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one.

Samihah Pargas

I. Just Some Thoughts

I have never wanted to be another's eyes. Scrounging my mind, I don't recall a desire of wanting to channel into someone

else's mind, read through their ancestry, be surrounded by the aura of the city they live in or experience their meaning of home.

How vulnerable it is to touch a memory. You're almost afraid, weaving words in your mind to construct a question that can merely touch the surface. It scares you. It makes you ponder about all the things that are living within you, the parts the world has yet to witness. Samihah preferred evoking all such memories to life- if anything, they laid them down in front of me. They manifested an individual who has spent years and years to explore her truth. They did not shy away from being vulnerable. Being authentic to oneself requires breaking yourself open and reflecting on your truth every single day, no matter how painful it is. Being authentic means vulnerability.

You only felt unafraid once you were on your prayer mat.

There will be a hole in the world you've shaken.

You didn't create it, you simply uncovered it.

*And everyone will tiptoe around it uncomfortably during the family activities
you'll exclude yourself from.*

Honesty is expensive.

You're unashamed and it surprises you.

Your indifference is frightening and confusing.

Perhaps the next few days, weeks, months, years

*Will be marked by a black hole that you had the audacity to point out,
and you will be made keeper of it and all other secrets that everyone else has
shoved inside*

*You shrug and think it's not much different to living behind the face your
parents made of you.*

*You'd much rather guard your truths with your chest than carry them on your
shoulders.*

-Samihah Pargas

II. Sexuality & Acceptance

So easy, it seemed so damn easy to question their identity. I will never deny the privilege with which we ask queer people this question. Gay. Gay is a word and a million is the times it feels like people still must count to merely accept their queerness. I am sifting through queer theory, political jargon and feminist contentions and I think of academic institutions and the pride that

comes with credibility. I scrutinize Samihah's poetry and I wonder if those theories are functional- in real life, where a daughter fights for her life.

You're not quite sure why, but you brought up the word

[gay]

last night.

*And Your Mother tried to kick you out the house again, but it didn't work
this time.*

You're less afraid, you're angrier

- Samihah Pargas

Samihah identifies as non-binary/gender fluid and their preferred pronouns are they/them but they are also fine with she/her, or even he/him. They are a curious person, to say the least, and have probed into their sexual orientation often to see where they stand on the spectrum. Oftentimes, they had experiences where they questioned their sexual orientation and thought they might be pan-sexual or bi-sexual. They take a pause, look down and finally say:

“but I do really just be loving women.”

and we both burst into laughter.

They identify as lesbian. They talked about how sometime last year, they started to embrace masculine ~air quoting~ traits. They expressed their disdain for labelling traits as masculine or feminine as they feel they are ever evolving, meaning progressing with time.

“Where I stand now, I don’t try and hold more tightly to masculinity or to femininity. Some days I feel less masculine or in some situations and I just let it be in that moment. I find that this is the least painful way to be ~laughs uncomfortably~.”

At 18, Samihah began acknowledging their queerness. They had a best friend for whom they didn’t have platonic feelings- which eventually grew too strong for them to contain. Samihah absolutely adored their best friend, that much I too could infer through a restricted zoom call. Still, they were in a constant struggle with an inward isolation, stemming from their relationships with their straight friends along with having to reconcile differences with their own identity. Samihah spoke of

the exhaustion they experienced by trying; explaining feelings to themselves in reference and in contrast to behavior normalized in a Muslim household. Their repression was brutal and relentless. Coupled with the familial pressure of living their life in a certain way: academic aspirations, religious and societal standards, the back and forth struggles and anxieties of undergoing adolescence were also thrown at them. At this point, I wondered how complicated it becomes at times to exist.

“ I had to sit down with myself and accept what I felt for this person and that was when it all really came into full swing. I had to work through things like internalized homophobia and then because I didn't feel accepted by the Muslim community, I started growing some sort of internalized Islamophobia. It was a mess!

An absolute mess!”

All the exit points for this pain failed to lure it out.

It is cleverer and faster than I am.

I could be outrunning my own self.

Sick game. Pain, the entertainer.

It does not push me further because it needs an audience to perform for.

Perhaps my heart is dangling from its own strings.

I am a contained explosion.

There is no sense of control no, the carnage is all internal.

My body is a warzone.

- Samihah Pargas

“**A:** Whom did you come out to?

S: The first person that I came out to was one of my queer Muslim friends that I met over Instagram. We became very close just talking about spirituality and our perceptions of the world.

A: How did you feel? What was their reaction?

S: I was hesitant from the fear of not being accepted by her. Although I knew I would be totally heard and seen by her, but it was more of the sense of having to face my own self and that's what really terrified me. It felt as if there was something heavy sitting on my chest and *I just couldn't get the words out*. Once I was finally reassured, I felt better. However, despite feeling relieved, I still felt a bit sad.”

Above is the role online avenues play in our lives, for better or worse. Coming out, or professing our truth gets a little bit easier. According to Samihah, coming out is terrifying, but also relieving.

“Nothing feels heavier than the initial moment of realization that it would irreversibly alter all the relationships that I had with other people or with my religion.”

For Samihah, coming out was really coming to terms with herself, she was heard and welcomed with open arms. That moment of realization seems like an aching devotion to oneself and Samihah said they would rather let it engulf them than be ignorant. The truth is bound to outlast every single one of those theories, biologies, cultures and societal judgements. It wouldn't be wrong to say that online platforms shrink vast distances into a safe space where our muffled sobs or staggering truths are heard. Maybe we feel a little less alone too.

There is a storm inside. Call it resilience. Call it belief.

There is a kind of madness growing within.

Despair or defiance. Or both. It feels liberating.

Almost Exciting. In my chest, I am soaring.

*Is this what happens when you acknowledge that your place has never been
shame*

never incorrect

never owned by another but you?

I swear it then

realising that you had been giving your power away is power itself

and I am going to own it.

-Samibah Pargas

III. Art & Exploration

“**A:** What does art mean for you?

S: It means expression in the simplest terms and the deepest sense of the word. It means to express oneself and to build bridges for connection.

A: What feelings do you mainly express through your art?

S: Everything. I am obsessed with the human condition. Anything that excites me, intrigues me, hurts me or gives me joy; I express any of these emotions. I notice that I turn to art when I'm really in pain.

A: How do you envision art in your head, what is your creative thought process for it?

S: I look at it as self-exploration. A wild fascination with oneself, the world and one's relation to the world. I don't exactly have a thought process. When I sit down and write, I try to catch whatever feeling comes to mind now. I'd like to write to free myself from whatever sort of shackles I've learned to have. I will write a thing and think 'oh my goodness that's so terrible why would anyone think that' but it is the truth and it exists in the world and within us so when I think of the creative process I think that the process is liberation however that looks for the creative.”

One of the overlapping themes that I noticed on Samihah's Instagram were spirituality, heartbreak, love and introspection. Later, when we discussed the themes that she displays publicly, she expressed a recurring urge to write of reconciling identities. She specifically used the example of pain. Through pain, she embarked on the process of reconciling parts of her identity which don't always fit together. She talked about love and spoke of an affinity towards writing about romantic love, all while chuckling shyly.

“Many times, it's been about women. I write for women.

