itself through us. We are the bearers of Praxis. We remain such until that final moment of supreme praxis when our life-breath leaves our body. And the world is glad we visited. Somewhere, at the moment of our departure, yet another baby is born, another life, another potentia, and the question is once more posed with the same thump:

“And Who are you?”

And this becomes ‘the miracle that saves the world.’

§§§

his lament speaks of a pain
of a soul in a trance,
quenched by the melodies of life everywhere
and still thirsty.

“i am of that which i cannot find,
a mere beat of ancient tune,
once raw bamboo,
now fair flute.
i am of that which i cannot see,
a ruptured note of celestial songs
once known,
now sought.

his lament remembers
ecstasies of intoxicating silence
in lavender fields of coloured lights,
tapestries of perfumed blooms.

"i am of that which kindles my fire,
veiled behind fingers of eternity,
a wayward spark,
erupted
out of burning marrow.
i am of that which shelters
in frail harbours of life itself,
a beacon,
in murky fog."

his lament seeks
a voice to chant,
a language to heal.

"i am celestial song,
wayward spark,
raw bamboo,
mere beat,
ancient tune,
fair flute,
in murky fog,

a ruptured note."

§§§§

"Are you still there?" I ask the little spirit that guides me.

"I am always here," Sakina assuredly whispers.

Afar, a playful giggle interrupts.

"And me too!" cries Kamal, gleefully.
APPENDIX 1: Theoretical Foundations

It would be remiss of me not to shed some light on two significant theoretical foundations that have influenced my project, and although they have been implicitly portrayed within the main body of my work, I wish to briefly outline them here, explicitly.

First, if my project strives towards unveiling a pedagogy of virtues that resides inside human experiences and actions, the reason it has turned into an empirically undertaken narrative quest has to do with the path-breaking work of Alasdair MacIntyre in the field of virtue-theory. MacIntyre's seminal contribution made through his book, *After Virtue*, argues that we need a contemporary and a more dynamic understanding of virtue that, whilst still in some partial sense under the shade of Aristotle and past secular and non-secular traditions, enables us, today, to claim back our quest for what it means to live "the good" life amidst the practices we are involved in as we live, resist and seek relief from the aporia of our modern lives. He then goes on to develop a three-tiered definition of virtue.

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If we have historically known and understood the virtues it has always been in relation to some form of practice. For example, in the time of heroic Greek societies of Homer, we understood the virtues of physical strength and courage as excellences only in relation to some well-marked political or social practice, such as war or games; in Aristotle's time, we understood the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) in relation to the role of the Athenian gentleman in the family or state; in the New Testament,
understood the virtues of faith, hope, and love in relation to the early Christian church; in the literature of Jane Austen, we understood the virtues of constancy and amiability in relation to social practices of the English upper class etc., etc.

And so, before we can outline a more useful and stable definition of virtue that would transcend the ones outlined or theorized in history, we first need a contemporary definition of 'practice.' MacIntyre offers us that definition as:

“any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.” (pg. 187)

Practices that fit this definition include: the creation and sustaining of human communities such as households, cities, and nations; sustaining a family life; and the arts, sciences, games, professions. More importantly, to enter into a practice “is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in that practice,” particularly those who have extended the reach of the practice to its present point. (pg. 194)

How we are able to extract a notion of virtue in the background of such a definition of practice requires MacIntyre to now give a tentative and partial definition of virtue:

“A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.” (pg. 191)

Virtues and practices, hence, sit in relation to each other. But, can I not
possess the virtues to be a “good” football player, or a “good” family man, or a “good” teacher – all practices – and still not be a moral person outside that practice? The simple example is of a “good” bank robber, expert in his or her practice, but hardly moral. A second stage of the definition of virtue is thus needed.

A practice, besides being able to sustain the goods internal to itself, must also sustain our personal quest for “the good” life, which we should be pursuing in all our practices. This quest for the good life is derived from the very narrative quality of life and self, which are felt as whole or good only when there is a moral unity in the self’s life narrative. In other words, there is an implicit teleology and even a telos in our narrative lives which is available to guide us to determine what is “the good life,” and this then becomes our quest:

“the good life for man (sic) is the life spent in seeking the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is.” (pg. 216-219)

And so, in order for me to know what goods and excellences mean for me is also to ask how best am I going live out my life as a narrative unity from birth to death. This is where the notions of accountability and intelligibility of actions come into play.6 Thus, in this, his second stage, MacIntyre has situated the virtues not only in relation to practices, but also in relation to “the good life” as lived narratively. If I am the protagonist in my life, and remain so in the making of that life as a complete story, then the way I am a protagonist devoted to the good life will depend upon how the virtues have made my life moral (accountable and intelligible). This is important to realize, for it also means that I ground my life as a unity in its narrative sense only when I am a moral person. Narrative and the understanding of narratives becomes crucial if I am to govern my life accordingly. Otherwise a certain aimlessness will crouch into the picture. Why? Because, narratives are always embedded in a complex web to tradition, which the protagonist cannot ignore nor avoid.
This is where the third stage of the definition of virtue is provided. To consider just my own life as a narrative quest for unity cannot be enough to bring the definition of virtue to its completion. For, what I may have as a version of what is the "good life" may not be a version that is necessarily good for humankind. The definition, hence, takes its hermeneutic turn from the particular of a single life (as distinct), to the universal (as plural) — to my recognition that what I am as a selfhood is in large part what I have inherited as a particular past that is now in my present. The teleology implicit in my narrative is an incomplete picture if I do not hermeneutically enter the stories in the tradition I have inherited (or using Heidegger, "thrown into") as a dialectic. For I am, whether I realize it or not, "one of the bearers of a tradition." (pg 221)

Virtues, therefore, according to MacIntyre's theoretical conception sustain and are informed by, not only practices and the praxis implicit of such practices, and not only a person's quest for "the good life" as a narrative unity, but also by relationships to the past, to the future, and to the present. It is only in relation to the background of my tradition and traditions as they are part of the greater humanity, that I will ultimately understand (hermeneutically experience) how my single life can continue as a moral story or stories even after my death. This dynamic and dialectic relationship is described as a "living tradition" which is:

"an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes many generations." (pg. 222)

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This brings me to the second theoretical foundation. If it is within my personal narrative and in the narratives within my tradition where I must look
to unveil the practices and the virtues, what is it in narrative *qua* narrative that supports or even creates the impulse towards this endeavour? Whereas I realize the breadth of theoretical reflections about narrative is formidable, it is Paul Ricoeur's understanding of “narrative identity” and “narrative understanding” that seems to lend thoughtful comfort to my own project.

