

Pastiche: Stories of Love and Resilience with a Critical Introduction



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Fall 2024

**“Pastiche: Stories of Love and Resilience,” a collection of short fiction with a Critical
Introduction**

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of English and Humanities

University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh

In Partial Fulfilment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

MA in English

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Fall 2024

Certificate of Approval

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.



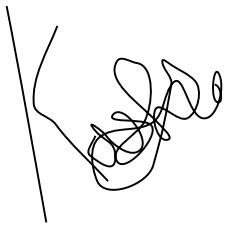
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Declaration

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgment of collaborative research and discussions.



_____01.31.25_____

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Dedication

To the voices that have been silenced

Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance of my supervisor Professor Shamsad Mortuza. Professor Mortuza's support, advice, and feedback have been invaluable. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their everlasting support and encouragement, without which I would not have been able to garner the confidence to write this dissertation. I want to express my gratitude to the Department of English and Humanities for supporting me throughout the MA journey.

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Abstract

For the Creative Writing dissertation, my submission is a collection of short fiction portraying the lived experiences of queer characters. This anthology contains six short stories, each depicting the themes of resilience, acceptance, and rejection. The stories, set in contemporary Bangladesh against the backdrop of the *gonoabbhuthan*¹ of 2024, depict the complex lives of queer individuals during a period of political upheaval. Moreover, due to the existence of Section 377 of the penal code which criminalizes homosexuality, numerous queer individuals are forced to hide their identities from the larger society. Because of societal and systemic discrimination, queer individuals inhabit spaces differently. The fear of persecution compels *deshi*² LGBTIA+³ people to hide their true selves. Those who cannot conform to the hetero-patriarchal standards often face harassment and discrimination. The vocal and open anti-transgender campaign that has begun in the country threatens the safety and security of transgender people. Queer people are being vilified and dehumanized on social media platforms, and all of these combined have a deep impact on the psyche of queer individuals. Unfortunately, society does not seem to consider queer people as human beings deserving of respect and acceptance, thus there is no concern about the mental and physical well-being of the SOGIESC⁴ community. Their voices are silenced; their stories are left out of the mainstream discourse. Even in English literature, the narratives of South Asian queer individuals are deeply insufficient, and this collection of stories is an attempt to bridge that gap.

¹ Uprising

² Bangladeshi

³ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Asexual +

⁴ Sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics

Introduction

I often think about stories and how integral they are to our existence. Stories preserve our history by encapsulating our experiences. “Storytelling is among the oldest forms of communication. Storytelling is the commonality of all human beings, in all places, in all times” (Collins, 1996). Stories transcend temporal and spatial boundaries; traversing the constriction of time, they connect people from all corners of the world. Stories sustain us and broaden our understanding of the universe we inhabit. For centuries, “literature has been playing an important role in the shaping of human existence,” and “storytelling has an even longer tradition” (Cairney, 2010). Sitting around a fire and telling stories about our experiences is a long-standing tradition tracing back to hunter-gatherer societies. Through stories, both real and imaginary, we learn to connect with one another, we learn to empathize. Fiction allows us to see the world from a different perspective. We get the chance to put ourselves in someone else's shoes and empathize with their experiences. We begin to comprehend the perspective of the “Other.”

From oral tales and folklore to modern-day short fiction, stories have been pivotal in shaping our society and culture. Culture influences fiction, and fiction, in turn, influences culture. Which stories are told and which stories are read are directly interlinked with power and control. Novels and short stories are often used to portray oppressors in a positive light. Representation has become a political apparatus to influence the opinions of the reader. Stories are manipulated to hegemonize the people to support the dominant ideology. Edward Said, in his groundbreaking work, *Orientalism*, explores the complex relationship between the West and the East, specifically how Western societies have historically viewed and represented the East. Said elaborates on how the portrayal of the “Orient” was entrenched in colonial and imperial

ideology that resulted in a misleading and prejudiced perception of the East. Colonial rulers depicted the Orient in a demeaning manner to justify and normalize oppression and colonialism. The view of the “oriental” subjects as the inferior “other” has been represented in both fiction and non-fiction texts, thus upholding and enforcing colonial perceptions. “Orientalism reinforced, and was reinforced by, the certain knowledge that Europe or the West literally commanded the vastly greater part of the earth’s surface” (Said, 1995). Orientalists dehumanized the people of the Orient and justified the colonial occupation and exploitation as a civilizing mission. The Occident imposed their views on the Orient to further “material interest and conquest.” The colonial rulers weaponized literature to advance their prejudiced rhetoric. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said writes, “the process of imperialism occurred beyond the level of economic laws and political decisions,” the imperial powers influenced cultural formations “by continuing consolidation within education, literature, and the visual and musical arts” (12). Novels and short stories represented colonial subjects as the subservient “other,” substantiating the need for colonial rule. Literature became a tool to maintain and advance colonial hegemony. At the apex of modern colonialism, “popular culture reflected an image of empire builders, [the colonizers] as heroes” and adventures, influencing the audience to “root for” these characters “in tales of violent conflict with metaphorically-and most often literally-dark enemies” (Hogan, 2025). These portrayals in literature promoted the belief that colonizers were “selfless labourers” fighting against the “cruelty of native despots” (Hogan, 2025). The occupiers were presented as the saviours while the indigenous people of the land were portrayed as “savages” in order to maintain colonial power and domination.

In a similar manner, to preserve their power and control, oppressors weaponize literature and mass media by dehumanizing and vilifying other marginalized identities. In

mainstream literature, sexual and gender minorities are rarely represented. When queer characters are incorporated in popular culture, they are generally portrayed in a negative light. Juxtaposed against virtuous heterosexual and cisgender characters, queer characters are often portrayed as the deviant “other.” In Oscar Wilde’s “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” the character of Dorian Gray, who is implicitly homosexual, is portrayed as morally corrupt and self-absorbed. The “sins” he commits can be interpreted as the euphemism of homosexual acts which perpetuates the notion of homosexuality to be sinful and immoral. These representations uphold rigid sexual notions and boundaries which benefit colonial and imperial powers. During the Victorian period, to benefit the bourgeoisie, “sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule” (Foucault, 1990). Sex was weaponized as an apparatus of control. Non-normative sexual identities were demonized and legally criminalized as they subverted the understanding of sex as a purely reproductive task, thus challenging the control of the rulers. The rigid Puritanical views on sex and sexual minorities were imported to the colonies, transforming the society and culture of these nations. In pre-colonial South Asia, prior to the enactment of the British Anti-Sodomy Law in the 1880s, queer identities “were accommodated, if not accepted” (Dasgupta, 2011). Erotic sculptures, such as the ones in Khajuraho temples of India from the 9th century C.E., depict sexual acts as pleasurable, and included homoerotic representations as well. In the latter half of the 10th century, following invasions by Islamic rulers, Islamic culture was established in some regions of India. During this period, “homoerotic love affairs were very visible” and “were not mentioned derogatorily” (Dasgupta, 2011). Sufi saints and poets played a pivotal role in bringing Perso-Arabic traditions to India. “At the centre of Sufi poetry and spiritualism” is

“love,” and “in Sufi literature this love is expressed in homoerotic metaphors” (Dasgupta, 2011). However, the expansion of the British Empire in the eighteenth century “dictated the social, cultural and judicial architecture of the [colonized] country” (Dasgupta, 2011). During colonial rule, led by the Victorian “fanatical purity campaign,” the empire enacted policies of sexual regulation in the colonies (Bhaskaran, 2002). The colonial powers enacted educational, social and legal reforms to persecute the queer community. Additionally, homoerotic art and literature were whitewashed to promote sexual purity, thus dehumanizing queer individuals. The ramifications of this colonial violence is felt to this day by the queer community in Bangladesh. Criminalized under Section 377 of the Penal Code, which is derived from the British Anti-Sodomy Law, numerous queer individuals are forced to hide their identities from the larger society. Due to societal and legal discrimination, the lives of queer people are rendered invisible, disrupting them from inhabiting space. The fear of persecution restricts LGBTQIA people from existing freely. The voices of queer people are silenced through systematic and societal marginalization. Queer narratives are not incorporated in the mainstream media. Queer characters are rarely represented in literary texts. I believe that understanding the context and legacy of colonialism is imperative in delineating the significance of emerging Bangladeshi queer stories and novels.

For centuries, literature has been manipulated and controlled by oppressors to solidify their power, but “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1990). Literature as a form of resistance has also emerged over time. Instead of allowing the oppressors to tell the stories of the oppressed, people from marginalized communities have picked up the pens themselves. Proper representation of disenfranchised communities is important in challenging dominant discourse. Fiction that portray the lives of people who are often misrepresented or

underrepresented make individuals feel seen and heard. Just as the development of South Asian literature has allowed the Orient to represent themselves, the emergence of queer postcolonial literature has enabled queer people to chronicle their stories. Portraying the complex lives of people whose existence is shunned can be considered as an act of defiance. When sex and sexuality are “repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression” (Foucault, 1990). This “deliberate transgression” acts as a form of resistance against pervasive beliefs.

