

The Bag of Passports: on Mobility, National Identity, and Migration

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Biography

Abdullah Qureshi is a Pakistani-born artist, educator, and cultural producer. Within his practice he is interested in using painting and collaborative methodologies to address personal histories, traumatic pasts, and childhood memories. Based at Aalto University in Finland, his ongoing doctoral project, entitled *Mythological Migrations: Imagining Queer Muslim Utopias*, he examines formations of queer identity and resistance in Muslim migratory contexts.

Keywords

Migration, Pakistan, Queerness, Art, Film

“While some of us who have escaped our cages may start looking for ways back into the zoo, others may try to rebuild a sanctuary in the wild, and a few fugitive types will actually insist on staying lost”

Jack Halberstram, 2011

Introduction

As far back as I can remember I had the desire to travel outside Pakistan, to immigrate, or at least, live in another country for an extended period of time. There was always the sense

that the world beyond was better – that somehow; I did not belong in my country of birth on a fundamental level. Much of this feeling of not belonging and seeing Pakistan as a lesser and backward space was the result of a combination of things. On a personal level, as an effeminate boy who was bullied a lot at school, I found solace in making art, reading books, and Western television – and perhaps, I was looking for escape. And, this desire to escape was further re-affirmed by the stories I would hear from family relatives who would travel, sharing their exciting adventures along with photographic and video evidence re-affirming that, indeed, life outside Pakistan had much more to offer.

Within my lifetime, I also saw my family move from being middle class to upper middle class, which involved upgrading from a Pakistani-run private school to an international one. As a result of this, I also found myself surrounded by children who came from families more affluent than mine – those who had traveled outside Pakistan, or had more *superior* foreign passports than my Pakistani one. The latter, I now understand, I saw as failure then. Perhaps, as a result of this personal history, I applied for Canadian immigration in 2015 and was approved permanent residency in Canada in September 2018. And though I had made many journeys out of my hometown, Lahore – including living in the UK and Finland as a student – leaving Pakistan with *immigrant* stamped on my passport carried a strange sense of shame, betrayal, and abandonment toward Pakistan.

Reflecting on these memories, and thinking about failure as proposed by Jack Halberstram (2011) – where success is established in relationship to a heteronormative and capitalist society – I also realize that growing up in the 1980s or 1990s in Pakistan, I was not alone in having migratory aspirations or feeling a sense of failure in my country of birth. Historically, this idea may very well be traced to the political ideologies, struggle, and movement that led to the very formation of Pakistan as an independent state in 1947 from British colonial rule and India as a separate homeland for the Muslims of the region as well as other minorities – such as Christians,

Zoroastrians, Hindus and Sikhs who decided to stay.

Within this paper, I examine: the history of movement within my family by studying my grandparents' passports – situated within the larger context of how the Pakistani passport developed over the decades, immigration from Pakistan to North America – and how that informed the contextualization of identity politics for Pakistanis in the diaspora, in particular, through the works of two Pakistani-Canadian filmmakers, Sharlene Bamboat and Arshad Khan, who address growing up in Pakistan in the 80s under the Islamic dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq from a queer perspective, and challenges of racism and homophobia in Canada upon migrating respectively. By doing so, my objective is to present a complicated perspective on movement and national identity through a Pakistani and queer point of view; and, in particular, responding to the thematic focus of this journal, *Borderless: Global Narratives in Art Education*, methodologically taking a narrative inquiry approach to highlight South Asian artistic investigations into migration.

Historical and Regional Context

Iftikhar Dadi's article, *The Pakistani Diaspora in North America* (2006), is useful in understanding the formation of Pakistan as an independent homeland for the Muslims (as well as other minorities) of India, and trying to make sense of what being *Pakistani* might mean within the context of having immigrated to North America. Providing historical context, Dadi (2006) states:

Pakistan was carved out of British India in 1947, comprising the geographically divided East and West Pakistan, with the territory of Kashmir in dispute with India. The partition of British India led to massive migrations and set the stage for a series of hostile encounters between Pakistan and India, which have continued until today, as violent exchanges in the form of war and clandestine operations, but also in terms of symbolic struggle. In 1971, after

widespread civil unrest in East Pakistan, its brutal suppression by the (overwhelming West) Pakistani army, and the break out of war between India and Pakistan, East Pakistan broke away to form Bangladesh, leading to further transfer of populations between the three countries. Therefore, in the last six decades, the question as to what a Pakistani might be has witnessed at least two large-scale shifts in meaning. (p. 39-40)