I write for women”.

The more I talk to Samihah, the deeper I delve into the complexities of her experiences. At times, the past would overshadow the present 20-year-old college going student. Other times, her smile outshined the darker undertones of our conversations.

Samihah had been writing as long as they could remember. They would write stories as a child. When they were not writing, they would pour themselves into dance. Dance, according to them, saved them from falling into lesser healthy coping mechanisms. But for them, they admitted, writing didn't always feel like a summer's breeze. At times, it felt exhilarating but at others, it was a dark path they maybe didn't have the strength to walk that day.

“I try to make sure that writing always makes my body feel like its lighting up because I think that my art should do that to me”.

IV. Family

“**A:** Was your art supported or discouraged by your family,
friends or mentors?

S: I think that my writing has always been supported. However, my parents didn't give me what I envision full support to be, at the time my parents wanted me to study medicine over becoming a writer simply because it was a ludicrous idea to my father especially, and maybe they were trying to look out for me. But I think as creatives, one of the things that we have to do is destroy as much as we create and one of the things that we constantly destroy are all these boundaries that we all place on ourselves. I think that they saw my art through support but also through the boundaries that they place on themselves and they project that often, albeit unintended.”

A quiet writer.

Anonymous on Instagram, right before their book got published.

Came out to their parents at 18.

Father was indifferent.

Mother tried to kick them out of the house.

Silence.

My mind was silent, unable to grasp the usage of 'mother' and 'being kicked out of house' in the same sentence. But they continued, without a sigh or a break or a breath.

They talked about how they never felt safe since.

They elaborated, stating the full extent of their art hasn't been a choice since.

There have been various forms of censorship since.

They have been struggling to save their relationship with their mother since.

You are sure you should be weeping.

You laugh instead.

Your Mother played the victim so well you forgot to feel sorry for yourself.

*Other people play judge so well you forget to wonder if you perhaps are not
wrong.*

*But you cried real tears and fell asleep on a prayer mat with everyone's curses
in mind.*

*No one is worthier of mercy than you, begging Allah for death and relief,
half-petrified, half-asleep.*

So you choose to see your pain this time.

This time, you choose you.

-Samihah Pargas

This hand painted piece is a mix of watercolour and digital art. Orange, a shade extremely contrasting to Samihah's persona, yet it was the only shade I could associate with her. It can either be the bright orange sweatshirt he wore when I saw him for the first time, or maybe the bright orange side to hers one seldom gets to see. The poetry is a raw attempt to congregate Samihah's constant inner conflict

Insert Picture 2

V. Homophobia & Safe Spaces

We spoke of safe spaces and if they played a role in their creative expression. I told Samihah about my safe space, a quiet lawn in LUMS behind the library. I told them, I feel like no one can hurt me there. I can be whoever I want to and create anything. They thought about my words for a while.

“Umm, well, there should be a place that is like that for me,
maybe I just haven't found it yet.”

I thought of the menaces that hover over a queer person at all times, the second they start embodying their truth. Samihah, however, was certain of some places where they could breathe freely. They elaborated.

“I know that I severely enjoy walking around. I would go to trending places at night and see all the neon lights and just feel a different kind of high and in those times, I don't really look to create anything. I think that those are the only times I feel like I can breathe so I just take in the moment instead.”

“**A:** And how is your overall experience as a queer individual in South Africa?”

S: I think my overall experience could be described as very, very wary.”

Living in Pakistan, with its larger population being Muslim, one observes a seeming increase in homophobia each passing day. So, when I inquired Samihah about their experience as a queer individual in South Africa, I was surprised (but not really) to hear about the prevalence of homophobia. Samihah highlighted that homophobic cases often made news headlines. They spoke about their university campus. They shared their belief on university students having somewhat progressive mindsets, unconsciously fleshing out safe spaces for others. Otherwise, Samihah sighed, pride parades are met with vandalism and hate speech. They talked about how they and their friends had to be cautious in the journey of finding safe spaces.

Samihah had also written a piece of poetry on a hate crime, in the form of a stabbing.

*And nowhere seems safe
Not if you are queer
I bet the grave isn't a place to rest either
People will have a problem with your
Bones if they want to
And somehow, these days, they do*

- Samihah Pargas

Samihah elaborated on the link between religion and homophobia. They said that their mother always used Islam as a tool against queerness. They speak decidedly.

“It has nothing to do with religion!”

They talked about how a lot of people just feared society’s reaction towards a person being homosexual, rather than actual religion being the source of their argument. If someone has a firm belief that homosexuality is wrong, and it comes from a place of a well-constructed argument and a firm sense of belief, then:

“To you, your beliefs and to me, mine.”

VI. The Community

A: Can you tell a little about the queer communities that you have been/ and are a part of at the moment? Can you elaborate upon the sense of community or security that you get from them?

S: I haven't actually been very involved with queer community for all that long and I've yet to be introduced to more queer connections. I know of parties and safe spaces that are openly advertised on social platforms, there are security measures taken and that's about all I can tell you. What I mean is that I haven't been much of a party girl ~gives a little chuckle~. I'm not a part of those queer groups because I'm just a private person. As I get more comfortable with sharing with other people, I think I might go to such events; but for the time being, no. One to one conversations have always been more satisfying to me, I never really feel the desire to go beyond that.

A: In consideration with the ostracization the queer community suffers from the society, when you artistically express yourself, is it ambiguous or do you consciously make it accessible?

S: My writing has always been ambiguous. Even between myself and the page, it's just been that way. If it's conspicuous, it's because it just happened to be more obvious at the time. It can be seen as abstract and you have to read between the lines to understand certain things. I have learned to carry myself in between the lines which I don't want to do but it's something that I have been doing and it's reflected in my writing.”

Under the scrutinizing eyes of their parents, they are left with no choice but to write about pieces of themselves, such as sexuality, in an implicit way. They gave an example of when they posted about the Muslim community not doing enough for its LGBTQ members. According to them, those are the only times they write for an audience.

“**A:** Do you have any advice for young queer creative individuals in South Africa or the Muslim world today? Maybe you from a few years back?

S: Well, I would tell myself, listen, you're not wrong and there is no one right path. There are so many pathways to God, if you are someone who wants to know. There has to be; there is no one way to look at things. Self-worth, oh my god, there should be

more talk about self-worth and not in a pretty, cliched way, self-worth is hard to come by. I would definitely want myself to know that the person you are is worth fighting for, so all that work that you're afraid of doing might just be the best thing that you could ever give to yourself.”

Samihah has a hopeful message for other queer creative individuals. They talk about the layers that they have had to break to discover the ‘self’. They say that beneath all those layers that one puts on to protect themselves from the patriarchal gaze of the society,

“We are very brilliant things to see.”

They say that one should not fear society’s rejections. Through some powerful words, which stayed with me till this day, more than a month later:

“People will only ever reject you in the same way that they reject their own selves. That's not something that should ever stand in the way of your relationship with yourself.”

VII. Online Avenues

“**A:** How much does social media play a part in advancing or providing safe spaces for queer artists to express themselves freely?”

S: I think that it is very helpful to have a social media because it connects more queer people. We're less alone this way. Although sometimes, someone's social media experience can just feel like it makes your day a little bit lonelier.”