My identity is actually a dialectic lived in time. On one side, so to speak, is my Character (*idem*-identity) and its constituents – the perspectives and stories of the world that I receive at birth, my habits that I acquire during my life, and the identifications that I accept or reject vis-a-vis my relationships. My Character usually has influence over the choice of my actions and, hence, usually is the dominating axis. *Idem*-identity answers to the question: “What am I?” On the other side of this dialectic is the Self (*ipse*-identity), the “Who” – the one who has the capacity to make and keep promises of words and deeds. It answers to the question: “Who am I?” and according to Hannah Arendt is the *potentia*, the possibility that resides in the human narrative given at birth. Both *idem* and *ipse* identities are felt as permanent and live the dialectic in tension that is felt as *aporia*. A battle of convictions rages in this dialectic.

What provides relief to this *aporia* and tempers the battle, according to Ricoeur, is one’s narrative identity and our narrative understanding of our actions lived in time. It is through narrative that we understand ourselves as both distinct and also as living the plurality that is human. The reason we are able to move from “I” to “We”, albeit a struggle, is a narrative accomplishment. As narratives emplot our actions in time, we become co-authors of our lives and in so becoming we accept not only the openness to a future, but also the evaluations and the accountabilities that go with that.

It falls upon the poet (writer, narrator), to poetically give shape to, or a “figure” to, an already “prefigured” narrative form of our world of actions. Ricoeur refers to this task as “narrative understanding.” He gives the “prefigured” world the name, *mimesis* – a world that is full of meaning, symbolic resources, and a temporal character, a world in its own *praxis*. It is the poet's task to mediate between the events and actions of this prefigured world.
and provide them a movement – a cause-effect succession; it is the poet's task to "emplot" the characters, their goals, interactions, and unexpected denouements; and, it is the poet's task to unite all of these in time and give the plot a temporal character. To this entire endeavour, Ricoeur gives the name of *Mimesis*₂ – a process of narrative “configuration” of an already narratively “prefigured” world. In Arendtian thought, this is the place where the “Who” is extracted from the flow of time and shown and held accountable to the world. In all this, the poet's *praxis* is thus revealed.

Finally, the world of text in its various genres and the world of the reader or the hearer, or the interpreter, must intersect, in a hermeneutic dialectic, such that a world “that might be” is revealed, or a human “that can become” is imagined. Here, it falls upon the reader to complete the circular process that began with the prefigured world. This final process is called *Mimesis*₃ – the narrative process of “refiguration.” This last process – our interaction with the text – also influences our physical (re)engagement with the world. This becomes the *praxis* of the reader.¹¹

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A narrative quest towards a pedagogy of virtues, hence, springs from both these foundations. The way in which I can understand the practices of people lived in time *qua* practice – be it as family, parent, trader, worshiper, community, etc. – and the way virtues are uncovered amidst these practices is primarily a narrative accomplishment. In this it is also a hermeneutical accomplishment. Stories are treasure-houses of “prefigured” practices waiting their “refiguration” – representation. It is out of the *aporia* that both the individual and the tradition live, that the impulse to narrate arises. The result, in large measure, is the possibility that makes the tradition “living.”

And, voicing the literature of a people in all genres is made even more imperative.
“If you complete it, you falsify it,” is a loose hermeneutical maxim. Another side of this maxim suggests a back-and-forth movement to conceive or perceive the whole through the parts which actualize it and make it publicly intelligible in itself, and then conceive of the parts through the whole that motivates them and gives them meaning.1 Conversational encounters that describe and inform a narrative inquiry that this project is involved in, is a similar hermeneutical engagement. Entering the site of such an engagement is not a process of rigid selection of “research subjects”, but of conversational partners who in partnership with the narrative inquirer are willing through their own volition to co-share their stories. I have, however, found the need to invite into this conversational site those who have “traveled” this journey within a particular time frame and a specific historical route. Let me explain, in point form:

- There are about four to five generations or cohorts of conversational partners that this project has sought to engage with.

- The focus of this project is on Ismailis who trace their ancestry to the North Western region of India (now Gujarat) and who traveled to colonial East and Central Africa (later, the countries of Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and the Congo) between the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Later generations of this group then went on to Canada or other Western countries in the 1970’s as a result of general tensions in the region. Included in this group are those Ismailis who came from Uganda as a result of the dictator, Idi Amin’s abrupt expulsion of all Asians from that country; those from Tanzania, who came as a result of the Africanization and nationalization policies of the government of that country; those who came from Kenya, in reaction to the above tensions or who had extended families in the two countries, and also decided to leave
the region; and, finally, those from the Congo who also left as a result of political uncertainties.

- The project also includes the first generation of Ismailis born here in Canada of parents from the above group.

- The generational differences are not necessarily based on age and may be imagined within a metaphor of “traveling cohorts.” Age, however, becomes a natural factor.

- The generations or cohorts are described as follows:

1. **Indian and pioneer African** (1st cohort: Over 85 years of age) – those (normally frail) elders who can trace their birth to the North Western region of India and who have traveled to East Africa as part of the “journey” sometime during the early part of the twentieth century. Statistically speaking many from this group may not be presently alive and so those elders who were born out of the original pioneer group in East Africa and are 79 yrs and above will also fall in this category. Both of these groups may still remember the stories of life in India, either directly or indirectly. They may also remember about the community’s first efforts to establish institutions in East Africa. Their spoken language of choice will normally always be the Indian dialects of Gujarati or Kutchi in which they will be completely fluent. They will be able to effortlessly read and write the Gujarati text.

2. **Early East African** (2nd cohort: 60 years to 78 years) – this group will have been born in East Africa and will have begun to associate it as their natural “home.” They will have generally been born between the two World Wars and will also be one of the first groups to loosen their narrative ties to India. The period of the war years is also important since it prevented many families to cross the Indian ocean to visit and keep their ties with India. The group will have seen their schooling done (if at all) within the Gujarati medium. Although they will know and understand English, this cohort will normally be speaking in Gujarati or Kutchi. They will also be able to read and write the
3. **Later East African/Pioneer Canadian** (3rd cohort: 30 years to 59 years) – this group will also have been born in East Africa, and after the Second World War. Their early childhood years will have seen an involvement in community and colonial institutions that were by now more firmly established. Many, including women, will have completed their high school and will have done it within an English medium throughout the schooling years. They will speak English very well and will generally **not** be able to read or write the Gujarati text. Their connection to their ancestral homeland of India will be further removed, but they will still retain some ties to their African home. This group will also be the first ones to make young families in Canada where they will have spent most of their adult lives. They will also be a “sandwiched cohort” with frail parents and grand-parents from the above two groups on one side and Canadian born children (now young adults) on the other.