Much of this turbulent history has had a natural impact on most, if not all, segments of Pakistani society. As each decade went on, and the rise and fall of democratic governments interspersed with military dictators, the country has undergone a range of *official* and state-led initiatives to define Pakistani cultural identity. Within media, this has been evident with the way female news telecasters were expected to dress up, which involved mandatory hijab during General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamic dictatorship (1977 – 1988). Similarly, in response to art and literature, in different times, writers and artists have undergone a range of censorship, as well as the visible shifts have taken place in visual appearance of the Pakistani passport, as I will discuss shortly.

Furthermore, as Simone Wille points out, “when talking about Pakistani cultural identity, one also has to consider the great neighboring cultures (Iran and India), as well as all the modernizing trends that have influenced the country before and after partition (Abbas, Abid, Khan, Qayyum & Wille, 2011, p.166). In relation to Pakistan's complex political history, Wille writes, “many attempts have been made to impose a unitary vision of Pakistan based on religion” (Wille, 2005, p.24). An obvious example being the green in the Pakistani flag that represents the color of Islam – and thus, brings the people of Pakistan together. As mentioned above, though Pakistan was created as an independent homeland for Muslims as well as other religious and ethnic minorities of India, considering recent cases of minority and sectarian related violence, “a fact clearer today than ever before: the only real alliance between the people of Pakistan, was, and has always been, that of ‘Islam’” (Wille, 2005, p.22). Much of this vi-

olence that various religious and ethnic communities were, and continue to be subjected to in Pakistan, led to their migration – often fearing their or their own families’ safety or as a result of diminishing economic opportunities for the minorities.

Addressing the religious diversity that was present within South Asia prior to partition, and which continued to exist post 1947, Dadi points out how when discussing the *Pakistani* identity within scholarship, oftentimes, it almost entirely reads as a monolithic representation of Muslim, although this in itself is incredibly complex considering different sects such as Sunnis, Shites, Hanafis etc. This results in any single definition of being Pakistani within the context of the diaspora, impossible; and, becomes further complicated when we bring in the perspective of gender and sexuality – which outside the realm of heteronormativity is also read as un-Islamic.

The Pakistani Passport

In an increasingly globalized world, mobility across geographical borders plays a significant role in the opportunities that are available to people – in particular related to education and economic emancipation. The model of the European Union, despite its challenges, demonstrates this. In contrast, Pakistan, even regionally speaking, remains an incredibly restricted territory – where, the crossing of the border with India requires reciprocal high-level government clearance, and similarly requires visas for all other neighboring countries including: Afghanistan, Iran, and China. Within South Asia, Nepal and Sri Lanka remain open to most countries in the world, including Pakistan.

At the moment, according to Passport Index, the United Arab Emirates is ranked highest with visa free access (VFA) and visa on arrival (VoA) to 167 countries (Passport Index, 2019). Germany is on number two with access to 166 countries, followed by the United States of America, Singapore, South Korea, and several European countries on three with access to



Figure 1. Pages from my grandfather, Shameem Sarfraz’s passport (1954 – 1959). From the personal archives of the author.

165. Canada is ranked fourth, alongside Japan and other European countries that can visit 164 countries with pre-approved visas. Meanwhile, Pakistan is ranked 3rd lowest at 92, having VFA access to 8 countries, VoA for 27 (usually with the condition of already possessing a UK, US, or a Schengen visa), and requiring visas for 163. However, this was not always the case.