Samihah elaborated on the empowerment and encouragement for queer people online, but never without a fight. They talked about how they are aware that they're exposing themselves to online harassment, especially when they share sensitive issues i.e. their sexuality. They spoke, pained, about how one signs up for potentially a lifetime of cyber-bullying in their journey for self-expression.

If we come to think of status quo and the borders it creates, we cannot undermine the extent to which categorization is fetishized. There's no denying social media has created a powerful platform in actively resisting patriarchal standards. Samihah talked warily of the idolization of “politically correct and woke people”, who are supposedly accepting towards every gender, race or

religion. They also fear a lot of these woke people are putting up a false pretence to look good in front of others.

“I don't think that there's actual inner work being done to tear down all the phobias and all the prejudice.”

“**A:** How is social media different from physical spaces for the queer community?”

S: Social media definitely connects me to a lot of spaces that I am not able to visit physically, spaces that I definitely want to be but either they just don't exist for me and where I am or they're just not timely. I am able to connect with other queer people and queer artists and we can just both be happily queer together ~laughs~. I get heartfelt messages from people who don't share the same circumstance but really appreciate that I am breaking down certain barriers because it helps them in their own situations in some miraculous way so that's cool.”

VIII. Isolation & Covid-19

“**A:** In light of Covid-19, how has this sudden change of lockdown impacted your life in general? Was it difficult to return to the same oppressive structures? How did you deal with it?

S: I've written about my experience with covid-19. It's staying home and really being forced to do nothing besides be with yourself. I think it gives you the opportunity to delve into things that you haven't run into before. I did that and I think that whatever I found has shaped my writing somewhat. I think that I'm more refined than what I was and it's perhaps because I've been given the space to get to that place inside myself. I mean I couldn't do that when I had a whole lot of distractions that I could easily opt to, and I like being distracted ~laughs~.”

Here is an excerpt from one of the pieces that Samihah wrote about their experience with Covid-19. I teared up once I was done reading it, it touched me deeply considering the times we are living (surviving) through

We are processing and not processing, struggling here and there, driving ourselves over various edges with boredom and panic. We are coming to terms with and not coming to terms with, exhausting our modes of escapism and

dreading or hopeful for whatever may come next. Some of us are feeling more helpless, some of us are in pain more often. It's a strange time for being. I am not writing a ray of hope, not even for myself. Thank God there are others doing so. I'm trying to write my experience into familiarity, but perhaps there is none. Not at this time. Maybe we must find new things to be familiar with, for now at least. Things like the news, the lonely-togetherness, the energy surges and plunges, the extensive consideration for others—the well intended kind as well as the kind that sometimes crosses into paranoia surrounding hygiene. And the sense that whole worlds can be turned over at inconsiderately short notice. That we can do little but be carried elsewhere by the winds of change.

-Samihah Pargas

Samihah was a regular university student normally spending hours outside of home daily. The change to a complete lockdown came without warning, and chaos ensued. Like most other college students, Samihah has online classes for the rest of the year. We connected deeply on this fact. The helplessness that Samihah and I shared over the lack of a campus was almost profound, deeply resonating with our combined hatred for the online method of learning. We expressed our distaste for virtual classes and the way they can also drain physical and mental energies. The pandemic is ruthless. This turbulent turn of events, as unwelcomed they were for Samihah, also affected their life in

various ways. They talked about the inevitability of analysing and re-analysing the relationship they had with themselves and their parents. It felt monumental- the unresolved issues and all the pending decisions simply had to be thought about and determined.

I had no answers to offer to them, no advice to give. The pandemic was deafening and utterly still at the same time. Samihah seemed visibly frustrated too. But eventually, they spoke of peace. They spoke of acceptance of this new lifestyle, and perhaps, an unsteady journey to the future. I joined them in this thought and wished I could hold their hand through the screen. Maybe another day.

Will you sit with me? 2 Metres away from me, so we are less hazardous to each other? But I want to be held. It's an awakening time. How much more do I consider the effect my actions will have on you these days? I hope that my staying-in means you can get your groceries safely, by some rare chance. On some screens, since there are so many about at the moment, I read that someone's money is being poured into efforts to help others. Lately we notice all that tends to go unnoticed, even the strangers we'd not take interest in otherwise. Perhaps we are searching for a familiar face—for somebody to confirm how real and unreal this all is, this collective unsettling and upsetting of systems. The frailty of us all. We need others to be proof that we aren't

alone in witnessing it. It's a lonelier time. I hear my neighbour blast Stormzy when I'm on the balcony. I've come to cherish knowing that there are still other people around. Other people besides whomever I live with. We are all enduring the same moment in so many different ways.

-Samihah Pargas

two.

Venus

Insert Picture 3

Creator: Venus

*Sometimes, I'll imagine myself at the dinner
Table, surrounded by all the people whose
Opinions I care about.*

*I'll imagine
My vocal chords vibrating around the words
My tongue shifting to make room for them
My lips moving to shape them: I'm bi!*

*I'll imagine my father, with his eyes
Turned to stone, ordering me out of my*

Home. Never to return again.

*Or, he smiles and says he'll celebrate me wedding
the love of my life, regardless of their gender.*

*I'll imagine my sisters turning away from
me, their minds clouded with perceptions
of my existence as halal or haram.*

*Or, they ruffle my hair, calling me their
Shajness, and get me a Pride flag for my
next birthday*

*I'll imagine all my heterosexual friends, losing the
Last ounce of respect I had for them, by asking
"ooh, are you into threesomes?"
"well, you won't hit on us right?"
"are you sure this isn't just a phase?"*

*Or, they just say "thank you for trusting
us" and don't bat an eyelash when I make
gay puns around them.*

I'll imagine all of this, but I'll never do it.

*Because it's too late.
Because I like my head attached to the rest of my body.
Because my mother always wanted a perfect child.*

*Straight As and
straight teeth and
straight nose and
straight hair and
straight lines and
stand straight
and smile!*

*No red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet, just
black and white.
My rainbow's perfect is lost in her colorblind eyes.*

*And so I'll sit at the dinner table,
my parents on either side.*

*My vocal chords will be still
My tongue heavy
My lips will mouth the words but no sound
will come out: I'm bi I'm bi I'm bi I'm-*

*Sometimes my mother will ask me what I
am saying, I'll smile and say it's nothing.
It's nothing that the people who made me
will never know what I'm actually made of.*

*They say forgiveness is the greatest
gift you can give to yourself.
I say acceptance is the greatest gift
someone else can give to you.*

*It's a gift our parents may never give to us, but it's
a gift you can always find, in the darkest of times,
when you remember how to turn on the light.*

*I've made a lot of rainbow's friends this year.
I feel like I'm home.
True heartbreak for our people,
is only in being alone*

-Venus

As I open my eyes in the familiarly unfamiliar space of the drawing room I've been sleeping in to economically share the cooling privilege of the AC with my siblings, at 1pm on the 6th of August, I feel my mind rush immediately. An array of thoughts and emotions and a heavy anticipation for the conversation I'm about to have in the next hour.