I believe if we have the privilege to, we must tell our stories and the stories of our communities that subvert the dominant ideology. That is one of the reasons I chose to work on a collection of short fiction focusing on queer narratives. As a queer individual, I want our experiences, our stories to be heard. I want the larger society that often dehumanizes us, viewing us as the “other,” to question their prejudice and bigotry. I hope that these stories will help those of us living in the margins feel seen and heard. Our lives are just as important, and this collection of stories are meant to challenge the queerphobic rhetoric.

Following in the footsteps of postcolonial South Asian authors, such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Mahmud Rahman, and Fayeza Hasnat, I adopted a non-conventional narrative style to portray the lived experiences of the queer community in Bangladesh. Inspired by Arundhati Roy and William Dalrymple, I interviewed five diverse queer individuals to learn about their experiences and perspectives. I incorporated each of their narratives in respective stories to depict well-rounded characters with complex inner lives. I fictionalized their experiences to subvert the stereotypical portrayal of queer characters. I also incorporated my own lived experiences in the sixth story “Ramblings of a Restless Mind.”

I hoped to work on a collection of stories that represents queer characters in the context of contemporary Bangladesh. Inspired by my love for historical fiction, I decided to write six stories against the backdrop of the *gonoabbhuthan* of 2024. Countless queer individuals mobilized during the uprising in solidarity with the students. We took to the streets demanding justice for the people who were killed by Awami League's fascist regime. Unfortunately, the role queer people played during the movement remains acknowledged and devalued. With the hopes of preserving and encapsulating the experience of LGBTQIA+ individuals during the uprising, for the first two stories, I interviewed queer individuals who were active during the revolution. "City of Loss" chronicles the experience of a transgender teacher, while "Of Defiance and Loss" follows the life of a gay activist.

For the third story, "Homeland," I interviewed an adibashi⁵ queer individual in order to write a nuanced narrative. In Bangladesh, adibashi people continue to face colonial occupation and violence from both the government and the Bangalee settlers. They are legally recognised as "ethnic minorities," which restricts their legal rights and protection. As I aimed to represent queer people of diverse backgrounds, I ensured to incorporate the story of an adibashi character. The intersecting forms of oppression faced by queer adibashi people need to be considered by the members of the dominant ethnic group. As a Bangalee individual who indirectly benefits from the colonization of the Hill Tracts, I believe it is my responsibility to incorporate proper adibashi representation in my work.

Additionally, for the fourth and fifth stories, I settled on illustrating heterogeneous relationships. "Different Desires," presents the story of an aromantic and asexual couple living

⁵ Indigenous people in Bangladesh

in Bangladesh. In contrast, “Of Love and Longing,” explores the relationship dynamics between a bisexual woman and her wife, a transgender woman living in North America.

In parallel with the other stories, “Ramblings of Restless Mind” is a depiction of my inner turmoil in inhabiting space as a queer person. The way I perceive and experience the world is interlinked with my privilege and identity. Throughout my life, I have felt alienated due to the discrimination I have had to endure, and I chose to include my story as a form of resistance. I believe my experiences and perceptions add depth and layer to this collection. My exposure to the July revolution has deeply impacted my psyche and my understanding of Bangladesh. The fear and uncertainty I endured during those tumultuous times have broadened my comprehension of violence and justice. The protests I attended enabled me to see a different side of my country, and I hoped to recount my experiences in my work.

Moreover, growing up, I only had the opportunity to read fiction that depicted straight cis-gender characters. I always felt this sense of disconnection at the lack of queer representation. Even now, it has been difficult to find *deshi* fiction that represents us as we are. The mainstream Bangladeshi queer literature generally focuses on the experiences of the Bangalee diaspora. In Adiba Jaigirdar’s *The Henna Wars*, the teenage protagonist, living in the West, comes to terms with her lesbian identity. While Jaigirdar attempts to portray Bangalee culture and traditions in the novel, she makes a glaring error when referring to the legal status of queer people in Bangladesh. In the novel, the protagonist mentions “the fact that being gay [in Bangladesh] is punishable by death,” which is a highly misinformed comment. Under Section 377, those who commit homosexual acts face life imprisonment as the maximum sentence. This oversight by Jaigirdar is deeply concerning as it perpetuates current imperial perceptions of the “Orient.” The current politics of pinkwashing and homonationalism enables

the West to be hailed as champions of LGBTQIA+ rights, while the East is condemned for the persecution of queer individuals, which completely overlooks how queerphobia was imported here by the West. We cannot understand the current situation of the LGBTQIA+ community in Bangladesh without delving into the impact of the 200-year colonial rule. Unfortunately, mainstream Bangladeshi queer authors belonging to the diaspora fail to understand and acknowledge the relationship between colonialism and the marginalization of queer individuals. Therefore, I decided to pick up the pen myself and represent my community and country in a way that I believe is befitting to us.

With the aim to uplift and amplify *deshi* queer voices, I poured my heart into writing this collection. I want these stories to represent all facets of our existence. I hope that these stories, reflecting the themes of acceptance, rejection, and resilience, resonate with queer people all over the globe.

City of Loss

Nibir takes hurried steps down the scorching streets, checking his watch every few minutes as beads of sweat cling to his slender eyebrows. *I should have checked the traffic update before heading out. I'll get there faster if I walk.* He lets go of the rickshaw and weaves his way through a sea of pedestrians rushing to work, as the vehicles remain gridlocked.

He reaches the university campus, parched and out of breath, just ten minutes before his class. He looks around, noticing students talking in groups, apprehension bubbling in the air.

He overhears a student saying “*Janos*,⁶ the government thugs attacked the student dorms yesterday.” Nibir shakes his head, *another student protest, another government crackdown. How many times will the cycle repeat?*

He vividly remembers the protests that took place in 2018, and how the government unleashed their forces to attack innocent students simply demanding safer roads. His heart constricts every time he thinks of the student who killed herself after facing expulsion from her university because of her involvement in the movement. After that incident, Nibir could not remain at that institute. He could not forgive or forget what the government as well as the university administration had allowed to happen. And now, he's watching the violence repeat, as a sense of foreboding gnaws at him.

He walks into the faculty washroom to freshen up. He glances at the mirror, smiling at the lean moustache gracing his lips. The euphoria he feels at the sight of the bristly mustache can only be understood by others who have struggled with gender dysphoria. Embracing his trans identity

⁶ You know

and choosing to transition has been a tumultuous journey for Nibir. He often feels dismayed by the people who turned their backs on him after he came out; but when he glances at the mirror, his heart soars at the sight of his lean, muscular body.

As he fixes his dense black hair, from behind the mirror, his deep grey eyes stare back at him. He chuckles thinking of the time he had run into Wasi, one of his former colleagues in the washroom. They had exchanged greetings and parted ways, - that was a couple of weeks before Wasi went on a talk show and spewed transphobic rhetoric. *Oh the irony. I wonder how he would feel if he learns that he used to share an office and a washroom with a trans colleague. Would he sick his hounds of followers to protest against me?* Nibir shakes his head; finding humor in the darkest of circumstances is a go-to coping mechanism for him.

He walks into his ethical studies class and steps onto the blackboard. His students pour into the classroom, greeting him warmly. Despite their attendance, most of their *mlan*⁷ faces tell him that their hearts are not into today's lesson, – their hearts are bleeding for their peers facing the brunt of police brutality.

Nibir quietly joins the crowd of student protesters gathered in front of the university. He slips in, merging in with the crowd. Despite being a teacher, Nibir still gets mistaken as a university student, and for the first time in his life, passing as a student seems like an advantage.

⁷ Solemn

Behind the comfort of a black cloth mask, he walks into the middle of the street and begins to redirect the traffic. He helps the students block the road, forcing cars and CNGs trying to go through the protestors to back up.

The energy in the protests feels electric. The defiance of the students, the sense of solidarity inspires Nibir, and he is glad to be able to be there for his students. He smiles underneath the mask as he watches groups of students climb onto bus *er chaad*⁸ and raise the red and green flag of the nation.

Nibir runs, flanking the students. His hands and feet shake as he tries to see through the cloud of smoke. Tear gas after tear gas are hurled towards the protestors. *I need to protect them.* He hears the sound of shelling as scattered screams reverberate through the air.

He rushes students after students into the university medical center, which is in utter chaos. Students bleeding, covered in cuts and scrapes surround him. As he is frantically searching for more savlon and gauge, a tall, broad-shouldered man walks up to him, his body littered with rubber bullets.

“Sir, *chinsen amake*⁹?” He asks, laughing. *He's covered in bullets and yet he is able to laugh. The courage of these students is astounding.*

⁸ Roof

⁹ Do you recognize me?

He talks to the student, then resumes his search for more medical supplies. But after some time, Nibir can no longer stand to be in the medical center. The sight of his students brutalized and injured suffocates them, and they leave the unit.

With bated breath, Nibir watches the video of a student being killed. His eyes transfixed at the clip of Abu Sayeed, a friend of his older brother, getting shot at. The violent rage that envelopes Nibir seems to be boundless. *They have killed somebody. Protestors have died. They cannot get away with this. We will not let them get away with this.*

Several teachers gather in front of the university entrance, red bandanas tied on their foreheads. They hold up banners and placards, “The violence against students must stop.”