Going through drawers back at home in Lahore, I discovered my grandparents’ old passports, which date as early as 1954, just 7 years post Pakistan’s formation. Tracing the history of the Pakistani passport, Nadeem F. Paracha fills the gap prior to 1954 showing that the first Pakistani passport issued was largely beige, with only the binding and two flags being green (Paracha, 2016). Continuing to explain that the two flags represented the country’s two wings, East and West, and the languages featured on the cover included Bengali, English, and Urdu. Going through earlier versions of the Pakistani passport, one can see that Pakistanis did not require pre-arrival visas to all countries of the world—including, India. By 1954, as is evident

within the case of my grandfather as well, the Pakistani passport had become dark green—with the name of the passport holder and passport number captioned on a beige background. The two Pakistani flags remained. Pakistani passports from the mid 50s show that apart from Israel, the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, Pakistanis could still get visas on arrival for most countries in the world. Commenting on the political unrest that followed between East and West Pakistan in a few years, Paracha (2016) writes:

Due to tensions between the state and the Bengali majority of East Pakistan, the government had introduced the One Unit scheme, which treated the ethnically diverse West Pakistan as a single province and the Bengali-dominated East Pakistan as the other province.

Consequently, West Pakistani passports had *Pakistan Passport* written only in English and Urdu, whereas East Pakistani passports had the same written in English and Bengali. (para 10-11)

From the beginning, the political situation in Pakistan has rapidly evolved, constantly shuffling between democratically elected governments struggling to complete their term, and military rule. In terms of foreign relations, Pakistan has historically maintained a tense relationship with neighbouring India with the Kashmir issue ¹ at the very centre; this has led to two wars in the past, and at present, the conflict is heightened once again. During the Cold War, Pakistan was considered a “frontline” ally of US in the *war against* the USSR in Afghanistan (Sunawar & Cuotto, 2015, p.1), as well as a sanctuary for the Afghan resistance movement (Weinbaum, 1991, p.71). Following the Cold War, “the US disengaged itself from the Afghan problem and Pakistan was left alone to face the consequences” (Mahmood, 1997, p.101). From a cultural point of view, these internal and external political struggles, have shaped Pakistan and Pakistani national identity, where not only the visual appearance of the Passport changed, the

languages used went from English, Urdu, Bengali and French (perhaps used in an effort to be more global) to just English and Urdu. And, as a consequence of Pakistan's weakening position geo-politically and economically, its travel document saw a steady decline with less and less countries allowing visa-free access.

My Family's Journeys

Recalling the partition of Pakistan and India, during an interview for 1947 Partition Archive, my paternal grandfather, Shameem Sarfraz (1931–2017) said: It was a calamity of the worst kind, and for days it seemed like it was not going to stop. People were on the move, trying to relocate without getting harmed (Qureshi, 2016). He was born in 1931 in Sialkot, a city located in the Punjab region of Pakistan. Shortly after completing his education in 1952 he was offered a job at Aramco, the American Arab oil company. Much of this is reflected within his passports across the decades where most of the pages are covered with Saudi stamps. My grandmother, Bilqees, accompanied him a few years later, and so her passports carry similar marks throughout the pages.

By the 1980s, and well into the 1990s, various members of my father's side of the family resided in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (USA). And, every time they would return to Pakistan from these locations, they would come bearing gifts that were otherwise not available in Pakistan. Often times these were simple things such as jeans, shoes, or even chocolates, but the brands would reveal that they were imported. My aunt in the UK had a son the same age as me. As a way of offering me the same exposure that was available for her son, she would record the cartoons he would watch on British television on video home system (VHS), and send them to Pakistan for me. They would never work, as the videocassette recorders (VCR) in Pakistan were not compatible with the VHSs produced in the UK. I had to wait several years until my aunt moved back to Pakistan

in the mid of 1990s, and brought her British VCR along allowing me to watch the backlog of recorded material.