These thoughts I'm thinking and things I'm feeling are entirely new versions of the kind of excitement and anxiety I've felt leading up to an "interview" before. The real differences are in the fact that there's no way but to have this communicate online, and no way but to experience Venus's company beyond a screen and the limited dimensions of our beings that it showcases to us. I feel excited to talk to someone outside of the five people my social circle has become restricted to these days. Imagining how refreshing it would be to use this project to have someone tell their story. A story that's personal and lived silently. A story that's probably transformed over the course of the past 6 months, in much the same way me and my story have. A story that's

undoubtedly going to serve as a muse for me, and the multitudes of others who have also reclaimed the margins as their own.

As I'm mulling over all the questions I want to ask Venus, nervous to learn her responses, I also feel a deep sense of loss and longing. A loss for the physical presence of another human being. A friend. Someone whose shoulder I can touch when we're laughing together. Or someone whose eyes I can look directly into while they open up to me about the life they've lived and the person they've come to be. I feel restless and annoyed, with the way things have to be. But I'm determined to treat this conversation as a breath of fresh air. To let parts of myself that I've taught myself to push to the peripheries of my being to be reflected in Venus's story. This is an exercise in community building. An exercise in seeing and being seen. After months of hiding. Maybe even years.

Venus is a 20-year-old woman, she tells me she prefers the use of she/her pronouns, cheekily pointing to the perfectly poised pixie cut on her head to mark the irony. She also tells me that if she **had** to prescribe to a label for her sexuality, it'd be "bisexual".

“There was a time I told myself I wasn't sexually attracted to men, but unfortunately I still am.”

We both laugh.

While we're on the subject of labels, I find myself wondering why part of our study is to uncover the language people use to describe themselves. It feels intrusive even asking the question, because words are just that, words. And feelings like attraction, love, and self identity seem to fall so far outside the ambit of mere words, in this case, usually just one word.

As Venus talks about her experience with her gender identity and sexuality, she circles back to the same thought:

“labels are for clothes, not for people.”

We laugh again in unison, in acknowledgment of a silent understanding of how inadequate a single word can be to define the entirety of a thing as complex and intimate as your sexuality. She explains to me that for her, “queeriness” extends beyond who she's attracted to at a specific point in time - “it's more about the general idea of non-conformity”. To be queer is to defy, and that's where all the loci on the spectrum intersect.

I. First Love

At the end of our conversation, I found myself sitting with all my notes and the interview recording for a couple of hours, trying to understand Venus's world in the way she painted it out for me. Trying to untangle the threads of her story to comprehend not only where she comes from, but also how her experiences are a nod to countless others' on the same spectrum.

The primary thing that strikes me as pivotal to queer experience, and specifically navigating "deviant" sexuality is the experience of the first love. The first moment a feeling awakens and leaves you feeling enlightened, but also maddeningly lost and alone. Venus's story projects me into a reflection of my own life and experiences, reliving my first queer love and all the baggage that came with it.

“My foray into queerness began with online spaces. I know it sounds like a cliché; like some Western idea infiltrated my mind!”

Yahoodi Saazîsh

“ I didn’t really have a *word* for what I was feeling, but I felt it all the same. First I actually thought I was asexual, or that I was aromantic.

I had some *light* crushes on boys around this time, but I was also realising that I felt similar things for girls. And because the thought of ‘liking’ girls was so out of reach in my mind, the voice of rationale in my head found it easier to convince me that if I was feeling the same thing for guys and girls, then I probably wasn’t feeling anything of the sort at all. There was a lot of mental gymnastics surrounding the question. By the time I was 14, I was very firmly identifying as ‘asexual’.

By the time I was 15, I was fully a Tumblr girl, as you can probably tell.”

I give her a nod of acknowledgement because anyone who’s been a teen trying to understand their identity better, has found a home in tumblr at some point or another, and Venus presents herself as another specimen of that journey. It’s an amusing journey, because while you’re telling yourself you’re *definitely not* gay, you’re also telling yourself it’s okay if someone else is.

Their life, their rules.

“At this point, I was struggling with a lot of internalised homophobia. But I also knew it wasn’t something I was supposed to be feeling. More like repeatedly reminding myself that it wasn’t okay for anyone to discriminate on the grounds of another’s sexuality. And so I kept reminding myself of that fact.”

It’s funny how the more queer individuals you speak to, the more certain patterns of evolution in the “coming to terms” phase begin to appear as common. As Venus takes me through the chronology of arriving at the fact of her queerness, I find myself breaking eye contact a lot more, letting a few extra shy smiles pass between the two of us. I feel a little exposed, and the excitement from being seen like that by someone, fully trusting the safety of this space we share, is uncontrollable. And I let myself be taken in by it.

“By the age of 15, I was finally looking for other queer people to connect with online. At first I thought I was all alone - that this was just me. And I had a lot of fights with my friends at school, because I would openly position myself as an LGBT ally. You

know when people ask you if you're gay and you tell them: I'm gay
for justice, I'm not actually gay!"

I had to take a minute and control my laughter at this point before we could move on. Venus watched as I helplessly tried to gather myself, because I felt like 16 year old Kanza had suddenly been put on the spot! But this time she wasn't afraid - just amused.

"So I was just *casually* searching for other queer people to relate
to when I met *Jupiter*."

It's at this point that Venus's composure and humorous connectedness slips a little. She takes a deep breath.

"Jupiter is still very hard for me to talk about", she says, with a telling grin across her face. She takes a minute, and when she starts talking again, the pace of her speech is slower, more conscientiously composed, the hint of a smile never leaving her face.

“I was 15 when I met Jupiter - and - we were really close *friends*.”

A brief silence follows the word “friend” and a knowing smile passes between the two of us. “Friend” in the world of queer homosociality comes as a loaded term - especially when you add the prefix “close” to it.

“Jupiter and I would talk to each other every single day. We would call for like three hours a day for three years. So we were like *really really really* close. I only ever actually joined the debate team because I wanted the chance to travel to her city to meet
her.”

If you’re looking for a summary of experience to understand what it’s like being a queer minor in Pakistan, this is probably it. Join a cult of masculinity to claim the agency to be queer.

“It worked out well actually! I got to go to her city and spend
time with her!”

She takes me through her relationship with Jupiter. All the love laced with discomfort it brought. She walks me through how difficult it was to navigate physical intimacy in the relationship with the baggage of trauma they both carried, and the fear of God they were both still firmly holding on to.

Venus's experience of a queer individual in Pakistan, navigating the plane of intimacy is a window into the ways in which power structures are embedded into our mere existences. The range of fear is on a spectrum, just like your sexuality: from being disowned by your family, to being lynched on the streets, to forever being damned to Hell. There is no respite but in each other's company. Knowing that if you're going to be damned, it's probably going to be together. And for the time being, that is enough to keep the love alive.

II. Queerness, Mental Health, and Community

Conjunct with Venus's first experience with her sexuality comes her tassel with bad mental health and seeking out a sense of community that could help ground her - reassure her that she wasn't the *only* one. This part of Pakistani queer people's journey is another gruelling process that never really ends. A constant questioning of oneself, and a strife to find a place that's comfortable - even if it's just at the margins.

“So by the time I was 15, I had found a bunch of different people from all around the world, but also from different parts of Pakistan. And by June 2016, we had formed a Whatsapp group called *PakGayStan*. And we had this teenage spirit in us - fully believing we were going to storm the Supreme Court one day and have a gay party in there!