4. **First Generation Canadian** (19 years to 29 years) – this group will be naturalized Canadians and will be born to the third group. They could have, however, also arrived as very young children in the 1970’s. They will be entirely English speaking, will normally have difficulties in conversing for an extended period in Gujarati or Kutchi, and will be unable to read or write the Gujarati text. They will have very little or no ties to their ancestral homeland of India and will have a fickle or token connection to their African roots. This group will have finished their secondary schooling years in Canada, will either still be in a University or College, or will be working as young adults.

The above descriptions of the cohorts are generalized and not the norm. They are meant to add context to the site of the conversational partnerships.

- I have engaged in conversations with partners from all the four groups as follows:
a. **Four from group 1:** Two women and two men. Conversations were held separately with each, and family members were usually present to lend comfort. *Stories from three conversations were eventually used in the dissertation:* Sher'banoo (Sheroo), Fazal, and Roshan.

b. **Five from group 2:** Three women and two men. Conversations were held separately with each. *Stories from four of these conversations were used in the dissertation:* Rehmat, Shamshu, Sadru, and Nuru (Nurbanoo).

c. **Four from group 3:** These conversations were held in pairs of parental units. The reason behind this was to evoke the narratives both as matrimonial and parental units as they pioneered into Canadian life and made their young families. *Stories from one pair were used in the dissertation:* Farida and Amyn.

d. **Four from group 4:** These conversations were held either in pairs or separately, usually 2 young women and 2 young men. Pairing was preferred with this group so as to add a level of mutual comfort, draw out shared or similar experiences, and generally make the conversation more evocative. *Stories from all four conversations were used in the dissertation:* Nafiza, Shaireen, Rahim, and Hanif.

- Conversational partners were invited from the Vancouver and Toronto regions, the two areas in Canada where a large Ismaili community resides. Conversations were usually held at the conversational partner’s home.
- All invitations were on a voluntary basis. The nature and purpose of the narrative inquiry was fully disclosed to those invited. Those elders who were frail were allowed their family’s input in making the decision to join the conversational partnership.

- Conversations were conducted either in the mother tongues of Gujarati or Kutchi, or, in English. This narrative inquirer is fluent in all three.
• All conversations were audio taped and later transcribed into a narrative form and in English. In some cases transcribed narratives were offered to the conversation partners for their general input and comments. In the case of the frail elders (1st cohort), this process involved their family members. Revisions to the narratives were made accordingly.

• Conversations were open-ended, non-linear, and without any rigid format. They should rather be visualized as back-and-forth mutual utterances between two or more partners who are co-creating conversational realities (Shotter, 1993).

• Conversational encounters usually lasted between one and half to two hours and not necessarily in one sitting. More time was spent depending upon the partner's feeling that the conversation still needed more "telling."

• A complete ethical review process was followed according to the guidelines of the University of British Columbia.

• A high level of ethics, accountability, and responsibility were attached to the entire project at all times. Pseudonyms have been used at all times to safeguard the confidentiality of the conversational partners.

• The intent of the dissertation is not to use all conversations to achieve its purpose. The selection of conversations for use was determined by me based on the relevance of the stories to speak further about the overall thesis of the project. Although, all conversations in various ways served the objective of the thesis, I felt that this dissertation was limited in its scope to include them all.
Notes - Dissertation

PART ONE: "Blessings & Blows"

Introduction (pp. 1-6):


A Disquieting Journey: Sections 1-11

(Journey 1 : pp. 8-9)

1. The theme of modernity's institutions impact upon the narrative unity of a modern selfhood has been persuasively argued by moral theorist, Alasdair MacIntyre, in his seminal work: After Virtue (1984, 2nd ed.). One central claim that MacIntyre makes is that the social and political conditions typical of modernity are hostile to moral imaginations leaving us with contemporary moral confusions. I am greatly indebted to his work in guiding and defining my own, and he is one of the core group of scholars whose work I have embraced in conceptualizing the inter-generational project implicit in this dissertation.

2. Modernity, is being presented here as a heterogeneous phenomenon, and I am assuming that MacIntyre would agree. The definition offered by one post-modernist of modernity is: "the accumulated experience of Western civilization, industrialization, urbanization, advanced technology, the nation state, life in the fast lane," in which modern priorities include, "career, office, individual responsibility, bureaucracy, liberal democracy, detached experiment, evaluative criteria, neutral procedures, impersonal rules, and rationality." In all this the moral claims of modernity are increasingly distrusted. See, Roseneau, P. (1992, pp. 5-6), Post-modernism and the Social sciences.

3. This greatly oversimplifies the place and condition of an individual in a social world. Social theories about how humans organize themselves abound and most remain within the "structure-agency" dilemma, i.e. either I am driven by external forces that are organized in a way over which I have no or little control, or I am an individual agent with my own productive capabilities. I do not wish to plumb further in social theory here other than to make a point as Anthony Giddens does, that social life in late modernity has become "messy" as socially reproduced patterns and practices take on a permanence within ever changing and complex space-time boundaries. It is to these structures and practices - "reproduced permanencies," as Giddens calls them, that I, as a modern, now hold my reverence. See, Cohen, I., Anthony Giddens, pp. 282-283, in Rob Stones (ed.), Key Sociological Thinkers, 1998. For other
4. "Paradise forfeited" is a phrase coined by Erik Erikson in his seminal book, *Childhood and Society* (1963, 2nd ed., pp. 247-250). Basic trust (versus mistrust) in the parent unit during childhood is described as the first of eight stages of man (sic). Building of "ego identity" in relation to the structures of social institutions begins (or falters) here. From this I am inferring a constraint that at a time when the child needs the institution of family or parenthood upon which to test and taste his or her relationships, is also, unfortunately, when both parents may now be absent during most of the day attempting to earn a living. The child, in the absence of an extended family unit, may at this crucial moment be in the care of a mere simulacra of the provider. Parental faith - a virtue? - supports the building of trust in childhood.

5. The last stage of Erikson's eight stages is integrity of ego versus despair where the fruits of the prior seven stages may determine whether the whole "fruit blooms" or rots (pp 268-269). From this I may infer that when I am old, when I know that I do not have time to restart my life, and if the whole "fruit" of my life has bloomed into a self-narrative with integrity, then I may need to show my family the integrity of my whole life and my acceptance of death so that their lives may be enhanced. The virtues of leadership, integrity, constancy, wisdom, courage, friendship are available to be seen by those most closest to me - my family. Alternatively, if I have become incoherent during any one of the prior stages, the whole "fruit may rot" in despair or disgust and I may need my family to assist me to seek coherence. In either case, I am as important to my modern family as they are to me in my old age.