Prior to the introduction of satellite television in Pakistan in the late 1990s, VHS remained the only major way of being exposed to cartoons (as well as other films) from abroad. This is further picked up by Pakistani-Canadian artist, Sharlene Bamboat's work, *Video Home System* (2018), who traces how popular culture and politics are intertwined within Pakistan—and in particular, how this manifested within the 1980s and 1990s. Born in Karachi in 1984 to a Zoroastrian household, Bamboat's family immigrated to Canada when she was just a child. The piece, *Video Home System*, is centered around three main characters, Aaditya Aggarwal, who is referred to as Aadi in the film, and two children, listed as DM and AN in the cast. Beginning with a black and white interview of the late Pakistani pop star, Nazia Hassan (1965–2000), the three characters are shown sitting on a sofa, as if watching the interview on television. There is static in the interview video, appearing like it was recorded on an old cassette that seems to now be showing the wear and tear of time or having been overplayed. Nazia Hassan and Zoheb Hassan were popular as a sibling duo singing sensation in the 1980s and 1990s in Pakistan, India, as well as some other parts of the world. Famous for songs such as *Aap Jaisa Koi* (Hassan, 1979) and *Disco Deewane* (Hassan & Hassan, 1981), they are credited for introducing pop music, specifically disco, to the Pakistani musical scene. However, within Bamboat's video we see how this upset the dictator at the time, General Zia-ul-Haq, who saw their songs as mockery to his regime and responsible for corrupting the youth, and a ban was placed on their music in Pakistan. Shortly after, the two young musicians were summoned to the presidential palace in Islamabad, where the two were lectured on what it meant to be Pakistani and good Muslims by the general himself.

General Zia-ul-Haq's period is often described as the most conservative time in Pakistan's history—where various policies were enacted to make Pakistan more *Islamic*. Though the coun-



Figure 2. Video Still from Video Home System, 2018, Sharlene Bamboat. Courtesy of the artist.

try's official name had changed to *Islamic Republic of Pakistan* in 1973, it was in 1984 that it started to appear on the passport (Paracha, 2016, para 31). The arts also went through heavy censorship, as observed by Salima Hashmi (2001), where literature, dance, and theatre were the first to be impacted for their obvious outreach, the film industry collapsed, and visual artists were expected to explore subjects such as landscapes and calligraphy. Though from very early on in Pakistan's history, the state, and by extension the military, was "invested in the production and policing of foundational truths about the nation-state and its apparatus of imperial violence" (Rajani & Malkani, 2018, para 4), it was under Zia-ul-Haq that a clear strategy and force was developed to counter liberal dissent.

Shortly after Nazia Hassan and Zoheb Hassan's meeting with General Zia-ul-Haq, the ban on their music was lifted, says the narrators voice in Bamboat's *Video Home System*. However, following this, upon the end of Zia ul-Haq's regime with his death, the music, film, and theatre industries would never be the same. Over the last decade or so, these industries have all been going through a revival of sorts, but are often unable to address challenging and critical issues due to existing legal and societal restrictions as well as lack funding from non-state and non-corporate sources. Within visual arts, during the Zia period, resistance was seen from a group of women artists, including Lala Rukh (1948–2017), Salima Hashmi (b. 1942), amongst others—who led the writing of a Women Artists Manifesto (1983), in secret (made public for the first time in 2001), where each one of the signatories acknowledge the pioneering role of women in art education in Pakistan, and condemn the anti-women and anti-arts sentiment at the time (Hashmi, 2001, p. 193-195). And though, many of the signatories, and in particular, Lala Rukh as one of the founders of the Women Action Forum, were also heavily involved in activism, given that most of them were educators, pedagogy was the space where dissent was fostered—a fact evident when looking at the political contemporary art that emerged from Pakistan in the 1990s (for example, by: Shahzia Sikander, b. 1969, Rashid Rana, b. 1968, Bani



Figure 3. Screenshot of Disco Deewane [Music Video], 1981, by Nazia Hassan and Zoheb Hassan, Producer: Biddu, Label: HMV India.

Abidi, b. 1971, as well as others).

Migration: Anxieties and Failure

On my mother's side of the family, there was very little travel outside Pakistan. However, in the 1970s, my maternal grandfather, Masood Sheikh (1937–1999), unsuccessfully tried to acquire Canadian citizenship. Though immigration policy in Canada had started opening up around 1962, when “Ottawa ended racial discrimination as a feature of the immigration system,” introducing a points-based system in 1967 “to rank potential immigrants for eligibility” (Dirks, 2006, para 14). Instead of race, colour, nationality, the points-based system ranked potential candidates based on work skills, education levels, language ability (in speaking French or English), and family connections (Dirks, 2006, para 14). This was also the period when “immigration from South Asia to the United States dramatically increased after 1965s and the 1960s also witnessed the beginning of large-scale Pakistani immigration to Canada”, and in most cases, these individuals were “educationally well endowed” (Dadi, 2006, p. 45). Very little is known about my grandfather's life in Canada during these years, apart from the fact that he spent most of his time in Toronto and Ottawa. Additionally, he only had an educational certificate rather than a diploma or degree, so caught between the years when various policy level changes were taking place in Canada, and not being sure of how it would end up for him, after seven years being away from his family, he decided to move back to Pakistan. My mother would proudly narrate this story that her father came back home for her, however, along with his passports, I also discovered many of his cards that he used in Canada—which he had kept safely in his briefcase till his death in 1999. These included bankcards, shopping centre account cards, and his social security number, perhaps as a painful reminder of wanting to settle elsewhere, and failing.