But things took a weird turn in June 2016, when the Orlando bar shooting incident happened. By this time, a lot of the people around me knew that I was very vocally in favour of LGBT rights. I wouldn't ever put myself in an unsafe position with my family by coming out to them fully, but they knew I was 'progressive'. I also don't have a good relationship with my mom so she purposely says things just to taunt me. So she would say things along the lines of '*jaise jije thay waise bi maray*'. Then I also saw a bunch of my friends sharing a lot of homophobic content and rhetoric on Facebook and stuff.

For some reason, everytime a queer person dies, Qoum-e-Lout references start popping up on the internet!”

While I find myself laughing alongside her, I also notice the tone of Venus's voice and the expression on her face change entirely when she recalls these memories. Speaking about her

relationship with her mother, she is less animated, a little distant. Laying out the nature of their relationship like she's giving me cold, hard facts. When she mentions Qoum-e-Lout, I laugh, agreeing with the ridiculousness of it. And while she acknowledges my reaction, I catch her faintly mutter "Muslims, ugh!" under her breath, and shake her head. I smile at her, because we've all been there. Being a queer Muslim in Pakistan is an extreme sport.

She tells me about her coping mechanisms and the things she clung to trying to cope with the mess of it all. Her enthusiasm for Zootopia is unfounded.

“ I was in a really bad headspace then, so I registered for this website called ‘Trevorspace’, which is an online platform consisting of sets of forums, where queer teenagers, if they feel they’re at risk, can reach out to a community of people who function as a safe space. I was feeling suicidal, so I set up a profile too. But as soon as I went on there, I realised it was a predominantly white space and there was a lot of Muslim hatred going around.

I distinctly remember this one time I received a threatening message when I revealed that I’m a Muslim as well. It just felt like I had come into this space looking for some relief, and I was being turned away again! At home and in my regular circles, I had to

keep my guard up because they were being homophobic, and on these queer ‘safe spaces’ I had to keep my guard up because they were Islamophobic and really racist.

I was so shaken by this that it kind of tripled my resolve.

I was so shocked after that experience, I forgot to be suicidal.”

There came an awkward pause before we both looked at each other and just guffawed in laughter. The words “forget” and “suicidal” seem misplaced in the same sentence together, even as I see them now.

“It’s funny when I think about it! I just... forgot to be suicidal!

I thought, you know what? I’m in this position right now where I’m feeling like I’m all alone in this big bad world, and so there must be others like that also.

So my desire to die was overpowered by my desire to find community, and that still somehow rings true for me.

Even now, even in COVID, if I feel overpowered by this urge to take my own life, like becoming fixated on the pills I have stashed away in my desk, I’m able to take a step back and think ‘no, I won’t do that because my desire to find community is stronger than my desire to die!’

And I think that's the one thing holding most gays together. ”

While I was thoroughly amused by the way in which Venus chose to narrate these parts of her lived experiences to me, I was also left with a lot to think about. “We’re sad and depressed, but at least we’re sad and depressed together”, is what I said to Venus when she was finished with her thought, and she agreed with me. It’s a bittersweet realisation when you are confronted with the realities of life for queer people in a social fabric that functions off of systemic exclusion, predicated on religio-moralistic rhetoric. There’s no respite anywhere but in the building of a community where the excluded can carve out a space to own their exclusion and curate a space where shared lived experiences become community knowledge. And from that knowledge builds a resistance - sometimes silent, sometimes boisterous. The pain of our deprivilege binds us together, and that shared context of making a home out of the margins is where we derive our strength. It’s where Venus and countless other teens like her found theirs. I can’t help but keep mulling over her words: “My desire to find community is stronger than my desire to kill myself”. While my instinctual reaction to the statement is to smile, there is a weight to these words that settles in my heart and in my

mind. The language of oppression is best understood and felt only by the oppressed themselves.

At the end of this exchange, Venus takes a moment to take a break from our conversation, to shift the focus to me. She reassures me that I can use this space to share my own experiences with her if I felt like. She reminds me that we've been friends before, and that community holds each other up, no matter the circumstance. These kind reminders are helpful to reinforce to me that despite what my qualitative research methods class may have taught me, the ethnographic method is inherently self-reflexive, and sometimes your "respondents" will break that fourth wall in ways that will leave you feeling a lot more seen than you may have anticipated.

The following few minutes then become dedicated to a light-hearted exchange about what life has been like for each of us, going through this phase of the twenty-first century. We catch up on life and have a reciprocal exchange about the experience of queerness in Pakistan. She expresses glee and excitement at the thought that a team of researchers have received a grant to conduct queer specific research. And while I've thought about that a couple of times myself, it's never really hit me the way it did when Venus pointed it out. Is this the Islamic Republic of Pakistan?

“As a person, I’m very avoidant. I don’t generally talk about things or tend to joke them away. But going into this call, I told myself I’m going to be more open because it’s to help the community as well.

And the drive to find community is stronger than the drive to hide. So that was 2016, and I started becoming more involved in my search for community. This was a paranoia ridden process because I was always afraid of my family becoming suspicious or finding out.

It’s kind of like this thing, where if you feel like you’re the only queer person you know aside from 4-5 others, you’re afraid that if someone finds out, you’re going to have a mob at your door the next day!

But slowly you figure out that *aisay tou hazaron hain Pakistan mein*, you begin to come to terms with the fact that they can’t possibly send a mob to ALL of you!”

She tells me how she made that transition from a scared queer kid trying to cling to others whom she could relate to and feel safe around, to that queer kid who started putting up advertisements on Tumblr, like

“DM me if queer and in Pakistan! I’m not a fake! I’m not a troll!”

I tell her that sounds an awful lot like me right now, trying to get in touch with people for this project. “Please talk to me! I promise I won’t lynch you, I just want to learn more about you and your work!” And I realise the extent of how anxiety inducing the process always is. Not just as a researcher, but specifically as a queer identifying individual. The isolation and fear become second nature, nesting silently inside you, while you yearn for a connection. Throughout my exchange with Venus, I kept hearing hints of that desperation and wistfulness, contrasted with an elation when she talks of her success in finally finding that niche of comfort and safety with others in the same hell as her.

“By the end of 2016, I had successfully curated a safe, relatable queer space for myself. And what was most comforting to me about this space at the time was that all these people were religious too!

What I don’t appreciate entirely about the queer spaces I’m involved in now, is that a lot of them are very dismissive of the

struggles that religious queer people go through. No one's saying that you must pander to Muslims, and make a special effort to not offend them, but I have seen queer people on left book who have gone out of their way to belittle queer Muslims. It's sad to see that people are willing to turn away community members on the grounds of differing belief systems, when really non-conformity is our common ground. It binds us together.

But what I liked about PGS was that we were all religious, and we would come to each other for religious advice as well. This is where we also managed to find resources that suggested that there is space for queerness in religion. And we latched on to it!"

III. Coming out

“ I first came out to my best friend *Mercury*. I’ve known her for
about ten years now.

I figured out that I was queer somewhere around 14/15 years old, and I admitted to myself that I was part of the LGBT community, accepting fully all the weight that comes with that label. I wanted to tell her, but I didn’t, because I kept thinking she was going to hate me, or that she won’t want to be friends with me anymore. She was also a bystander in the homophobia I was receiving at school.