(Journey 2 : pp. 37-39)


(Journey 3 : pp. 72-74)


8. Rumi's, Masnavi i Ma'navi, occupies a central place in Sufism and took 43 years in the writing. The opening couplets presented here are from a translated and abridged version by Whinfield, E. H. (1979, pg. 1), *Teachings of Rumi*. My personal mediations through the poetry of Rumi have helped me enter into a spiritual world that offers solace when the modern world summons, insists, and persists.

9. In Shackle, C. and Moir, Z. (1992). *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia: An Introduction to the Ginans*. I have presented only the second verse of this ginan that was composed by Pir Shams al Din: pages 117-118.
10. In Gadamer, G. (1975, pg. 320). *Truth and Method*. This insight recognizes the finiteness of humanity, and according to Gadamer, brought the very art form of Greek tragedy into being out of the experience of the moral exemplars who lived the tragedy. His point is that even though we may have an ambitious sense to develop a capacity for seeing and understanding we can only approach it as a relationship to the essential limits of our finiteness.


*(Journey 4 : pp. 91-92)*

12. Gay Becker, in her book, *Disrupted Lives* (1999, pg. 39), says that “suffering arises not only from the experience of bodily disruption but also from the difficulty of articulating that disruption.” Her persuasive work, emerging out of medical anthropology and sociology, has periodically informed my own thinking in this section. People who live disrupted lives, live it in two ways: in body and in narrative. Disruption creates discontinuity of order in both.

13. Merleau-Ponty speaks to me here: “in every focusing movement my body invites past, present and future ... My body takes possession of time; it brings into existence a past and a future for a present, it is not a thing, but creates time instead of submitting to it.” (1962, pp. 239-240). *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

14. According to Becker, G. (1999, pg. 38), people who live the experience of embodied disruption, strive to find a cultural meaning from which to reconfigure that story. There is always a “hope of eventual resolution of the problem and a return to normalcy.” That hope is implicit in the way they structure their cultural narrative.

*(Journey 5 : pp. 120-122)*

15. The sense of the individuality I talk about here is situated within ‘a post-modern’ discourse, although I still socially live such an individuality within the description of modernity I describe in Note 2. From my perspective, I have now discovered the “eyes” or a “discursive consciousness” as Giddens calls it, to see myself differently and this itself may be a moral beacon. Charles Taylor writes: “The modern ideal of disengagement requires a reflexive stance. We have to turn inward and become aware of our own activity.” Taylor seems to feel that the turn inward is actually an effort to define and reach the goods based on moral ideals of self-mastery and self-exploration. In Taylor, C., *The Sources of Self* (1989, pp 175-6). For Giddens, see, Cohen, I. (1998) *Anthony Giddens*, pp 283-284, in Rob Stones (ed.), *Key Sociological Thinkers*.

16. Paraphrased from MacIntyre,A. (1984, p. 213): “(W)e are never more than the co-authors of our own narrative. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please.”

17. “Things take on importance against a background of intelligibility,” writes Taylor. “Let us call this a horizon. It follows that one of the things we can’t do, if we are to define ourselves significantly, is suppress or deny the horizons against which things take on significance for us.” (1991, p. 37).

*(Journey 6 : pp. 151-152)*

18. Most of these I have generalized from the stories and conversations presented in the Dissertation, as well as from my own personal experiences and the experiences of Ismaili friends and acquaintances. My father’s story – see ‘Sadru and I’ - is a case in point.
19. The dictionary definition of Aporia is: 1. Rhetoric, the expression of doubt. 2. A doubtful matter, a perplexing difficulty. The Canadian Oxford Dictionary. In *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1*, Paul Ricoeur (1984, pp. 5-30) speaks of the aporia of time as confronting us at many levels: the perspective of lived (experienced) time against that of time of the heavenly bodies (cosmic) and the impossibility of reconciling the two; and the problem of experiencing time in its three parts, past-present-future, and reconciling it to a unified whole. The narrative urge, according to Ricoeur, emerges out of this aporia.

20. For a persuasive discussion of the idea of the whole life being a life that has both a narrative unity and a unity of virtues see, MacIntyre, A. (1984, pp. 204-225).

*(Journey 7: pp. 183-184)*


*(Journey 8: pp. 212-213)*

22. This condition may be tenable, in a general and characteristic way, of most communities that fall under the disruptions of modern diasporas that Stuart Hall (see note 6) describes. I propose that other East Indian communities who may have made a similar journey from India to Africa, and then to the Western world all between the mid-1800's and late-1900's also fall in this condition. Ismailis may have been unique from among this group in the way they have secularly organized themselves, but my contention is that disruptive conditions may not have avoided them, altogether, merely affected them differently and in some cases even intensely because of this uniqueness. Bharati, for example, on three occasions illuminates how Ismailis have organized themselves differently in East Africa: (1) The Ismailis do not have the Indian sub-continent as their "spiritual point of reference" as do other Indian communities in Africa, and they do "not regard India or Pakistan with any kind of overt nostalgia"; (2) Ismailis, short of intermarriage, are seen to openly engage in cultural and social interchange with their African hosts and seem to "regard East Africa as their inalienable home" which they will not leave; (3) If the Ismailis in East Africa have become "modern and prominent" within three generations, they owe this "miraculous" "thorough-going social change" to the efforts of the late and the present Aga Khan: their "Hazir Imam" or "living Imam." In A. Bharati (1972, p. 258-259 & pp. 317-316): *The Asians in East Africa: Jayhind and Uhuru*.

23. MacIntyre makes a substantial argument that the fragmentation that has occurred in the narrative selfhood of the modern individual has also fragmented the traditional notions of what it meant to lead a life in the quest for virtues that previously guided the individual. (MacIntyre, A. 1984, 2nd edition).

*(Journey 9: pp. 217-220)*

24. One only has to read Jean-Francois Lyotard's "*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,*" to get the full measure of the struggle of individual narratives against the grand or meta-narratives of our time (1984). In its most simplest form, Lyotard defines "Postmodern" as "incredulity towards meta-narratives" (pg. xxiv).

25. Bakhtin's contention that what we see as literature of a community or fiction in novels and other genres, is merely stabilized forms of the first utterance now filtered into a genre where the truth of the first utterance in not diminished but only enhanced. In Bakhtin, M.M. (1986, pp.61-62), *Speech Genres and Other late Essays.* His work (pp. 60-102), offers valuable insight in the way simple (primary) utterances – everyday conversations – stabilize into complex (secondary) speech genres that range from novels to scientific commentaries and reside as "organized cultural communication (primarily written)."