I am glad to be surrounded by teachers who refuse to remain silent in the face of injustice. Nibir thinks, glancing at the faces of his colleagues.

One of the senior teachers is handed the megaphone, clearing his throat, he begins to speak, “We cannot accept the violence the regime has unleashed on our students. They must be held accountable for their criminal actions. Justice must be ensured for all those who have been killed. The government has already gone too far, and if they fail to take accountability, if they refuse to accept the students' 9-point-demands, we will have no choice but to demand the Prime Minister's resignation along with her cabinet.”

His gentle but strong voice stirs the small crowd. Nibir can sense a shift in the air.

Demanding resignation from the government? When the protests began, I never imagined we'd get here, that we would even discuss the possibility of being free from this oppressive regime. I guess after one and half decades of enduring their tyranny, I just couldn't imagine a time when they would not be in power...

With countless thoughts racing through his head, Nibir takes the megaphone, and recites Nazrul's poem "*Bidrohi*."¹⁰ His deep voice echoes through the crowd,

"I am the death of all reigns of terror,

I am full of a warm restlessness forever!"

Nibir sits on the sofa in a dimly lit room surrounded by his friends, Shamim, Faiza, Jahin, and Ritu. Faiza paces back and forth in a corner, while Jahin types away on their laptop.

"Okay, we are almost done with the article. Now we have to call any international journalists we may know and share what is happening here, the international community must be made aware of the violence this regime is committing."

"How will we send the document in the midst of an internet blackout?" Faiza asks, frowning.

"Right, um, one or maybe all of us could take turns reading the article out loud on the call?" Jahin suggests.

¹⁰ Revolutionary

“That could work,” Nibir says, nodding his head. “Doesn't hurt to try right?”

Nibir walks down the alley by his apartment. His phone begins to ring, piercing through the silent night. He picks up the call, and a rushed voice whispers,

“Nibir, this is Jahin, I'm calling from a different number. The police called me, they are looking for you.”

“Fuck. What did they say?”

“They know you have been supporting the students and that you helped organize today's teachers' *shomabesh*¹¹. I didn't tell them anything, but I think they might be tracking you. Please don't go home today, and don't use this number for some time.”

“I... goddamnit. I will see what I can do.”

“Be safe, dost, please.”

Hanging up the call, Nibir turns on his feet, his heart beating loudly in his chest. *How did they... What do I? Fuck. Just goddamnit.*

He takes a deep breath to calm his nerves. *Okay, what do I need to do first? Get a new number. Then I need to call Shamim and ask if I can stay with him. Fuck, curfew has started, will I be able to find any buses or CNGs?* Thoughts collide onto one another as Nibir quickens his steps, searching for a mobile-phone store.

¹¹ Gathering

Nibir walks into the campus, still struggling to believe it has been a month since they last entered the classroom. The upheaval and trauma Nibir witnessed is still fresh in his mind.

The hallways look the same, the classrooms are as bright as before. But everything feels different. The missing faces in the classroom make Nibir choke up. *So many students were killed. So many have been injured. Will we ever recover from this trauma? Should we? We have toppled the fascist regime, but the lives they took are forever gone.*

He welcomes his students back into the classroom. *It feels strange that merely a few weeks have passed since the dictator fled. Only two weeks to process and heal the pain they experienced. Of course, a month is not enough to get over watching your friends being killed in front of you. It's like the mental health of our students is the least of our worries. It's more important to make up for the missed classes and finish the semester as soon as possible, any delay is a loss to the profit margin.* Anger surges through Nibir's body. These institutions care so little. Just fuck.

The somber atmosphere feels suffocating. Nibir takes a deep breath and asks the students how they are doing. *It's important to check in with them.* He invites them to share their experience of the uprising, if they wish to.

“We have all endured collective trauma, and I understand it may be difficult to talk about the horrors we have witnessed. You don't have to share if you are not ready to. But if you want to share, we are here. Healing starts when we express our trauma and connect with people around us, and I want us to have that space.” Nibir says.

A student, wearing a black burkha, raises her hand. She begins to share, her voice shaking.

“I went to buy medicine with my 3-year-old daughter, and on the way, things escalated. The police began to attack and shoot at the protestors. Pin bullets were everywhere. I carried my daughter to a construction building, and we hid there. I shielded her with my body. Through a gap in the wall, I glanced outside. There was blood everywhere. I watched as student after student fell to the ground, riddled with pin bullets. I will never forget what I saw. I don't know how to carry on anymore.”

Another student, taking a deep breath, recounts,

“I was on the rooftop with my sister, we had gone there to see what was going on with the protests two roads down. We saw a helicopter descend over the protesters. They threw down tear gas canisters at first. Then the bullets began to rain down on all those innocent people, and they began to drop like birds. I” she begins to choke up. *The horrors we have seen will forever stay with us, won't they?*

After class, when everyone leaves, a student walks up to him,

“Sir, League er ekta member pitaye mere phelsi,”¹² the student proudly tells Nibir. “He raped my friend during the protests, and we knew there'd be no justice from the government, so we took matters into our own hands.”

What do I say here?

“I am proud of you,” Nibir says. *The violence they have witnessed, the violence they had*

¹² “Sir, we killed a member of the league.” [League is the short form of Awami League, the party in power]

to resort to, will they ever be able to heal from this trauma?

Nibir pulls the shawl around him, bracing against the winter breeze as the rickshaw turns a corner. Even though it has been a couple of months since the conversation, his restless mind refuses to stop thinking of the student who engaged in the murder of the League member. *Will she be able to recover from the violence she was forced to commit? How are you supposed to deal with oppressors without resorting to violence yourself? Can you even?* He sighs, glancing at the street teeming with people. Pedestrians rush past one another on the sidewalk, sidestepping the makeshift fruit and vegetable stands. From the rickshaw Nibir watches a group of children play cricket on the road, and he can't help but think of all the children who are no longer here. *Oh, how life just keeps going.*

Of Defiance and Loss

Part I

Shamim smiles as he watches his 3-year-old niece, Jaima, feed the street dogs, her giggles warming his heart. She's slowly overcoming her fear of dogs, just like her *mama*.¹³ *How could I ever be afraid of such kind beings?* He wonders, shaking his head. He takes Jaima's small hand in his and continues on their daily walking route. Every day after work, Shamim does his best to get home so he can spend these cherished moments with Jaima. The two of them laughing and walking down the narrow streets of his neighborhood, petting and feeding the dogs, is the favorite part of his day.

As he navigates his way around the twists and turns of his neighborhood, he can't help but glance at the graffiti on the walls –bright and colorful in their defiance, a vivid reminder of the people's uprising a few months ago. Shamim finds it hard to believe that just a few months back, these bustling, lively streets had turned into a *ronokhetra*,¹⁴ even though the trauma he witnessed continues to haunt him. *Life just keeps going, doesn't it?*

Shamim is running down the street, the smoke from the tear gas blinding him. Despite the mask, the smoke forces his way up his nostrils, making him choke. All around him, students are running; screams echo from all corners. The sound of bullets pierces through the chaos, and he continues to run.

¹³ Uncle

¹⁴ Warzone

Shamim wakes up sweating in his bed. The night terrors have not stopped. Every night they transport him back to the moments he cannot find the words to talk about.

A teenage boy grabs his hands and drags him into a building as armed police forces descend on the protestors standing in solidarity on the *rajpoth*.¹⁵ They rush up two flights of stairs, as the crowd below begins to disperse, running in all directions - fleeing the *chorra guli*¹⁶ raining down upon them. Shamim turns his head, and a bullet whizzes just past his ear. *Fuck*, he swears. But before relief can wash over him, he hears the boy beside him yelp, and he turns to see him clutching his face, pin-bullets lodged all over his face.

As Shamim walks past the neighborhood hospital, he finds it difficult to breathe. The images of countless students, bleeding, injured, dying ingrained in his mind. He could vividly recall how every minute students kept showing up, *chokhe, gaye guli*.¹⁷

He can still clearly conjure up the young boy, who took the bullet that missed Shamim, lying under a shroud, dead at eighteen. His mother's scream of agony continues to echo in Shamim's head. Marching down the street, with the boy's body wrapped in the red and green flag is an experience Shamim can never forget. He still can't manage to talk about all that he

¹⁵ Street

¹⁶ Pin-bullets

¹⁷ Eyes, body full of bullets.

witnessed during the protests. He still can't process the pain and the trauma that has encapsulated his being.

In the beginning, Shamim was skeptical of the quota reform protests. *This will end the same way all the student protests did, our demands will remain unmet, or they will concede to some meaningless gesture while we face the brunt of police violence.* But when the protests reached their critical point, on the 15th of July, the resilience and fierceness of the students inspired him, and he couldn't help but show up to support his juniors. The reports of students being attacked in university halls, and reports of female students being sexually assaulted enraged Shamim, and he could not simply stand back and watch. *They are my sisters, I have to be there for them.*

Even though he had heard from sources that some extremist groups had infiltrated the movement, he couldn't stay back and allow the regime to attack innocent students.