Because there wasn’t any active affirmation from her that she would still love me, I kept feeling like I needed to keep it from her.

So in 2016, we attended the Cursed Child launch party at Dolmen.

Mercury went as Harry and I went as Hermione.

It’s really funny, but that day was very significant for me in my journey with queerness, because we randomly found another queer person!”

I notice Venus’s face light up as she recalls the events of this day, a toothy grin plastered across her face. And I find myself relating to her excitement as she narrates this story to me. The joy of just chancing upon another queer person is a similar feeling to finding

a 500 rupee note in the back pocket of a pair of jeans you haven't worn in a couple of months. A silent gift from the forces of good in the universe.

Considering the extent to which we carry a fear of being found out inside of us all the time, having another queer individual trust you enough to come out to you almost immediately, is a heartening feeling on multiple levels. It brings with it the comfort being seen just the right amount, by just the right people, confirming to you that the fragmented identity you're walking around with is serving the functions you want it to serve. It brings with it a reinforcement of a sense of security, that the wrong people won't be able to see you unless you choose to reveal yourself to them, but the right people will sniff you out. Because to them, you're the right person too. It's a reaffirmation of your agency; that you won't be seen unless you choose to be. In an otherwise overwhelming sense of loss of agency, that reaffirmation comes as a warm hug.

“So Mercury and I ran into this girl *Mars*. She complimented my costume and my shoes, and we got to talking almost immediately. We exchanged numbers first, and then she gave us her Tumblr, because obviously, we were all Tumblr girls.

And Mercury turns to me and exclaims: ‘Venus look! She’s gay! It
says so on her Tumblr!’

*‘Aisay bhi randomly mil jaatay hain Pakistan mein? Humein tou pata nahi
tha!’*

Later on, Mercury and I were getting icecream, and I was
simmering in my gay angst, as one does, and this really hot girl
walked by, and Mercury murmurs: ‘hmm. You know, I’m so gay
for her’

And I was just shocked for a second. I asked her to clarify what
she meant, and she confessed to me that she might be gay,
because she knows she likes girls.

And I just felt ambushed like ‘you loser! I was supposed to tell you
first!’.”

She recalls to me how giddy the revelation made both of them.
Finally finding the space to come out to each other. It reminds me
of the way I am with my friends. Even though my journey with
my sexuality and the “coming out” process have been both recent,
and rather seamless, I found myself relating to the ecstasy that
accompanies being accepted by your closest friends. It’s like you
don’t necessarily have to seek out external spaces anymore
because home is now a safe space in its own right.

Insert picture 4

Creator: Venus

III. Political Engagement and Evolution

Our conversation slowly evolves into a discussion about political engagement and the way her self presentation has evolved in those spheres. Venus is part of a variety of student political organisations and movements. She is actively involved in on-ground resistance and organisation for Femsoc at LUMS, as well as the Women's Democratic Front, and an enthusiastic volunteer for the Aurat March and the political endeavours of other leftist student organisations. She points out that the evolution of her queerness and how she embodies it is heavily influenced by her experience as a feminist activist on multiple levels.

She talks of resisting the default position of invisibility that society relegates women to by default of existence.

“ I was sexually assaulted in my school years, and everyone made a real deal out of it. And for the longest time, I retreated and learnt to ‘protect’ myself. The thought was always that if I kept myself hidden, cover myself up, don’t go out as much, don’t look as bold, I’ll be *safe*.

But the realisation that no one is going to be protected opened my eyes to the fact that a life where I speak and die is more appealing than a life where I stay silent to stay alive. ”

She tells me how she has resolved that the only way to claim one’s own space is to claim it as such. Take Airlyft buses around Lahore, travel on Careem bikes, and walk the streets brazenly, staving off hungry stares no matter what you’re wearing, who you’re with or where you’re going.

“ I know men stare, I know it’s dangerous. But for me personally, I feel like I owe it to the women around me to desensitise men to my existence. ”

V. Artistic Expression and Evolution

Venus is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Science from an institute in Pakistan. She uses visual art as a mode of personal self-expression, unconstrained by the rigidity of the system. My first engagement with Venus's work was actually at a poster-making activity for the Aurat March 2019 at our university. Before that, I'd distantly known her as the girl I went to school with, now friends with many of my university friends. More specifically, I knew her as the girl behind some of my friends' elaborate make-up shoots. I had heard some chatter about how she uses dream concepts to inspire makeup looks she would paint onto people's faces. I dived into this bit of our conversation deeply intrigued by the specifics of this process. As someone whose dreams slip away from them like grains of sand you tighten your fist around, it's fascinating to wonder how someone could draw all their creative inspiration from their dreams.

Our conversation organically picks up from reflecting on quarantine circumstances and what that's entailed for our senses of selves and self-expressions. We plunge into an excited exchange about feelings of "going into hiding" by extension of returning home to families, relationships and individuals that we've taken pains to carve out a space away from.

“The first thing I had to do when I came back home was hide
away all my gay paraphernalia.
I have a bag stashed away that I have come to call my paranoia
bag. It has all my gay badges, bits of poetry written on scraps of
paper strewn at the bottom.”

As she talks about how she’s always hyper aware of the exact spot the bag is stowed away in, I sense my mind wandering to all the password protected folders I have buried in the depths of my intangible hard disk. She tells me about the thought process that goes into quelling the anxiety instigated by living that parallel life, precariously balancing the many fragments your identity is almost forcedly broken into. Some days, the burden of being from all of them just sits on your chest. Kind of like that anvil from Road Runner that always finds its way to Wil-E-Coyote. Sometimes you’re thrown into being all of them at once: a woman, queer, Pakistani, daughter, sister, caregiver, and the list is never ending, always disorderly.

Venus talks to me about her difficult relationship with her mother, her constant struggle to push the boundaries of acceptability so she can be the best attainable versions of all her selves. She tells me about how her mom landed on a poem where a verse literally screams

“I’m gay, I’m gay, I’m gay!”

As she’s speaking, I notice myself slipping away a little. Getting sucked into the dread that inevitably comes as a package with the delicate balance of holding up all of your facades at once. I feel like I’m holding my breath until she tells me how her mom didn’t react to the poem. She folded it neatly and left it in her bedside drawer. Like an unpleasant memory you lock away in some part of your brain, the weight of it pushing against its heavy bolted metal cage.

At this point Venus reminds me that she has never come out to her mother. In fact, she knows next to nothing about her life outside home; the home where she’s a good daughter, putting interview calls on hold for dinner with the family, working while she babysits her nieces. In spaces already crowded with so many relationships and expectations, “queer” is pushed further and further out of her fragmented existence. It stays this way with her and it stays this way with her parents. A peacekeeping.

When the narrative shifts from her mom to her eldest sister, I notice the expression on her face change. The faint traces of a frown are replaced with a relaxed smile.

“My elder sister knows. I came out to her years ago and she gave me the space to be transparent with her.”