31. For further discussions about the notion of "Thou" as "historical consciousness" see Gadamer H-G (1975, pp. 320-341). *Truth and Method*

**Sher'banoo: “Wake up! Why are you asleep?”(pp. 11-34)**

1. Jamnagar, in Gujarat, is where Sheroo was born and the stories I am recounting here are about life events that actually happened. Although in some cases I have resorted to imagination to fictionalize the kind of life that may have been lived at the time whilst these events were happening, Sheroo has given me much to go on, and the rest has fallen into its proper place. To the extent where I have found that original Gujarati or Kutchi utterances add more to the story than their English translations, I have used these. Often, the English meaning has been offered along side. If not, then these can be found in the glossary.

2. This story in particular fascinated me, and although at first I had little to go on, Sheroo offered me the general plot, the place, and the protagonists and the antagonists around which the story was written. Of particular interest is the mentioning of the Hindu celebration of Navaratri, and the way she traces her lineage to that particular time.

3. Hindu celebration of 'The Nine Nights', starting on the new moon of Ashvin that makes up the longest festival in the Hindu Year. The first three nights are normally dedicated to, Kali Ma (Fierce Mother), where people pray for the elimination of anger, greed, and other evils; the second three nights are dedicated to the goddess, Laxmi, where prayers for prosperity are said; the last three nights are dedicated to, Saraswati, where prayers for knowledge, understanding, and the understanding of one's soul are offered. In Salvadori, C. (1989, pg. 60). *Through Open Doors. A view of Asian Cultures in Kenya.*

4. *Satpanth* is a khojki word meaning - 'The True Way,' a term widely used in Ismaili ginans to reflect upon the "rightly guided" mode of the teachings of Nizari Ismailism. (Nanji, 1999, pp. 207-208).

5. Although, Sheroo sang this verse to me, the ginan can be traced to Pir Sayyid Imam Shah's *Parahatio - Morning Hymn*, verse 1. See Shackle, C. and Moir, Z. (1992, pg.91, 16:1). *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia: An Introduction to the Ginans.*


8. Muharram is more of a lamentation than a celebration. It commemorates the siege of Kerbala (in today's Iraq) during which Husayn, the Shia Muslim Imam (and the Prophet Muhammed's grandson) and his family were murdered. For the Shia Ithnasheris, remembrance of this time is a twelve day annual focus where Muharram narratives, hymns, and chants of 'Ya Hasan, Ya Husayn' are recited. It's on the tenth day (Ashura) of this event that many men flail their bare torsos with chains tipped with double-edged blades and lament the sacrifice of the Imam and his family. (Salvadori, C. 1989, pg. 251).

9. In Shotter, J. (1993, pp. 122-123). Language, in its various ways can show us how we are to our own relation, to our own situation, and in various ways reminds us of something we already know, but were ignoring or had forgotten.


13. The terms 'symbolic immortality', 'agentic', and 'communal' have been taken from Dan McAdams book, 'The stories we live by: Personal Myths and the making of the Self.' (1993, pp. 224-229). By 'agentic' he means - that pertaining to the agent and his or her agency.

**Poem - “a ruptured note”** (pp. 35-36)

1. This poem came to me after my very first conversation with Sher'banoo (Sheroo) who sang verses of a song about moths, bumblebees, and birds. Deeply spiritual, Sheroo's singing seemed to blend the distinction between the "her" (self) and the "i"(soul), and I have tried to do the same in this piece. The image of "flute" and the "bamboo" are Sufi-like symbols, although Sufi poetry of Rumi refers to "osier bed" of reeds and not bamboo in his prologue of the Masnavi (see, A Disquieting Journey - 3) The quest for the Divine by the soul which is trapped inside human form is one of the continuing motifs of many Ismaili ginans (hymns) as will be shown elsewhere in the dissertation.

**Fazal: “I am an insignificant person”**(pp. 40-71)

1. The expression “fullness of language" comes from Paul Ricoeur (1967, pp. 348-349), *Symbolism of Evil*, and is an image of language that Ricoeur consistently expounded in his writings: thought itself must "inhabit the fullness of language."

2. In McAdams, D. (1993, pg. 34). *The stories we live by: Personal Myths and the making of the Self*. McAdams goes on to say, "In the midst of this existential nothingness, we are challenged to create our own meanings, discover our own truths, and fashion the personal myths that will
to create our own meanings, discover our own truths, and fashion the personal myths that will serve to sanctify our lives.”

3. When Fazal told me of his father’s voyage to Africa in an Indian va’han, I set out to find out the conditions that the first pioneers may have encountered when they arrived into Mombasa and then when they went into the interior. Three books that provided excellent sources for this were: Miller, C. (1971). *The Lunatic Express: An Entertainment in Imperialism* (for the building of the Uganda Railway); Stigand, C.H. (1966). *The Land of Zinz* (for an account of Mombasa’s old harbour); & Salvadori, C. (1997). *Two Indian Travellers: East Africa 1902-1905* (for the descriptions of the train journey to Kisumu and an Indian trader’s life in the area). I have used these sources to fictionalize some of the events in Fazal’s father’s (Jamal) life.

4. Kassamali Paroo’s name in the Mombasa (and Kenya) Ismaili community is usually remembered in awe and respect. Although the description about Paroo’s personality came from Fazal, some were provided by my parents and a few others who remembered him. On my visit to Toronto, recently, I was surprised to hear from one very prominent Ismaili businessman that “my hero is Paroo!” “Why?” I asked him. “He was a trail blazer and a visionary. He had the ability to build institutions and run them. He was also an astounding orator. Don’t have those type of people (leaders) anymore, here in Canada,” was his reply. Given that this businessman must have been about ten years old when Paroo and Fazal’s encounter took place in that office, says a lot about Paroo’s impact on the community.


10. Fazal spoke about these steamer ships in his conversation. Additional information about their sailings from Kisumu to Entebbe, see Miller, C. (1971).


13. See Bruner, J. (1986, pg. 13). *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. The narrative mode he says, “deals in human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course. It strives to put its timeless miracles into the particulars of experience, and to locate the experience in time and space.”


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"Banyani Gaanga, Pili Pili Maanga" (pp. 75-89)

1. In this chapter, I use a soccer match between my favourite team of the time, and its equally worthy adversary to bring to light many historical tendencies as well as present to the reader a general social and political description of the tensions of the time.

2. For further historical readings about this period see the references presented in Note 6 of Section: "A Disquieting Journey."

3. Most of what I say here is documented in history. However, I have chosen the textual fonts in the manner I have, to reflect the feelings of many of my conversation candidates (and mine) whose lives were disrupted by these events.