On 16th of July, the video documenting Abu Sayeed being shot at, while he stood in defiance, with open arms, surfaces. Shamim watches the footage, and it ignites a fire in him that pushes him forward. He hears from friends that cops shot at the crowd who were marching with Abu Sayeed's body. The policemen forcefully took away the body, refusing to release him to his family. The rage that spreads through Shamim's entire body makes him want to break everything, to shoot back at the oppressors. *You killed us, and you won't even let us take the body! How did we get here? How can I stay back and watch my people being slaughtered? Even if there are protestors who'd want me dead if they find out I'm gay, I will not remain passive in the face of state sanctioned violence.*

A tear gas lands right in front of Shamim, and he kicks it away, his survival instinct pushing him forward. In the haze of smoke, he distributes water, masks, and toothpaste to everyone around him. He helps students break the lane dividers to use as shields and weapons. *Students with sticks facing heavily armed police forces, a tale as old as time.* Shamim sighs, defiance coursing through his body. *Will we make it through? We must. There is no other way.*

Shamim is darting past alleyways, his feet gracing the concrete beneath him as fire blazes all around. Police stations burn as students set fire to buildings that symbolize the power of the fascist regime. They run and run, stopping to hurl bricks and stones at the armed forces chasing them.

He is held up on the second floor of the building. The young boy, with his bullet-riddled face, was rushed to the hospital by others. *I hope he makes it,* Shamim prays, as another bullet hits the owner of the building, who's a senior policeman. Twelve bullets drill holes into his body, and he howls in pain. Shamim tries to stop the bleeding with tissues and toothpaste, anything he can get his hands on, but it's all in vain.

I have to get him help, but if the students see a cop, even an injured one, they will not let him escape. I don't know what to do. A strong sense of helplessness envelopes him as he watches life leave the injured man, bit by bit.

Shamim watches as a crowd of students apprehend three policemen who got separated from the others. He stares in disbelief, his body paralyzed, as the students beat up the cops, and drag their lifeless bodies through the streets, into their university campus. *How else are we supposed to fight back?* He wonders. *How do you resist violence without resorting to violence yourself? Brutality breeds brutality.* He sighs, still shaken by the bloodshed all around him.

“What are you doing out in the streets, marching with a dead body?” Shamim's brother shouts through the phone. “*Ammu*¹⁸ saw you pass by the house, and now she's having a panic attack. Do you not care about your family?” The accusation cuts Shamim to the core, as he is trying to catch his breath, hidden behind a building after police descended upon their peaceful march honoring the young boy, martyred at such a young age. “*Bhaiya*,¹⁹ don't, just don't,” he yells back, “I cannot be a coward like you, and stay inside in the safety and comfort of bricked walls. I cannot stand the violence anymore. I just can't.” He hangs up before Bhaiya can say anything in return. *I will not cower. I will not bow down.*

Shamim still hasn't shed a single tear, despite the nightmare he has endured. He pushes the pain down, deep within him, and carries on. Visiting hospital after hospital, disbursing the funds his friends had raised. *Queer people stepping up to provide much-needed funds amidst a communication blackout. Always on the sidelines, always on the margins, and yet*

¹⁸ Mother

¹⁹ Brother

we continue to show solidarity. When the nightmare ends, no one will know the role we played during the movement. These thoughts flutter through his mind as he navigates around countless police check posts.

He doubts the sight and smell he encounters in these hallowed hospital halls will ever leave him. Students and working-class people, chock-full of bullet holes, eyes damaged by pin-bullets, some needing their arms or legs to be amputated. *Our own government did this to us, simply for demanding reforms to a biased and discriminatory quota system. The fact that they would resort to such brutality....*

He passes a police check post; they make him get off the rickshaw, and frisk him. A tired-looking policeman makes him unlock his phone, and he checks to see if it contains any content that goes against the government. *Thank god I turned on the second space option on the phone or else I would be arrested right away.* All the measures he has to take to simply avoid persecution at the hands of armed forces frustrates him. *Will we ever be free of this oppression?* He wonders as he rushes towards the hospital.

Shamim joins his friends amidst the crowd of hundreds of thousands gathered at the Shahid Minar. He looks around and smiles at all the known queer faces he notices. *All of us are here today, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, standing in solidarity.* Being surrounded by *lakh lakh*²⁰ people, bold in their demands for justice, feels

²⁰ Hundreds of thousands

powerful. He witnesses history unfold before his eyes, as one of the coordinators of the movement takes the mic, and announces,

“*Ek dofa, ek dabi*,²¹ the prime minister must resign.”

He hears the crowd cheer, and he too shouts, despite a sense of apprehension clawing at him. *What's next? I guess we will know when we get to it.*

Shamim marches forward with the protestors. Caught in a cycle of *dhawa-palta-dhawa*²², the students, on the north end of the road, push back against the armed forces, chasing them with sticks and stones, forcing them to fall back. Another group of students march forward from the south, and the cops get caught between the flood of protesters on either side. At first, the police seem to be taken aback by their resistance, but within seconds, they raise their weapons, and pin-bullets begin to rain down upon the crowds on either side. Shamim helps an injured student to the university gates. Teachers, many of whom showed up to support their students, rush forward to carry the bleeding students to the medical center.

Shamim stares at the message in disbelief -

“She fled the country! We did it, Shamim!”

We toppled the fascist regime! We finally won! He thinks, still taken aback at the

²¹ “One point, one demand”

²² Chase

news. *I don't need to look over my shoulder every time I step out of the house now. No more lives need to be lost. We can work towards building a better future.*

Part II

Shamim and Shihab hail a rickshaw together and make their way to the *Gonobhobon*²³ to join the celebration. The *rickshawala mama*²⁴ doesn't take any money

“*Areh mama, ajke kono taka lagbe na, ajke amra shobai ek!*”²⁵ He says, smiling brightly, when Shihab tries to insist he accept the fare.

As they step inside the *Gonobhobon*, a sense of suffocation begins to envelop Shamim. The entire residence is teeming with people, every inch covered. He watches people loot whatever they can get their hands on. He sees a man run away with one of the Persian cats. *Should I stop him? What should I say? God... I hope he takes care of the cat.*

People stampede through the resident. All around him, the mob claws and pockets every trinket, every device they can find. He sees a man hold up the PM's discarded bra, and anger explodes within him. *This is not the independence we wanted.*

He turns to Shihab, “I... this isn't what I expected.”

“Me neither, *dost*”²⁶, me neither. This is insanity.”

²³ Residence of the Prime Minister

²⁴ The rickshaw puller uncle

²⁵ “Areh, uncle, no need to pay me today, today we are all the same.”

²⁶ Friend

“Should we leave?”

“Yes, please. Though I'm tempted to carry one of the gorgeous plants from the garden,” he says jokingly.

As they are walking past the pedestrians on the street, they see an excited man, with a bag full of Macbooks, yelling “*Niben? Niben?*”²⁷

Shihab trips on a loose wire, and almost gets trampled by the crowd running amok.

Shamim sits in a corner of the auditorium, listening to the discussion. *Maybe all hope is not lost.* Watching teachers and activists come together to identify key issues the interim government should address makes him feel hopeful for the future. *We can't change everything with one uprising.* He reminds himself. *There is a lot of scope for work. We need to unite and mobilize against those who want to tear us apart.*

²⁷ “Want any?”

Homeland

Aung makes his way through the bustling crowd in front of the bazaar. Underneath his mask, the smell of salt lingering in the air is still palpable. The heat of the sun bears down on Aung as he maneuvers his way through the vibrant streets of this seaside town. The fusion of diverse individuals on the streets, – workers and tourists, vendors and hawkers, women and children, – rushing past one another never fails to amaze him. The clamor of their presence brings this city to life.

A whiff of fried crab floats through the air, beckoning Aung towards the food stands. He shakes his head and hurries towards the office, situated in the business section of the city. As he enters the elevator, he glances at the mirror and frowns at the creases that have formed on the freshly pressed blue shirt gracing his slender body. Tufts of rich black hair frame his soft square face. He adjusts his glasses, and wipes his eyes – a delicate brown pair radiating warmth.

As he enters the office space, he steels himself for another busy day. Working for an INGO in a new city has been an interesting chapter for Aung. Advocating for and connecting with the people in the refugee camp has been an insightful experience for him, broadening his understanding of the world. Despite the heavy workload and extensive work hours, he feels a sense of gratification in providing support to the SOGIESC community in the camps. The strength, the resilience he has witnessed amidst the weather-beaten tents have

transformed his perspective on life. *If they can continue to fight despite facing genocide, we can too.*

Inspired by the courage of the queer community in the camps, Aung began to feel more comfortable with his own identity and embarked on a quest for queer individuals belonging to the *adibashi*²⁸ communities. In the beginning, apprehension tinged with a sense of hopelessness had overcome Aung, but over the years, as he has continued to connect with more and more queer *adibashi* people, he has started to feel a sense of belonging that is unparalleled. Curating a space for the queer community where he doesn't have to hide, where he can unabashedly be himself has brought him more joy than he thought was possible. Even at work, he has to hide his queerness, he has to conform to societal expectations, and the suffocation that accompanies him only lifts when he is in the presence of other queer people.