Throughout our conversation so far, Venus reveals herself to me as someone who strives to strike a comforting balance in her life to achieve and feel her best. A big part of her relationship with her queerness has a lot to do with keeping herself safe and finding peace in the way her significant relationships arrange themselves around that curated sense of security. While she admits she and her mom have a long way to go, she's also at peace with the sense of safety her hiddenness lends her.

She tells me that she first began expressing her queerness through her art around the age of 14 when she began realising that her sexuality fell somewhere on the spectrum as well.

“I began making small pride flags, stuck them on to those small wooden tikka sticks you get at grocery stores, and would hand them out to my close friends.”

Her artistic inclination is underpinned by a love for bold colours and outrageous designs. She tells me about how initially just sticking to the pride flag as a theme for her art played into the will to keep herself hidden and safe in her house. Even though she

isn't out to her mom, she's still very vocal about LGBTQ+ rights around her, and it was easy to hide her love for the pride flag under that garb.

Over time, Venus notes that her creative process evolved beyond just a knack for painting and sketching, and her preferred mode of artistic expression became photography. As she tells me about some of the photo projects she's undertaken, I see her expression morph into a gleaming smile, excitement punctuating each sentence she spoke. She tells me that she is a vivid dreamer, and sometimes she sees very elaborate dreamscapes that also feature certain people in her life. A lot of the makeup work that she does for shoots is inspired by things she sees in those dreams; the models are people who appear in those dreams. The work she does is elaborate and finely detailed, treating the faces of her models as a canvas she paints onto. When I ask her whether she would commercialise her skills and do makeup shoots for others, she firmly tells me that only the people she sees in a specific dream can be the vessels for the dreamscapes she paints.

At this point, I find myself wondering how she uses online platforms to exhibit this work of hers and ask her to explain to me how the process works. She pauses for a second and tells me that her dad is actually very serious and unrelenting about his family's faces being on the internet.

“Photography itself as a medium is *cursed*. My dad searches our names on Google on an almost daily basis to check if our pictures pop up in the search results.

At the start of quarantine, I found myself rethinking the way I use my social media, and the paranoia kind of took over. I cleansed out my following on Instagram and removed all my posts for a while. Now I’m in the process of rebuilding a following that I feel fully comfortable sharing bits of my life with.

If you’re on my account, you’re privileged!”

Aside from creating visual art and doing makeup shoots, Venus also is also inclined towards using writing as a mode of self-expression. Giggling, she tells me that since the start of quarantine, she’s sort of gone back to her “roots” and is writing a lot of fanfiction again. I laugh with her as I get flashbacks to my teenage self, scouring Wattpad and Tumblr for fun fanfics to tickle the shy little gay sensibilities in me.

Venus is actively involved in curating and managing queer exclusive spaces like open mics and gigs that give queer artists a safe space to share their work in. Her last event “*Qaus-e-Qaz̤a*” was held in Lahore and was a big success, bringing together queer

people and experiences from all walks of life under one roof. She hopes that she can make it a recurring event.

She tells me that while she writes poetry and prose both, she feels that her prose is a more transparent representation of herself and her creativity because it's a medium that is rarely ever intended for an audience. Poetry, however, she writes with an audience in mind and is thus more mindful about how it turns out.

“Prose is a more personal, uncensored expression of my thoughts and feelings. Poetry is more of a spoken word thing and sometimes the open mics I choose to perform at tell me to ‘tone down’ the emotions so I feel like it’s a reflex to keep that advice at the back of my mind always.”

As she tells me about all the different ways in which she escapes to art as a means of self-expression, I am thinking about her affinity for colours and bold designs, and the way flamboyance is a tool often used by the queer community to regain visibility. Venus’s reliance on that flamboyance is also reminiscent of the things she said about reclaiming power by making oneself visible - taking to the streets and shoving your existence down the system’s throat.

IV. Final words and advice

As our conversation comes to a close after an energising three hours, I find myself feeling wistful for all the things we won't be able to talk about because we don't see each other anymore. We don't say an enthusiastic "hello!" to each other walking through campus from one class to another anymore. I don't see her outside the library during finals week with her bright red coat anymore. We don't have poster making campaigns anymore. We only have Zoom and the measly inadequate outlet of Whatsapp and Instagram.

But I lock all of those feelings away; waiting to unpack them on another day. Maybe never.

Before signing off, Venus advises other young queer people trying to find their way around understanding their own gender identities and sexuality better to always put their safety first. Don't come out to authority figures like your parents and family if you aren't sure they'd react supportively.

“You will often feel like you're alone in your experiences, but this chapter is a reminder that you aren't.”

Insert picture 5

Creator: Venus

three.

Minabil Abideen

I. We Begin At Home

Home is where meaning is. Home is the natural habitat of the body.

Home is both

spatial and temporal. Our bodies crave it, thirst for it, and die for it.

-The Temporal Platform and The Body, Minahil Abideen

What do we say to a friend of over three years- the '18's drifting over to the '20's. What do I say of an artistic mind over a computer screen? My bed looms in the background, caught by my HP webcam - a sobering, intimate reminder of the home. I recall rolling a lit Marlboro Farsi between my fingers last time I spoke to Minahil. I was wearing a black fur jacket and tearing up about something I can't remember now. It is not important today. It has been a year since then. My eyes water, and my throat swells up as I see Minahil on the screen once again: her two-dimensional, soft, blurred eyes (Thank Zoom) meeting mine on the 6th of August. We catch up from our bedrooms hundreds of miles away, mine in Karachi and hers in Lahore. We catch up about things we should have known to ask each other over the last year, but "time, am I

right?”, I say as I grin tightly over the screen at her. Minahil smiles in response.

A year of not talking to a friend may be disconcerting, but with Minahil it is anything but that. Imagine heading home after a long, cold day. How does your blanket feel, sharing with you almost a womb-like embrace before you softly drift to sleep? That is how Minahil made me feel a year after no communication. I felt like I was going back home.

My shirt sticks to my back

As I write

An essay about places

Too far away.

About topics,

Too far away

From my heart and this room.

-Writing Today, Minabil Abideen

II. The Language of Queerness

I knew what I had to write about today. Or rather, what I had to furiously type while nodding and smiling, while Minahil spoke in almost a singsong, lyrical demeanor. I wanted to keep listening, I wanted her to never stop talking. I asked her the first question, it felt biting to the tongue. I was asking a beloved friend of mine such a glaringly obvious question. I vowed to myself to allow the next inquiries to flow softer.

“**H:** Would you be comfortable sharing with us the gender identity you conform to? What pronouns do you prefer?

M: I am she/her and I am a trans woman.

H: When did you come to terms with your queerness? To whom did you first come out to and how accepting were they?

M: It was not all of a sudden. In the year 2015 there was a lot of discussion about LGBTQ+ rights. I finally got the language to explain what I was experiencing throughout my life. I first identified as bi-cis man but realized something was not right, so I changed to gender fluid then, still, I didn't feel right, so I now identify as a trans woman.”

The lifelong struggle of queer folks with coming to terms with their gender and sexuality was not unknown to me. I am

subjected to the same plight myself, being bisexual and non-binary. In Pakistan, the repression, and social repercussions of the unconventional were undeniable. I watched my friends assigned male at birth borrow my Mac lipsticks, shades ranging from Ruby Woo to a taupe Mocha and smear them across their lips. Sometimes I would apply the pigments precariously for them and watch their eyes light up. They stared at themselves, lips pouted, eyebrows upturned, eyes trained on differently sized mirrors coated with fluorescent lights. I also watched my friends assigned male at birth wet a Rose Petal tissue (blue or pink, interestingly) and wipe the rouge off their lips, as if it never was meant to be in the first place- a cardinal Pakistani sin.