Roshan's sah'chai: "Today who has the time to sit and listen?" (pp. 93-116)

1. See Keen, E. (1986, pp. 177-183), Paranoia and Cataclysmic Narratives. In T.R. Sarbin (ed.), Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct. The notion of coherence in narratives that are intelligible is more about being able to articulate experience sufficiently so that it can be experienced, so that it registers, makes sense, and even grounds life.


3. To have a ‘warrant’ of ‘voice’ is a crucial convention of social constructionism, according to Kenneth Gergen (1989, pp.72-75). Warranting Voice and the Elaboration of the Self. Those with the warrant usually shape the lives of those without it.

4. John Shotter in particular has argued the importance of conversation as rhetorical device to shift communities into a higher order moral argument. Every conversation encounter is the place of first utterance upon which we can exercise a certain intentionality to feel the otherness around us. In Shotter, J. (1993, pg. 124). Conversational Realities: Constructing Life through Language.

5. The way we knowingly and unknowingly make ourselves and our realities is what is implied by ‘joint action.’ It is action that produces unintended and unpredictable outcomes. It is from this zone of uncertainty that a practical moral setting arises. In Shotter, J. (1993, pp. 38-39).

Poem - “ina, meena, dhikha” (pp. 117-119)

1. From the lyrics of an old Indian film song I used to sing and even dance to as a little boy. It was sung by Indian Actor/Singer, Kishore Kumar, whom I considered a buffoon when he came on the screen. Rajesh (Khanna) and Sharmila (Tagore) were Indian actors of the early seventies. Sharmila Tagore was considered by my friends & I as the ideal of an Indian woman's beauty. I have used various lines from other Indian songs which still remain vivid, as well as names of other Indian actors (Dharmendra & Hema Malini; Waheeda Rehman & Dilip Kumar). Needless to say, I watched Indian films quite a lot, and it was a family habit to visit the Mombasa Drive-In for a movie and picnic every Sunday. The poem also recounts many aspects of the journey from India to Africa that many of my older conversation candidates described.

Shamshu: "Life is about Flavours." (pp. 123-149)

2. According to Gay Becker, “when life must be reorganized, metaphors can provide a transforming bridge between the image of the old life and the new one” and as a result may be a crucial way to reconstitute a sense of self after disruption. (1999, pg. 60).


Shiva’s Dance - Hymn (pg. 150)

1. In Sullivan, K.E. (1998, pg. 106). Indian Myths & Legends. A contribution to Shamshu’s story. The loss I feel in Shamshu’s life that seems to be connected to Malek, his wife, has in many ways been expressed through this song of Shiva.

Rehmat: “There was no-one in this world who was mine.” (pp. 153-182)

1. I have fictionalized this story from, Sullivan, K. E. (1998, pp. 103-105). Indian Myths and Legends.

2. “Mongoloid” was the common way in East Africa, to describe persons with Down’s Syndrome, as it must have been elsewhere. Children and adults with Down’s Syndrome were usually kept at home and there were no educational facilities to meet their needs. I don’t believe that has changed yet.

3. Khand, is an important part of the final rites of the funeral ceremony where close family members with the help of other community members carry the coffin (mayat) on their shoulders as they take it to the motor hearse for the short journey to the cemetery. In Canada, this is done inside the jamatkhana social hall, and then again, briefly at the cemetery. In Mombasa, there was a time, my father told me, when the mayat was carried on the shoulders all the way to the cemetery, whilst the procession recited prayers.


5. In Shackle, C. & Moir, Z. (1992, pp. 102-105). Ismaili Hymns from South Asia: An Introduction to the Ginans. I have contrasted the narrative implicit in this ginan (Ismaili holy hymn) against the story of Rehmat since her own life journey in many ways has been a spiritual quest. The ginan and its transliteration will be presented in verses throughout this chapter.

6. Although many of the older women I have spoken with told me that schooling was rarely an option in their lives in India and then in Africa, by the time Rehmat’s generation took root, the Ismaili community had already begun to educate its girls. However, there were cases such as Rehmat’s, when the father could still invoke his rulings as he pleased. There were also situations when girls still got married young (by sixteen or seventeen), though this is marginally better than the older cohort who got married, in many cases, by thirteen.

7. At this moment, Rehmat begins to cry. The word “joolam” cannot be translated into English, and my attempt at it by the choice of the word “harm”, I feel is insufficient to explain the full wrath of the word. But Rehmat’s story adequately describes the word eventually. I have
honoured this moment by giving a title to the chapter that expresses Rehmat's feelings as she remembers that moment.

8. In DeConcini, B. (1990, pp. 161-163). *Narrative Remembering.* I've referred to DeConcini's work extensively in this chapter to follow-up on my earlier reflection about the act of remembrance as also an act of identity in which narrative plays a crucial part. (Also see Note 7 under the section: Sadru & I).


11. See Bakhtin, M.M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays.* (Also see Note 2 under the section - Part Two: Introduction).

12. The philosophical idea about the Blessings and Blows of Life, and ‘Resentment’ came from Hans, J. (1994). *The Golden Mean,* where he argues of the need once again to recover the virtues that once made part of the traditional lives of our ancestors.

**The Day Tom Mboya was Shot**(pp.185-188)

1. As a Kenyan and African politician, the late Tom Mboya was seen as a rising star amongst Kenya's new breed of leaders. Even though an African nationalist himself, his assassination stirred an evil brew of political uneasiness within the Indian and Ismaili community. I remember the uneasiness within my own family as talk of the future of the country as a multi racial society was put to doubt. For this chapter, I have used David Goldsworthy's book, *Tom Mboya: The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget* (1982), as my main source.

2. The Luo and the Kikuyu were at the time Kenya's main rival tribal groups. The political leadership amongst the Luos was afforded to Odinga Oginga, whilst the Kikuyus looked upon Jomo Kenyatta, the first President of the country, as their political leader, even a kind of a "father figure."


**Sadru & I: “When does a man begin to rot?”**(pp.189-211)

1. In Vassanji, M. G. (1991). *No New Land.* It tells of a story of Nurdin Lalani and his family, Asian immigrants from Tanzania, in East Africa, who have come and settled in the Toronto suburb of Don Mills. Although Vassanji, himself an Ismaili author, puts the Lalani as belonging to the fictional Shamsi community, the story is an analogy of Ismaili immigrants who arrived as a result of political and social uncertainties in their African homeland. The story is also about displacement from home and the ensuing despair it causes in individuals and families.

2. These street names evoke powerful recollective memories since both my parents and myself, during our early years as immigrants, lived in Don Mills and in one of the many apartment buildings not unlike Vassanji's main characters. Even today, many Ismailis have remained here around two local Jamatkhanas.