Aung frowns as he stares at his computer, trying to focus the report seems to be a futile endeavor. At times he can't believe how much his world has transformed over the past couple of decades. The fact that he is here, working at an elaborate office in a high-rise building, still makes his head spin. Growing up in the hill tracts was so different compared to this city life that Aung still can't believe this is his reality now.

Oftentimes, boxed inside a cubicle for hours, deafened by the hubbub of the city, Aung can't help but reminisce, longing to return to his childhood home, – a small Marma²⁹ village nestled in the folds of luscious green hills. The vast ancient trees, the river flowing

²⁸ Indigenous

²⁹ An indigenous tribe

down the slope call out to them daily; and at every opportunity he returns home.

He fondly remembers the countless hours he spent swimming in the wide river, the icy water felt so refreshing under the scorching sun. The moments he spent fishing with his best friend, Umong, are some of his most cherished memories. Umong, the first boy he ever loved. Umong, the boy with the brightest smile, will always have a special place in Aung's heart.

On his way to the beach, as the *tuk-tuk*³⁰ crosses the steel bridge over the narrow river, Aung thinks of all the times the two of them spent crossing the river to make it to school. His school was a thirty-minute walk away from the village, and every morning they would head out together, walking and laughing, wading through the river to get to the other side. During the monsoon season, when the river swelled and submerged its surroundings, they would carry their school uniforms and bags in plastic wraps, putting them inside a *hari*³¹. They would push it along as they swam through the currents. It was a difficult journey, but Umong's presence made it into a joyous adventure.

How easily we cross rivers now, Aung wonders, awed at how fast infrastructural development happens. So many things have become easier now, but did they have to come at the cost of nature? If we don't make a real shift towards sustainable development, I wonder how much worse things will get.

³⁰ A local vehicle powered by electric batteries

³¹ Cooking pot

After a tiring day, Aung lays down on the bed, ready to fall asleep, when a new message pops up on his phone.

“Settlers have attacked our village, we are on the run. We are okay for now. Will call when safe.” - the text from his sister reads, jerking Aung awake.

Fuck. This cannot be happening again. Aung tries to call Didi³² but there's no answer. He logs onto Facebook and sees posts from his friends about the violence that occurred in the hill tracts today. He learns that a settler *Bangalee* man, accused of stealing a bike, was killed during a mob beating earlier in the day, following which violence escalated. In the evening, defying the military curfew, the settlers descended upon the *adibashi* villages, setting their houses and markets on fire.

How did I miss this? How did I...

I hope Maa and Didi are okay. I should've been there with them.

The previous month, when Aung was visiting home, an *adibashi* friend was killed in a mob beating. Enraged and grief-stricken, Aung joined the protestors on the street, demanding justice, when the army descended upon them, shooting and killing four of his friends. The pain and grief that encapsulated Aung still feels all-consuming.

³² Sister

Being brutalized and killed by state forces is an experience *adibashi* communities have become all too familiar with. During the uprising a couple of months ago, the *Bangalee* community was horrified when the army was deployed to quash the movement, but Aung wasn't surprised. He kept thinking about what Kalpana Chakma had said, decades earlier, before her enforced disappearance, "whatever is experimented on the hill tracts, will be implemented on the plain land."

Watching innocent, unarmed students being attacked by police and military forces outraged Aung. Their struggle deeply resonated with him. Even though he could not physically attend the protests due to safety restrictions of his job, he did his best to support the movement in online spaces. Witnessing the resistance and bravery of the protestors made him hopeful. But now, with the violence escalating in the hill tracts, he is finding it difficult to remain optimistic.

They had toppled the fascist regime, and he was glad to see them fall. People celebrated when the army went back to their barracks in the cities, but the majority of the people did not seem concerned about the 300 plus barracks occupying the hill tracts.

From a young age, Aung had to learn to navigate the confines of military occupation. When he was in high school, needing permission slips to go outside his village became a regular ritual. When he moved away for college, the *Bangalee* friends he made could not fathom the reality of living under colonial occupation.

The beautiful village he grew up in, his ancestral land, holds memories spanning across generations. When he was in his teenage years, *Didi* told him about the massacre that took place in the 80s. The army had called his ancestors to a meeting with the *Bangalee*

settlers, who had moved to the region in the 70s and early 80s. His heart constricts every time he thinks of the betrayal his people had experienced when the army and settlers surrounded them, shooting and beating them to death. *My people - always willing to die for their homeland, for their community.*

Aung's phone rings. Hoping it's *Didi* calling, he quickly grabs his phone. Never before did he feel dismayed seeing K's name pop up. *First time for everything, huh?*

"Hey,"

"Love, are you okay? How are *Didi* and aunty doing?"

"I... I don't know, K. *Didi* texted a few hours ago that they were going into the *jongol*³³ to hide. I haven't heard anything since. I should have been there, K. I..."

"I know, hun, I know. I am so sorry you are going through this. I am praying for *Didi* and aunty to be safe. No one should have to go through this."

"Violence and oppression seem like our birthright, don't they?" He spits out, anger and resentment palpable in his voice.

He hears K sigh over the phone, and silence comfortably settles in between them. K's presence, even over the phone, makes Aung feel less alone.

³³ Jungle

After spending a sleepless night, tossing and turning in bed, consumed by anxiety and fear, Aung gets up. *I wish I could stay home today. But what do I tell my boss?*

As he is heading out the door, he receives a text from *Didi*,

“We are safe, staying with uncle B in town. Call us after work?” Relief floods Aung's senses as he clutches his phone to his chest. *They are okay. They are safe. That's all that matters.*

He calls *Didi* right away, and hearing her voice makes him tear up. He finally acknowledges the fear that clawed his mind all night, – the fear of never getting to hear *Didi* or *Maa*'s³⁴ voice again.

He quickly texts K, letting him know they are safe.

Aung walks on the shore; K walks in step beside him. They watch the waves crash onto the shore and recede, their hands inches apart. Even after two years of being together, he is still surprised by the extent of love he feels towards K. *I wish I could tell Didi and Maa about him. But I know they will never understand. I will always have to keep my family and my partner in separate spheres.* He sighs, turning to look at K's glistening face. He smiles at him, wishing to take his hand into his, but he doesn't, he can't, not in public.

K pulls out a picnic blanket and a thermos of tea. They sit down and watch the sun behind the cerulean sea, allowing the stress and anxiety of the past few weeks to recede into

³⁴ Mother

the background. Sitting beside each other, in comfortable silence, is all the intimacy they can afford.

Different Desires

Abir sits in front of their laptop, typing away. The makeshift desk they have prepared in the warm hotel room is neatly organized, with notepads and schedules resting in a corner. Attending residential training in a different city has been an insightful experience for Abir.

After a long day of sessions and discussions, exhaustion overwhelms them. All they want to do is curl up on the bed, but it's been days since they last spoke to their partner, and they just want to hear her soothing voice. They pick up the phone and call Shreya.

“Hey you,” Shreya’s soft voice greets them, alleviating their fatigue.

“Hi hun, how are you? How has your day been?” they ask, a smile forming at the corner of their lips.

“Oh it's been a long one honestly, work has been exhausting.” She sighs.

“I hope you get to rest up this weekend. You've been working overtime for weeks now. Your work ethic is beyond admirable.”

“Thanks, huh. I really hope I get the time to just rot in bed this Friday, I can't anymore.”

“Understandable, we can't function without rest, can we?”

“I wish we could, we would be the perfect employees then” Shreya chuckles. “Now tell me, what's up with you? How was your day?”

“Oh, it was pretty interesting. Today's sessions were on different learning styles, and

I really loved how the facilitator made us brainstorm ways to incorporate these styles in our classrooms.”

“Ooh, that sounds interesting. I'm glad y'all are getting the chance to learn and explore.”

“Me too, I am looking forward to implementing these techniques in the classroom.”

“I love seeing you so excited.”

Abir shifts to the bed, lying down, they continue to chat with Shreya, her soothing voice helping them drift off to sleep.

Abir returns to his room, depositing the bag, they pick up the phone, and text Shreya.

“You know today, one my coworkers were asking me why I am not yet married,”

“Ugh, that must have been annoying.”

“It was, but at this point, I'm used to it. When I told him I don't feel the need for marriage, he was like, ‘then who's gonna cook for you?’”

“He did not!”

Abir shakes their head, typing,

“I just stared at him for a few seconds before saying, ‘I don't need someone else to cook for me, I'm self-sufficient enough.’ I wanted to call him out on his belief in misogynistic

gender roles, but I just didn't know where to start.”

“Understandable. Men like him are so thoroughly hegemonized, one conversation won't make a dent in making them question their uninformed beliefs.”

“Yeah. When I was younger, these kinds of questions and comments used to bother me so much, but now, I no longer care.”

“I get that, hun. It's too emotionally draining to try to change other people's minds, and it's not your responsibility to,”

“Exactly, it took me a long time to accept that. Now I know, it's not my burden to make people question their bigotry. All I can do is live a life that is true to me. Plus, now, I love watching them stutter when I reply sarcastically,”

“I adore your sarcastic remarks.”