On a personal level, my anxieties around living in Pakistan hit a peak once I started studying



Figure 4. Various Cards from Canada belonging to my grandfather, Masood Sheikh. From the archive of the author.

in London in 2006, and for the first time got a chance to explore my sexuality in an open space. However, this was also a time I found myself emotionally most vulnerable and alone, and feared moving back to Pakistan. During a trip in Karachi, in 2008, the intensity of my fear manifested in the form of a dream:

I am standing in Dadabu's (paternal grandfather) room. It seems larger, like a king's room, almost out of Shakespeare's Macbeth. The mood is somber, and the air seems still.

Dadabu is in the bed, looking old and frail, but alert. Chachoo (father's younger brother) is standing on his left, and it seems like he's explaining himself, giving hasaab (accounting report) of some sort. On the bottom right side I see Muna Chachoo (youngest uncle), just standing, and witnessing it all.

Everything burns, and I run from the situation.

The scene changes, and I return to my house. It's a long hall, and I see lots of other people eating at cafes, and realize that my house has been turned into a public place, like a shopping center.

I try to go into my grandfather's room but there is a barricade set by the police, and I am told I can't go in. I tell the officer that this is my house, and he hands me a bag full of my passports, telling me that that's all that survived.

I remember waking up scared from this dream. And for years to come, it continued to haunt me, revealing to me my angst around losing home, not having anything to go back to, and that my running away from family would have a price to pay.

Addressing the idea of home, Sara Ahmed writes, "it is the 'real' home, the very space from which one imagines oneself to have originated, and in which one projects the self as both homely and original, that is the most unfamiliar: it is here that one is a guest, relying on the hospitality of others" (Ahmed, 1999, p. 330). And once having moved, and in transit, she writes, "The journey between homes provides the subject with the contours of a space of belonging, but a

space which expresses the very logic of an interval, the passing through of the subject between apparently fixed moments of departure and arrival” (Ahmed, 1999, p. 330). In Ahmed’s case, she was writing about being born to Pakistani and British parents, having been born in the UK, moved to Australia, and still having family (and hence, some part of home and origin) in Pakistan. In my case, even though most of my early life had been spent growing up in Pakistan, the unfamiliarity of home is an issue I continue to grapple with. Psychologically, it is clear to me that my need to escape home is very much rooted in a long history of trauma experienced through sexual abuse and violence; but equally, studying the history of movement in my family alongside the history of Pakistan which led to mass movement of people, one could argue that perhaps displacement of some sort is inherited through the decades and generations.

The Pakistani-Canadian filmmaker, Arshad Khan, also examines many of these ideas through his film *Abu* (Khan, 2017) – a feature length autobiographical documentary that follows the journey of his family as they immigrate to Canada, and deal with issues of sexual and religious identities. Interestingly, *Abu* also begins with a nightmare, where Khan describes driving in the rain with his brother and encountering a monster wearing a light blue shirt. Later on in the film, we discover that this was in fact a prophetic dream about his father. Growing up in Pakistan, Khan talks about resenting his father, as he was coming to terms with his sexual identity, and was expected to be *manly*. Similarly to me, Khan’s molestation started very early on, at 4 ½ by a neighbor. The family immigrated to Canada for a better life and economic opportunities, however, at the time, in the 1990s Mississauga was not so open and welcoming to brown immigrants. And neither was being gay and brown in high school for Khan.

As Khan continued to come to terms with his sexual identity in Canada, his father was also having a crisis of his own, where due to lack of a decent job, feeling inadequate at being able to provide for his family, and seeing his children become *Westernized* as failure, he started to become more conservatively Islamic. This resulted in Khan and his father to move in polar

opposite directions.