3. *Dhaam-Dhoom:* An expression in kutchi or gujarati that conveys among other things, feverish activity, bedlam, excitement, liveliness, turmoil. It can be either of a joyous type or can indicate sorrow and distress.


6. This section is my family's story presented in the 3rd person. Except for my own name, all other names of family members have been given pseudonyms as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sadru</td>
<td>father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shireen</td>
<td>mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anil</td>
<td>older brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeenat</td>
<td>my sister-in-law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamila</td>
<td>my wife</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


8. The quote from Stephen Crites is from: Storytime: Recollecting the past and projecting the future. (pg. 164)

9. In attempting to understand “paranoia and cataclysmic narratives”, Ernest Keen (1986, pp. 174-190) provides an insightful account of the incoherence present in the stories and experiences of people living such disruptive lives: “... Being on the edge between the arriving future and the disappearing past not only makes life tolerable but itself is tolerable because, and only because, there is a future. In cataclysm, I lose the future, and the edge I am on is the gaping emptiness of nothingness...for the softening, made possible by the future has been washed away.” (pg.188)

10. The quote is from Stephen Crites: Storytime: Recollecting the past and projecting the future. (pg. 164).

PART TWO: Praxis (pg. 214)

Amyn & Farida: “We're facing emptiness.” (pp. 221-264)

1. This chapter takes a glimpse into the lives of Farida and Amyn, an Ismaili couple who arrived in Canada in 1974, a year after they were married. Amyn, a Ugandan, and Farida, a Kenyan, the couple initially went to England after the Ugandan Exodus. They have two teenage children - Tameeza, their twenty-one year old daughter who is in university, and Alim, their seventeen year old son, who is finishing high school. Neither children are present in the house during the conversation. Nothing further need be said about the children for that will be revealed in its own time. Both Amyn and Farida are well-educated, prefer to converse in English, and have now been in Canada for about twenty-seven years, nearly over half their present ages.


5. What I mean by script is: doing the kind of parenting that is vaguely understood as being generally accepted in larger modern society — in parenting books, from experts, teachers, etc. But this script which is no more under the gaze of the community or extended families can be loosely applied. More often, new scripts may be made up as isolated parents—single or couples learn to face the difficulties of parent-child relations alone. One may even avoid using scripts if one can get away with it, and instead use physical or emotional violence upon their children as long as no-one gets a wind of it. This looseness of script is one of the consequences of the modern private-public distinction that Skolnick speaks about (Skolnick, A., 1987, pg. 325). *The Intimate Environment: Exploring Marriage and the Family*.


11. At a public forum at the ‘Remaining Human’ conference, University of British Columbia, May, 2001. Maturana went on to suggest that “you cannot understand an action unless you see it in the context of a whole history, for ultimately the path that human history follows is guided by emotions, set in that history.” The only thing one can do is to ask— is this path I am laying in front, a path of ‘good earth?’ (paraphrased).


**Ginan - “The Journey is for Two” (pp. 273-276)**

1. In Shackle, C. & Moir, Z. (1992, pp. 102-103). *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia: An Introduction to the Ginans*. I have provided the original transliteration of the ginan in a story form. The symbolic descriptions are by the authors. (pp.181-182).
“Pirbhai’s Blessings” (pp. 277-312)

1. Later I remembered that it was Fukuyama who had argued a case for this strange proposition. See Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man.*

2. In Hall, M.C. (1999, pg. 151). *The Special Mission of Grandparents.* She goes on to say that grandparents have a special mission, among many other goals, to free their adult children’s lives from negative family intensities. For example, many grandparents merely react to family situations, and some are trapped inside family status quo as passive observers as a result of intergenerational tensions. Stepping in to interrupt cycles of disruptive behaviours or assisting in ameliorating family dysfunctions or making a sincere effort to enhance the life outcomes of their grandchildren are intrinsic to good grandparenting.


6. Although a true account of events recounted by Nuru (Nurbanoo), my seventy-five year old conversational partner, I have also fictionalized certain parts drawing upon true historical events that befell the Congo between 1958-1960. An interesting and disturbing rendition of events can be found in Legum, C. (1961). *Congo Disaster.* Also see, McKown R. (1969). *Lumumba.*


Epilogue: “The miracle that saves the world.” (pp.322-324)

1. To begin and end the dissertation with a quotation from Hannah Arendt is appropriate since it is one of her profound arguments that it is the act of natality and the ensuing narration of that one single life that ultimately “bestows upon human affairs faith and hope.” In Arendt, H. (1958, pg. 222). *The Human Condition.*
Notes - Figures


Appendix 1 - Theoretical Foundations (pp. 325-330)

1. See MacIntyre, A. (1984), *After Virtues*. Page numbers of subsequent quotations from this reference source will be noted on the main text page.

2. The Homeric list of virtues, or *aretaí*, would translate into what we would call, possession of excellences - kinship, friendship, cunning, are other types. In Heroic societies, virtues were implicit of character tied to tradition and social structures. *Kudos*, or glory, went to those in society who preserved or extended their excellences. In an important sense, morality could not be contemplated from outside the individual's place in society as we do now.

3. Interestingly, the core catalogue of New Testament virtues, especially, 'Humility', would have been completely alien to Aristotle and considered as vices. For example, to strive for riches, in the New Testament, is tantamount to being hell-bound, whereas Aristotle would look at it as a venture towards the disposition of the virtue of *megalopsuchia*, or Magnanimity.

4. The point to be made here, is that the notion of virtues as being second to some form of practice or roles in tradition or society has proved to be incompatible over time, with each age and time taking the same notion of virtue and giving it a different spin. Even in our Twentieth Century narratives, the virtues of 'Integrity' or 'Courage' would mean different things to say, the Nazis, who aspired towards creating a new narrative of a thousand year Reich, and the Jews, who aspired against all odds, to hold on to their ancient historical narratives. MacIntyre argues that the modern age is deplete of not only a viable notion of virtues, but also of what constitutes 'practice.' (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 181-203).

5. It would seem proper to say that from within the arena of 'practices,' as defined by MacIntyre, a glimpse of what makes those practices extend their excellences is seen as the disposition towards the virtues by those involved in such practices.

6. The notion of accountability and intelligibility has been argued by me in the, "A Disquieting Journey," section. The case is being made that by the very fact that narratives contain inherent and rival choice-making of my actions, what gets included and, what left out, provides grounds to hold myself accountable to my narrative.

7. For a thorough and recent introduction to reflections about 'Narrative' and its associated genres see, Coble, R. (2001), *Narrative*.