Abir laughs, imagining Shreya laughing as she types. Shreya always has a way of making them laugh, even when things seem bleak.

“Can you imagine how they would react if they found out how different our relationship is compared to the conventional ones?”

“They would lose their minds,” Shreya replies. “They would for sure think something was wrong with us,”

“Like we are deviants,” Abir texts back.

From a young age, Abir has felt different than the people around them. Watching their

peers fall in love and obsess over romance always left them feeling confused. *This isn't what I want.*

Growing up, they could not tell their friends how they did not feel any romantic or sexual inclination towards anyone. They felt pressured by their peers to pretend like sex and romance held the same fascination for them. Seeing their classmates be openly queerphobic made them feel alienated and detached.

When they would read novels portraying characters falling in love, they couldn't relate. As much as they loved to devour books, there was always this sense of disconnection they experienced. They deeply felt the lack of aro-ace representation in the mainstream media and literature.

Abir and Shreya met at the height of the pandemic, - when the world stood still. They connected through virtual chat rooms, and over time, their relationship deepened. Their love for books and gaming fostered an organic connection. Abir still fondly remembers the day Shreya asked them out,

“Would you like to go on a coffee date sometime?” Shreya had asked over text.

At first Abir was nervous. His previous partner couldn't grasp the concept of aromanticism which had led to a number of issues when they dated. *Shreya is also aro-ace. Why am I overthinking this? We like spending time together, we enjoy each other's company, so why not?*

They met at a cozy book cafe on a rainy afternoon. Sitting by the window, with teeming mugs of coffee, they watched the downpour and spent hours talking about their favorite things. A sense of warmth encircled their heart, and Abir knew they wanted to keep spending time with Shreya.

Over the past few years, Abir and Shreya have gotten closer. Their affection for one another has only deepened. Abir often gets asked by their friends about their relationship status, and every time they have to explain their queer platonic partnership with Shreya as their straight friends stare back at them with a baffled expression. *Some people can never understand the idea of a non-romantic and non-sexual relationship. To them the lack of sexual intimacy is unimaginable.* He sighs.

“How is it different from just friendship?”

“Do you plan your future together?” are some of the questions they get asked frequently.

“Did you see the new ICT law that was passed yesterday?” Shreya asks them over the phone.

“I did, and I am not even surprised, you know? The way the interim government has been handling the post-uprising issues has been disappointing to say the least. Like I'm glad the autocratic regime is not in power anymore, but I can't help but be worried about the future.”

“Same, B, same. Every day I see articles and reports of violence, and it just makes me feel so sad. I don't get what the government's priorities are right now. If they don't care about restoring law and order and keeping our people safe, what is the point of any of it?”

“Exactly, Shree. Their prioritization has been extremely problematic. The fact that we continue to see posts about injured protesters still not receiving the funds for their treatment is utterly dismaying.”

Shreya sighs, “I genuinely don't understand what this government is trying to do. Most of their actions seem to be meaningless gestures to appease the middle class, don't they?”

“Yeah, I agree. They do not seem concerned about doing right by the people who sacrificed their lives to overthrow the fascist government.”

Abir meticulously folds their clothes and packs them into the bag. They clean out the neat desk. *A few more hours and I will be home. Two months just flew by, didn't they?*

They smile at the thought of having dinner with their parents. When they left for the training, they didn't think they would miss them as much as they have. *I hope they will like the books I got for them.* Abir sighs at the thought of home and finally getting to sleep in their own bed. They quickly pack up the presents they got for Shreya, eager to be embraced by her warm and comforting presence.

Of Love and Longing

Mahin bends down to tie her shoes, her tanned skin glistening under the winter sun. Adjusting her hijab, she sets off running. She loves feeling the refreshing summer breeze gracing her face. *I am so glad to have this space to run. If I had to stay indoors and worry over what is happening back home, I would lose my mind.* She takes a deep breath, inhaling the fresh morning air.

Moving to a small university town in North America has opened up new possibilities for Mahin. Back in her home country, finding green spaces in the capital city was difficult. Every inch of the city was covered by intricate roads and high-rise buildings; most of the parks were often crowded, and it made it difficult for Mahin to find spaces for physical activities. She hated the way most men would stare at her, unabashedly whenever she went out. Not having to worry about being leered at has been freeing.

She runs past the university field. She glances around as a pang of guilt overwhelms her. The field looks so empty now that all signs of the encampment have been erased.

Mahin sits on the soft grass, the spring sun blaring down on her. Pulling the *keffiyeh*³⁵ closer around her shoulders, she joins the chant. Her defiant shout mingles with the voices echoing from countless other students and workers, chanting in solidarity, “Free, Free, Palestine.”

³⁵ Traditional Middle-Eastern Scarf – now a symbol for supporting Palestine

Mahin has been at the encampment for the past couple of days, protesting on the university grounds. Being surrounded by other people who are just as enraged at the ongoing genocide has been a liberating experience. The queer Muslim group Mahin co-founded has been active in Pro-Palestinian advocacy since last year, and being at the encampment alongside her comrades fills her heart with love, despite the despondent circumstance.

She walks over to the library corner and adds the books Riha brought over earlier.

“Hey love, do you want to grab some food? The teach-in on “Decolonization” is in 30 mins,” Riha tells her.

“Let's go,” Mahin replies, smiling, linking her arms with Riha's.

Mahin wonders if the kind Egyptian lady brought over delicious home-cooked dishes for the protestors like she has for the past few days. She sees her sitting beside one of the tables ladled with food. Mahin waves at her, and walks over,

“Hi, Mrs. Abbas. How are you doing today?”

“Oh, I'm alright, hun. How are you? Where's that sister of yours?”

Mahin scrunches up her eyebrows, confused. *Sister? Does she mean Riha?*

“Um, do you mean Riha?”

“Yes, I think so. The *Bangalee* girl you are always with.”

“She's actually my wife.”

“Oh. I thought you were sisters because you look so similar.”

“You know what they say, soulmates look alike,” Mahin says, smiling. Mrs. Abbas smiles back, ladling more food onto Mahin's plate. This moment of negotiated acceptance warms Mahin's heart.

Mahin runs through the park and stops by the blue lake resting at the edge of the woodland. Struggling to catch her breath, she sits down on the small wooden bench. *I wonder how long it's going to take to get used to running. As tiring as the journey has been, I'm glad I started.*

As her breathing steadies, she looks around, taking in the surroundings. This shaded corner of the park, over the past couple of years, has become a refuge for Mahin. Whenever she needs to calm her racing mind, she comes here to watch the shallow waves ripple across the lake.

For their third wedding anniversary, Mahin brought Riha to this secluded lake shore, surprising her with a cozy picnic. The two of them read side by side, fingers interlocking, under the shade of ancient trees. Mahin knows how difficult their wedding anniversary is for Riha, and every year Mahin tries to do something thoughtful to make the day easier. This year, she gifted Riha a beautiful red *jamdani sharee*³⁶, to make up for the one she didn't get to wear at their wedding.

“I should have never asked you to go through the wedding then, I didn't think how difficult it would be for you to boymode³⁷, I'm so sorry, love” Mahin apologized, her voice shaking, finally able to string together the words that had been suffocating her for months.

“I appreciate that, love. I hated wearing a *Punjabi*³⁸. Even now I hate looking at myself in our wedding photos. But I know this was the most convenient way for us to come here together. And I don't think I would have felt as comfortable transitioning back home”

³⁶ Cultural attire made with Jamdani fabric

³⁷ Presenting as masculine

³⁸ A South Asian traditional wear mainly worn by men

Sitting on the wooden bench, overlooking the lake, Mahin recalls the day Riha first told her that she was gender non-binary. At the time, Mahin was taken aback, but her love for Riha never faltered. In that moment, her sense of reality had felt threatened. She had thought she was dating a cisgender bisexual man; and as a bisexual woman being in a straight-passing relationship allowed her to feel a sense of safety. She felt secure in the comfort of being in a socially acceptable relationship, and when Riha came out to her, Mahin was scared of losing that safety. She filled up countless pages of her blue journal, writing down her scattered thoughts. *If Riha is non-binary, then we are not in a straight relationship. I think I am okay with that. But... being in queer relationship here is just... I wish I didn't feel so scared. My parents would not approve of a non-masculine son-in-law. But they don't have to know now, do they? We can pretend to adhere to certain gender roles for now. And if we apply for post grad abroad, and we get the chance to go, we can finally just exist as us, without needing to conform. We will just have to hide for a little while.* She wrote in one of the pages.

Mahin had embraced Riha's identity, but to keep them safe, she had asked Riha to mask in front of her parents and the larger society. At the time, Mahin couldn't completely grasp how difficult having to mask was for Riha. Over the past couple of years, Mahin has grown to empathize with and understand Riha's struggles, but she still feels guilty for how she acted in the past. *I should have been more supportive when Riha came out.*

As she watches a blue jay fly over the lake, she thinks of the day Riha told her she wanted to transition to fully embrace her trans identity, a few months after moving to North America.

"I love you and I support you," Mahin had said, wrapping her arms around Riha.

“I think I want to start by changing my name first, and I want to make an appointment with the doctor and start on HRT soon.”