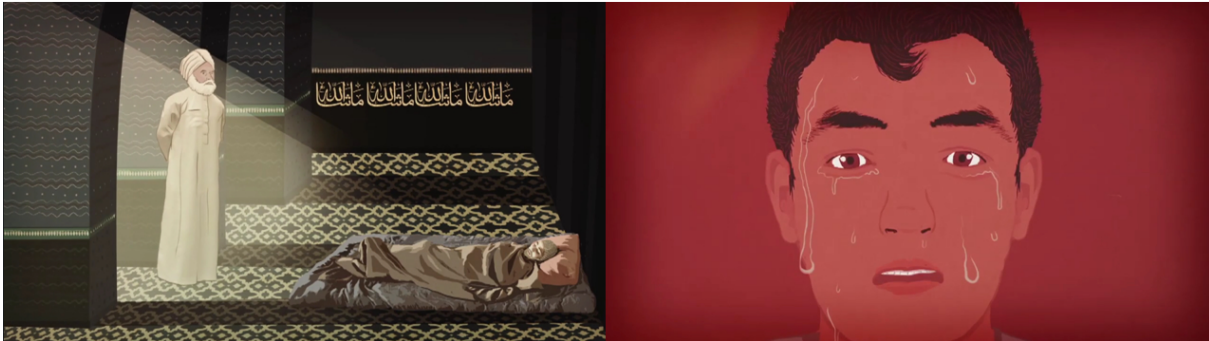


Figure 5. Abu: Father [Feature Length Documentary], 2017, Director, Screenplay and Producer: Arshad Khan, Animation Artist: Davide Di Saro.

The film ends with the death of Khan's father, and both of them facing each other, and finding peace. However, it is the journey of getting there that makes it a significant story to tell. Furthermore, in contrast to the narrative of my grandfather, where he attempted settlement and failed, and my own experience, where as an adult I consciously made the decision to seek another home, in Khan's story we see the complexities of migrating and experiencing racism as a brown family into a predominantly white setting, and in his individual case, also experiencing homophobia.

Conclusions

Drawing conclusions, I am reminded of a memory from Lahore, where in market places, you often see vendors selling birds. These are usually sparrows and crows, caged, being sold for a few hundred rupees. The idea being that you would set them free, and they in turn would pray for you as thanks for granting them their freedom. However, the macabre reality behind this tradition is that the birds are never really free—or at least not for long. Usually the birds perish from dehydration in the city, away from their natural habitats. And, the birds that survive, the vendors know where they return to, or their usual feeding grounds, and before long, they are

caught again, and probably find themselves right where they began. In those cages.

Extending this metaphor of the birds within the context of this text, we can also think of the inherent failures embedded within the migratory journey illustrated through the caged birds, who despite being granted *freedom*, often find themselves destined for failure. Looking at the history of the Pakistani project as a whole, where migration and displacement forms its very core, exasperated by turbulent political governments and dictatorships, and weak foreign policies and relations, 73 years on, the vision of a *safe homeland* begins to crumble. Within the context of migration from Pakistan, in particular to North America, the difficulty and futility of defining a Pakistani identity as a diverse group of people becomes further apparent, as highlighted by Iftikhar Dadi (2006). This complexity of migration from the Pakistani perspective is often heavily echoed in artistic work in the diaspora. In the case of Bamboat (2018), we see this through exploration of visual culture and censorship during a difficult political time in Pakistan's history, and with Khan (2017), we see an autobiographical account of a brown family migrating to Canada, struggling to hold onto cultural values and shifting individual attitudes internally, and encountering issues of racism and homophobia externally.

Within this journal of art education, in particular within the Northern European setting, where recent influx of migration through the so called *European Migrant Crises*, is opening up new challenges and discourses, I feel a more complex dialogue on the migratory experience presented through first-hand accounts is very much needed. These observations I have taken during last three years when conducting my doctoral studies in Aalto University, in Finland. Taking a personal narrative approach to highlight the history of Pakistan, movement in the region, and artistic explorations of identity in the diaspora, I have attempted to do so from a queer South Asian perspective. I hope in the coming years, we can see this dialogue complicated further.

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Notes

¹For further information: <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1153341>