9. I have greatly simplified Ricoeur's thoughts on *Idem* and *Ipse* identities to get my point across. The core thinking is one of *aporia*, or tension that sits between this gap, with *Ipse* identity trying to keep and perhaps even safeguard the gap, and *Idem* identity trying to narrow it and
even conflate it. The project of this conflict comes to end when we die. In some sense, it merely gets absorbed into the identities of those who were close to us and may translate into their own aporias.
For Hannah Arendt’s thoughts on narrative and action, see Arendt, H. (1958), *The Human Condition.*

10. According to John Shotter, these spaces of accountabilities are first offered to us within conversational encounters, the first and primary utterances between humans. Seen as ‘rhetorical-responsive’ genres, conversations reveal to us the prefigured world of prior questions, in which two or more agents operate. Thus they are also sites of practical-moral settings which reveal to us our tendencies. ‘Conversation,’ as a beginning place, a ‘method,’ allows us to enter into those sites that have already become stories or narratives - secondary utterances. See Shotter, J. (1993). *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life through Language.*

11. In a sense, this becomes the project of ‘critical hermeneutics,’ where the hermeneutical circle forces a re-engagement back into the world.

**Appendix 2 - Entering into Conversation Partnerships (pp. 331-335)**

1. In Shotter, J. (1993, pg. 120), *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life through Language.*
### Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Areh</td>
<td>An exclamation/question: Oh?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bapa</td>
<td>A respectful term for an old man; father, grandfather.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bajans &amp; Geets</td>
<td>Devotional Hindu hymns and songs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beechari</td>
<td>Pity invoked upon a girl/woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bui-bui</td>
<td>Kiswahili word for thin black garment used as veil and worn on top of a dress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaacha</td>
<td>Father’s younger brother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaachee</td>
<td>Wife of father’s younger brother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dehr</td>
<td>Husband’s older brother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dehrani</td>
<td>Husband’s older brother’s wife.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhaam-Dhoom</td>
<td>An expression in kutchi or gujarati that conveys among other things, feverish activity, bedlam, excitement, liveliness, turmoil. It can be either of a joyous type or can indicate sorrow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duka/Dukan</td>
<td>Shop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gheerya Zhaari</td>
<td>Request to the Divine through prayer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gharba</td>
<td>Indian (gujarati) folk dance - usually of devotion - where dancers swirl whilst moving in a circle. (Salvadori, C. 1989, pg. 72).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fario</td>
<td>Compound within or near a house.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hahn</td>
<td>Yes, or hahn? - Yes?.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ithnasharis</td>
<td>Arabic word (Ithna Ashariyya) for the followers of branch of Shia Islam who believe in a line of twelve Imams from Ali to Muhammad al Mahdi. (Nanji, A. 1999, pg. 205).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imam</td>
<td>Arabic word meaning “leader”; in a simpler sense – one who leads the prayer, congregation. But, among the Shia Muslims, the term refers specifically to Ali (Prophet Muhammed’s son-in-law and first Imam) and those from among his immediate descendants. The Ismaili usage as presented in these stories connotes a significant and extensive spiritual authority to the Imam. (Nanji, A.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
1999, pg. 205). Hence, Hazir Imam, means the current living Imam.

Iman

Faith; one of the five core virtues of the Satpanth tradition of Nizari Ismailism extolled in the ginans - the others being, Truth (sat), Contentment (santokh), Forbearance (khamia), and Remembrance (zikar). In Shackle, C. & Moir, Z. (1992, pg. 161).

Ismaili/ism

Ismaili/ism – implicit of the Islamic narrative – traces its traditions through a series of historical events all the way to the time of the Sunni and Shia split which centered around who would succeed Prophet Muhammed, and also around other doctrinal differences. The Shia branch, which centered its support behind Ali, the Prophet’s son-in-law, vested a divine interpretation upon Ali as the first Imam, and also upon the hereditary line of Imams who followed after Ali. But, along this line as well were further schisms out of which historical and contemporary Ismailism has emerged under the guidance of its present 49th Imam, Karim, Aga Khan IV. For further readings about the Ismailis and the philosophy implicit of Ismailism, see: Daftary, F. (1998; 1990). For further readings about the Nizari Ismaili tradition, see Nanji, A. (1999).

Jaldi

Hurry! or quickly, as in ‘walk quickly.’

Jamat

Congregation, community.

Jamat

Members of the congregation; parishioners.

Jamat Khana

House of assembly; the centre of communal, religious, and social activity (Nanji, A. 1999, pg. 205).

Jeth

Husband’s younger brother.

Jethani

Husband’s younger brother’s wife.

Jugu

Indianised form of njuger: peanut.

Khidmat

Selfless service, volunteerism, care for others in the community.

Khoja

Strictly speaking the name of a caste. But as used here, it is the term afforded by the Ismaili Pir to the Hindu converts to Shia Nizari Ismailism. It is derived from the Persian word, Khwaja, meaning Lord or Master. (Nanji, A. 1999, pg. 206).

Khojawaar

Used by Sheroo to describe the Khoja tenements of Jamnagar.

Maasi

Mother’s sister. Her husband is addressed as Maasa.

Maama

Mother’s brother. His wife is addressed as Maami.

Memons


Mishkaki

Kiswahili for Shish-kebabs.

Mithai

Indian sweetmeats of which saffroned ladoos are one type.
**Mohabat**
Affection, love; devotion towards the beloved.

**Mukhi**
Local community leader; currently his function is to officiate jamatkhana at the time of prayers and religious ceremonies. (Nanji, A. 1999, pg. 207).
Wife, who also officiates in the jamatkhana is called the, Mukhiani.

**Nana bapa**
Maternal grandfather.

**Nani Maa**
Maternal grandmother.

**Pachedi**
Type and way of dressing of Khoja women which covered the head, legs, and often, the face. Or, piece of light cloth that’s worn around head and shoulders.

**Pir**
Elder; in Sufism, the Master; in Nizari Ismailism, the chief Da’i who works on behalf of the Ismaili Imam, and represents him. (Nanji, A. 1999, pg. 207).

**Pyar**
Love (Hindustani, Urdu, Gujarati).

**Raas**
A dance in which one or more persons go around in circles clapping and clicking fingers to a beat.

**Raj**
Kingdom (as in the ‘British Raj’).

**Rohtlo(a)**
Millet chapati(s).

**Salaale**
An exclamation (Swahili).

**Sasrah**
(Mother and Father-in-law).

**Sherbet**
A sweet drink, usually made with milk, vanilla essence, rose colour and pistachio shavings. Usually used to commemorate all types of social and religious festivals. Other varieties also exist.

**Va‘han**
Wooden sailboat, usually with one main sail used by ocean traders to cross the Indian Ocean. The Arab Dhow is somewhat similar to the Indian Va‘han.

**Yaar**
Friend.
References