“I get that. I will accompany you to the appointment, of course. Have you thought of any names that you like?”

“Not yet.”

“How about Riha?”

“That’s a beautiful name.” Riha had replied, a smile adorning her soft round face.

Mahin gets off the bench and begins to jog, weaving her way to their apartment. Kicking off her shoes, she brings out her phone and dials her parents’ Bangladeshi phone number, but the call does not go through.

Mahin refreshes her Facebook newsfeed for the umpteenth time. None of her friends or family in Bangladesh are online. No one has posted anything in days. *It's like there has been a digital death.*

She bites her lower lip, gnawing at it as anxiety threatens to devour her. Not being able to contact her family, especially a time of upheaval, has kept her up for the past two nights. *Who would have thought that I would actually lose my mind worrying about them? I can't believe we were thinking of cutting off our families for good.* She sighs, settling down beside Riha, and wrapping her arms around her.

“I can't imagine what the police and army are doing to our people,” Riha says, sadness etched into her voice.

“Me neither, love. Me neither. Every time I think of what horror they must be committing during this internet blackout, I can't breathe. Like before they shut down the internet, we already

saw reports of hundreds of students being attacked, and a number of them were killed. And now...”

The call finally goes through, as they hear the line ring, Mahin and Riha reach for each other's hands. “Ma,” Mahin says as soon as the call connects, relief flooding her body. “Are you okay? How is everyone else?”

“We are all okay. Curfew is still ongoing, so we have to stay indoors.” a tired voice replies through the phone.

“*Alhamdulillah*,³⁹ I am so glad all of you are okay. We have been worried sick the past couple of days.”

I can't believe we were thinking of cutting off our families. As much as it hurts not to have them accept us as we are, they are still our family. When Ma asked me to divorce Riha, I thought I was never going to speak to her again. But the silence of the past few days has reminded me how much I also value my parents. Mahin thinks, glad to be able to talk to her parents again.

³⁹ Thank Allah.

Ramblings of a Restless Mind

As I walk out of the university campus, the winter sun embraces me in its warmth. Soft white clouds float above the city line. I traipse through crowds of boisterous students, laughing and chatting away. I weave my way through the throng of customers and get to the *tong*.⁴⁰ Greeting the *tong er mama*,⁴¹ I ask for a cup of *cha*.⁴² As mama hands me the cup of steaming milk tea, I notice his left hand, his index finger no longer there.

“*Mama*,⁴³ what happened?” I ask, my voice is louder than I expect.

“*Areh, mama, kichu na*.⁴⁴ During the protests, I got injured.”

I don't know what to say to him. How many countless people have sacrificed their lives to rid their country of the oppressive regime? It's been six months since the uprising, but wherever I go, the signs of those brutal days are present. The blood has been cleaned off the streets, the bodies have been buried, but everywhere you look, you can't help but see the blood that was shed.

The faces that are missing in the crowds, the voices that we can no longer hear, continue to occupy my thoughts. But what can we do? Life goes on, and the globe keeps spinning, and we spin with it. There is no time for grief. There is no time for our feelings. All that matters is being productive. All that matters is being the perfect cog in the machine.

⁴⁰ Tea-stand

⁴¹ Uncle manning the tea-stand. We refer to elderly men of all professions as “mama” – uncle.

⁴² Tea

⁴³ Uncle

⁴⁴ “Areh, nothing, uncle.”

Being surrounded by a sea of people at times feels so overwhelming, I can't help but wonder, what life would have been like if I was born into a different era. A simpler, quieter era.

I sip my tea, sitting on the wall that surrounds the solitary tree in front of the *tong*. I look around, the young faces in the crowd look tired and stressed, and I wonder what goes through their minds, how they are coping with the trauma they witnessed during the uprising.

I hail a CNG⁴⁵ on the Uber app, – the convenience of technology has made commutes more tolerable for me, but at what cost? As the CNG navigates around the twists and turns of the narrow streets, a feeling of suffocation envelopes me. Caged within the green bars, passing by sky-high buildings, makes my heart ache for country roads surrounded by trees.

The CNG navigates through the congested roads of my city, and I can't help but think of the Bengal that existed before the colonial period. Before our civilization was forever transformed by the British Raj.

Where would we be if we had not been invaded? If our culture and our way of life had not been reformed by the oppressors? Maybe these are just futile questions to ponder over, but I can't help but wonder.

The stories I have heard from my parents, passed down from one generation to another, makes me think of a Bengal full of ancient trees and vast rivers that flowed through every

⁴⁵ A local vehicle run on gas

corner. Mud huts with straw thatched roofs, shaded by *taal gach*,⁴⁶ flash before my eyes, and I long for a time I never got to witness. And I don't know how to explain this yearning, not even to myself.

Sitting in the green CNG, choking on the toxic air of this city, all I want to do is turn back time and return to a simpler world, a world where our lives were not incompatible with our innate human nature.

The sound of cars, the cacophony of horns and sirens overwhelm my senses, and I simply want to retreat to the forest and live amidst nature. Drinking water from the babbling brooks, foraging for native fruits in the depths of ancient trees. This fast-paced world, the constant chaos, is not for me. I wonder if other people also feel this nostalgia for the past, for a world we did not get to see. This inexplicable longing. I wish I could ask people if they too long for a past they never witnessed, but how do you bring up something like this naturally in a conversation? Sometimes, all the thoughts swirling around in my head make me feel alienated from the people around me. This sense of disconnection always seems to cling onto me. Lately, I have been feeling even more dismembered from this world and the people who inhabit it. I was not meant to live in this capitalist hellscape, I was meant to live a quiet life, deriving sustenance from the earth that birthed us, and taking care of her in turn. I was meant to frolic in meadows; sing without inhibition under the open sky; and read under the embrace of ancient *bot gach*,⁴⁷ vast and luscious.

⁴⁶ Palm tree

⁴⁷ Banyan tree

I glance out the gaps of the metal bars and my eyes catch on the graffiti on the walls - “*Shoirachar nipat jak,*”⁴⁸ “*mor bhaire marli kenu?*”⁴⁹ - the powerful words, accompanied by vivid imagery of blood and pain, make my heart ache. Six months since our lives were turned upside down. Six months since we lost over a thousand of our brethren at the hands of our brutal, bloodthirsty regime.

The sound of gunfire still echoes through my mind. Sometimes, I jerk awake at the sound of transformers erupting. I can feel my heart pounding whenever I cross a police checkpoint, and I'm one of the privileged people. I didn't directly witness any violence. I didn't witness my people being beaten, shot at, bloodied. I only saw clips of the violence, and yet I'm traumatized. I feel like I have been transformed by the brutality that occurred in July. And I can only imagine how traumatic and painful the uprising had been for those who witnessed the violence first hand. I have a friend who watched their friend die in front of them. Another friend witnessed the murder of people they didn't know. How do you recover from that trauma? Can you even?

I attended the protests in my area. Every time I left the house, I made sure to hug my cats, smothering them with kisses, in case I didn't come back. Thinking about those days feels unreal now. So many emotions overwhelmed my senses throughout those weeks. Anger. Fear. Defiance.

I still clearly remember the day the first deaths took place. I was just making my way back from the protests, grasping the bamboo stick tightly in my hands. My backpack, full of

⁴⁸ “End to Fascism”

⁴⁹ “Why did you kill my brother?”

masks, medicines, gauze, toothpaste, and saline, was slung over my shoulders, heavy under the burden of its contents. I stopped at a *tong* to grab some tea, my chronically ill body needing a break from walking. I sipped on the tea while I scrolled through the Facebook feed, and the post about the first student death popped up. My breathing became shallow, as tears poured down my cheeks soaking my mask. Disbelief clung on to me as I stared at the death certificate of Abu Sayeed, killed by the police in my home district. I wanted to scream. I wanted to tear everything apart. Even as I write, recalling these memories, tears are beginning to stream down my face. It's been months since July, and yet sometimes I feel like I'm still living through those days. I have no words to express the pain of watching my people being brutalized at the hands of our own government. Those who made promises to protect us, chose to kill us. Tale as old as time, isn't it? These systems of oppression seem like our birthright now. How did we get here?

I jerk forward, snapping out of my reverie. I almost hit my head on the metal barrier between me and the driver as the CNG comes to a sudden stop, and I see a group of people rush past the front of our vehicle. The driver has barely avoided a collision. If he had taken a few more seconds to react... I shudder at the thought. Isn't it sad that every day we leave the house we risk losing our lives at the hands of avoidable accidents? Oh this city, where human lives are the cheapest commodity. How did we get here? How did we allow apathy to run rampant through our streets?

Every day I scan the newspapers, and reports of fatal accidents, of brutal murders grace the pages, barely deserving of space. The other day, a university student was killed in a hit-and-run in front of a police box. At first, the identity of the driver and his companions, who

were drunk and high at the time of the murder, was not released, because one of them was the son of a brigadier general. It's a strange world we live in where the value of our lives is attached to status and class. If students of the university had not protested and demanded justice, I wonder if we would have learned of the perpetrators' identities. I wonder, would anyone have protested if the victim had been a working-class individual and not a student? You would think that after the *gonoabhutthan*⁵⁰ things would change for the better, even if slightly. But it seems like nothing has changed. We just swapped one oppressor for another. The pigs have transformed into humans, and they no longer care for our well-being, if they ever did that is. It's funny how a number of people would get mad at me if I openly express my discontent regarding our current leaders, so much for freedom of speech, nah? Sometimes I am genuinely baffled by some people's thought processes - so binary in their thinking that they can't grasp the nuance in different situations. Of course, the previous government had to fall. How could we allow them to govern after they attacked and killed innocent students? But being against the brutality of the past regime doesn't mean that I will be blind to problematic actions being taken by the current government. Why is that considered a controversial concept?

You know, during the uprising, this sense of heaviness sat on my chest. During the blackout, I felt so hopeless, so scared that words are not enough to convey the extent of those emotions. On the third day of the blackout, I woke up to the sound of bullets firing. The sun was just beginning to rise over the surrounding buildings, when I heard three shots being fired. To this day, I do not know why those shots were fired.

⁵⁰ Uprising

During the protests, I wanted the regime to pay for the lives that they took, for the terror that they unleashed. But if I am being honest, I was skeptical of the one-point demand, because “*bikolpo ke?*”⁵¹ I was afraid of an unknown evil replacing the known one. I was afraid of extremist sects infiltrating the movement. And six months in, I can’t help but say that my fears were, indeed, valid.

“*Mama baam e jabo*”⁵² the driver mama calls from the front seat.

“*Ha mama, baam e jan, ekdom last er building e raikhen.*”⁵³ I holler from the back trying to be heard over the loud hum of the engine.

I hand *mama* the fair and sigh in relief. I am not too late. After an hour of navigating the jam-packed streets, I have finally reached my destination - a small queer event. An event we can't disclose to the mainstream world. An event where we have to maintain numerous safety and security protocols simply to ensure we have a space to connect. The reality of our lives is shrouded in secrecy, there is no other way for us to circumvent the hatred and threats we have to endure daily. How long can we live under such segregation? Every time I think about our lives, my heart feels like it's being squeezed by a cold, metal fist. Sometimes I want to throw caution to the wind and announce my existence to the intolerant world. “I am here! I exist and I am queer!” I want to shout from the top of my lungs and reclaim my space in my motherland. But I don't. I can't. Visibility politics is dangerous in my city. Two of our dearest comrades, Xulhaz and Tonoy, were killed in 2016 by a terrorist group, soon after they published the first openly gay magazine here. I didn't personally know them, but I still

⁵¹ “Who is the alternative?”

⁵² “Uncle, should I take the left turn?”

⁵³ “Yes, mama, take the left turn and stop at the last building on the road.”

remember how the 19-year-old me wept when I saw the news. The pain I felt then is inexplicable.

I now work alongside people who worked with Xulhaz and Tonoy⁵⁴. I smile when I hear my friends talk about Xulhaz, how kind he was, how talented he was. I have teared up hearing them recall the days following the murders. So much pain. So much trauma. Where do we put it down?

I chew on my lips as the elevator slowly ascends to the top floor. The moment the doors open, I eagerly jump off and quickly climb up the flight of stairs leading to the roof.

Fairy lights, in the warmest shade, twinkle over the roof, enveloping the tall potted plants in their warmth. My lips curl into a smile as I walk under the lights. Something about fairy lights just warms my heart.

I quietly sneak into the ballroom. On the small stage, a Hijra *apa*⁵⁵ is playing the harmonium and singing one of my favorite *Rabindra Sangeets*⁵⁶ and I begin to hum along. One of my friends walks up to the stage next and recites a poem, followed by a group of dancers. Watching Hijra women dance, adorned in colorful sarees and intricate jewelry, fills me with this sense of pride and joy that I can't put into words. Carving out spaces where we can exist as who we are, despite the risks we continue to face, is our form of resistance. All of us here are connected to one another, bonded in a way that the heteronormative world will never comprehend.

⁵⁴ Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy were queer activists who founded the magazine "Roopban." In 2016, they were brutally murdered by a terrorist group.

⁵⁵ Sister

⁵⁶ Songs by Rabindranath Tagore

I still remember the first queer gathering I attended, organized through online networking. With excitement bubbling in my chest, I made my way to the get-together. I still vividly recall the warmth that embraced me, the joy that overpowered me, on that fateful day, nearly four years ago. Seeing a room full of queer people together, despite all odds, was so inspirational, it still carries me forward. That day opened the door to a world I didn't know existed, and I got involved with community organizing. Every time I help organize an event, every time we defy the repression, I am engulfed by this sense of power and resistance that is unparalleled. Community is powerful.

But you know what's sad? In this competitive world, even in queer spaces, we can't find true community. I have noticed how even within queer spaces, those who are more vulnerable end up facing discrimination. The practice of otherization we inherited from the colonial rulers continues to haunt us. I recently left a community based organization because of how they treated me for being chronically ill and neurodivergent. One of the senior members made some insensitive and ableist comments regarding my illnesses, and when I dared to speak out against them, they filed a complaint against me. I still remember how my heart clenched up when they said, "You cannot let your illness control you," after I had explained to them how debilitating my illnesses are, or when they suggested yoga will cure my chronic pain, as if I hadn't tried yoga and every other remedy possible. Even now, my breathing becomes shallow when I think about that conversation, which began with them telling me "at this age you should have full-time job experience," their voice dripping with condescension. When I told them how I did have a couple of full time jobs previously, but I had to leave due to my chronic conditions, they began to lecture me about managing illnesses whose names they did not even bother learning. They expected me to accept their ill-informed unsolicited advice, but I could

not tolerate the ableism, not in a queer space. Watching other members defend their behavior pushed me to leave. After dedicating more than two years of my life working for the organization, it broke my heart to leave. But how can I exist in a space where people are allowed to disrespect me for being disabled?

Ever since I left, I became somewhat distant from the community and the events that sustain us. But it's also my space, and I will not allow discriminatory behavior to make me relinquish my place. I am thankful to the organizations that continue to invite and welcome me. Last month, I got the opportunity to conduct a session on "Decolonizing Gender and Sexuality: Art, History, and Culture" at a conference on "Diversity" and it was such a liberating experience. Researching for the session made me so angry at how our culture and society were influenced by the 200-year colonial rule. Of course, even before the colonial period, marginalization existed, but it wasn't as pervasive, you know? Non-normative gender and sexual identities were "accommodated if not accepted."

Hijra women were respected during the Mughal Empire, holding administrative positions at the court. If we look back to the times of princes and kingdoms, we see how Hijra women were viewed as auspicious and were invited to bless weddings, births, and funerals. Reading scriptures belonging to the Sonaton religion fills me with a sense of loss that I cannot express. From Shikandi to Brihonnala, non-binary gender identities were very much part of the mythology. And facilitating a session where we got to discuss the queer history of South Asia, from homoerotic sculptures to homoerotic Sufi Ghazals, was truly empowering.

It's funny, in a very depressing way, how Hijra women who were once an integral part of our society and culture, have been pushed to the margins of our current "civilization." Oh

civilization, such a loaded word. Such a colonial concept. From indoctrinating us to the concept of gender binaries, to criminalizing Hijra women under the 1861 “Criminal Tribes Act,” to criminalizing same-sex relationships in 1871, the way colonial violence disrupted and dismantled our culture and society continues to enrage me. Our current predicament, - the criminalization, the rampant queerphobia, is directly linked to colonial violence

Do I hear them calling my name? I look up from the notes app on my phone, to see the host gesturing at me. It’s my turn to perform. Why did I sign up again?

I stumble my way across the people seated on the *satranji*.⁵⁷ Grabbing the microphone, I take a deep breath to steady my nerves. I can feel my heartbeat in my throat. Greeting the audience, I begin to recite my poem titled “Abstract”

“An abstract

A concept

A sin

That is how you perceive us.

To you,

We are not real.

⁵⁷ Carpet

We are not among your friends.

We are not among your family.

Nor among your colleagues, or your classmates.

To you,

We aren't living breathing human beings.

We are a stigma,

A blemish

That you wish to eradicate.

To you,

We do not matter.

We do not belong.

Our existence - blasphemy.

To you,

Your hatred, your bigotry is justified,

Your beliefs justify our oppression,

Your violence upon us.

To you,

We are a debate.

An idea,

An abstract.”

As the customary applause echoes through the room, I take my seat in the back of the room. Even as I sit amongst kin, laughing and talking, I feel disconnected. Divorced from everyone around me. I cannot help but overthink every little thing. It's like a steak of loneliness envelopes me at all times. Even as I dance to the beat of the drum, allowing my body to move in tune with the rhythm, surrounded by my queer friends and acquaintances, I can't help but worry. The way the sound technician gapes at two male friends holding hands while dancing makes me feel uneasy. Even in spaces that we curate for ourselves, we cannot escape the disdain of the cis-het world.

Sometimes I am smothered by this sense of suffocation so overwhelming that I freeze up. During these moments, I long to lose myself in a forest, far away from this artificial world we have built. I wonder, do others feel the same as me?

The End

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