Insert picture 6

Love in the time of of dysphoria

Creator: Minahil Abideen

I could not begin to imagine Minahil’s trans experience in Lahore, Pakistan. She was so utterly, undeniably herself. Another caged, boxed self of her, one that was culturally expected, was incomprehensible. My heart pained for the fortitude of queerness in our Islamic Republic, of “macro-level, institutional level” forces, as Minahil so eloquently worded them.

III. Let’s Call It (Gay) Art

We cloaked ourselves small; deftly painted the community in a regression of invisible strokes. But the colors bleed through under the white, the brilliance is blinding. Art was an expression of that blinding brilliance, the reason I was on a Zoom call at 8pm on a sweltering Karachi night with Minahil today. After some more conversation, I posed another question to Minahil.

“**H:** So, let’s talk about art for a little bit. What does art mean for you?”

M: Ummm, ~laughs~.

H: It is a tough question, I know.

M: It is. Can we make it more specific?

H: Sure. What feelings do you mainly express through your art?

M: I think the emotions I'm feeling at the moment are the ones I have in my writings. It's about loneliness, alienation and trying. I think it's because I don't have that much power in my real life. In my writings I am able to be in control of my life. I don't think my life is in my control now, there are forces that dictate what to do, how to do it, and how to define myself. In my writing I am able to explore new memories, places and bodies. I think making a narrative gives you some control. No one give focus to what we ~queer folk~ go through in real life so if we are able to express what we are going though or give voice to it, it is empowering to some extent.

H: That is such an interesting thought. Do you think you use art as a medium to express or process feelings related to your sexuality or gender?

M: I think I did that very soon after I discovered who I was. I felt like I need to narrate what I am. I need to narrate my being. So, I think almost for a lot of years a lot of my stories and writings usually had this very trans-voice in it. My baba was kind of annoyed that I was so self-centered. He would want me to talk about others, their struggles and what they are going through. I felt guilty writing about myself and who I was. Now I know I shouldn't gaslight myself, I need to speak about who I am. My being and identity are so ignored in real life they need some place

in writing. It doesn't mean I'm ignoring the suffering of the working class or other issues like that- these things should not be in separate boxes. Writing about myself doesn't mean I'm ignoring others and vice versa. There are different periods of life where you can write some kinds of stories and other periods where you can write other kinds of stories. So, we kind of diversify into different kinds of writings and how they evolve, there's an age for everything.”

Minahil's response to my overarching question about art and how it coagulated with queerness left me floored. The process of writing is so immensely personal- listening to another person talk about the innermost workings of their mind, exactly how the cogs turn, felt intimate. It was almost like watching someone wake up and stretch on their beds and then get up to make a cup of chai. The normalcy for them could prove not worthy of a second thought. But the way they add a little bit of cinnamon to their chai and play Hum TV in the background because silence for them is disconcerting is a novelty for a fresh pair of eyes.

Insert picture 7

Minahil, circa 2018

IV. To Experience a Writer

I decided to engage further with Minahil about art, this time on her medium of expression.

“**H:** Before your art, was there maybe another outlet for you to share your feelings?”

M: Facebook rants ~we laugh~. I learnt how to write through these rants. They were so meaningless but so healing. Words can heal using these rants and it helps.

H: And was your art always healing for you?

M: Yes, always. The violent experiences I have had in real life where trauma isn't resolved, through my stories, I reached some form of resolution. To resolve something traumatic is so healing and redeeming to an extent. I'm able to validate my experiences through my words.

H: I'm so glad you got to experience a sense of healing from your words. What about others? Would you say your art is supported or discouraged by your loved ones?

M: I would not use a harsh word like discourage, but my family had responded in ways that demotivated me for a while. They eventually understood that I'm a skilled enough writer though. I found a way to write about myself, but not my gender. I wrote a very good story about my religious sect and my father liked that self. Maybe my dad isn't comfortable about my gender but is with my sect. He's not comfortable with my gender and says a lot about him not comfortable with my trans experience, not me. My friends and mentors were sure to be very strong supporters even when I wrote trash ~laughs~. I'm an average writer now but at least it isn't trash. Definitely better to read. And I wouldn't have become better if I thought the trash was good. You see, writers have an

ego problem. They hurt themselves before anyone else can. It helps them grow faster; I think. If you accept your work as legendary, you reach a point where there's no room for further growth.”

Minahil had an optimistic outlook on writing, as well as the themes that popped up in her work. While she spoke, she radiated a sense of personal growth and cyclical learning. She was open to the experience, process, the pain, and the glory that came with the tangible expression of her words. When she spoke about writers with an ego, my insides stung because it struck a chord. Her thought was agreeable, writers are never happy. But Minahil seemed content with that. She wrote about the trans-ness of her experiences and how they shaped her life in a cathartic manner. Her relationship with her words seemed personal, yet emotionally fulfilling. Writing about trauma does not always have to be a representation of pain on a white sheet of paper, it could also be a representation of healing. She breathed and lived in writing and defied odds- in terms of a lack of support or the culturally sensitive subject matter of her words. As cliché as it may seem, her words invoked a sense of inspiration inside me. The unconditional truth in her words was powerful.

We talked for almost two hours. I lost track of time and as I glanced out the window. The night was pitch black. I thanked Minahil for her time and ended the call. My mind was hurtling at a hundred miles an hour thinking about the corpus of ideas, thoughts and feelings that were talked about today, some in passing and others extensively. The conversation about queerness and its representation into an art form evoked visceral images in my head: standing along atop of a cliff, looking into a black hole, holding the distantly familiar hand of someone you swear you don't know. I also felt naked. Some writers allow their bodies and minds to be taken over by words. They enchant themselves and others with a hypnotizing snake dance. Minahil's expression of her trans-ness, loneliness and the carnality of trying in her words were breathtaking. My mind drifted, again, to a poem she sent me earlier.

V. The Ending (Not Really)

*I can breathe,
But I burn. Life on
Ventilator. My writing
Does not speak
About my back.
It speaks to itself,*

In vacuum.

*I write not about
That room or this room.
My writing has no room,
Or taste.
It is in a meadow
We have never been to.*

Writing Today, Minahil Abideen

Minahil shared that she did not write much during the pandemic, but she was working on herself. I respected that and did not question further. Sometimes surviving the surreal circumstances life throws at us (looking at you, covid-19) is enough. Art takes it time to manifest at times, especially in forms that please the finicky writer within us.

Sometimes we create because it makes the urge inside us look pretty on paper.

Sometimes we create because it is, supposedly, who we are.

Sometimes we create because we know no other way.

four.

Swamp Slut

I. The Swamp Slut's bubble

My excitement for this project has been resonated by every artist I have interviewed. SS is another who supplements my enthusiasm. This anthology immortalizes our friendship by means of a timeless digital archive.

SS is a 20-year-old college going student whom I met in my first year of university. She lives in Lahore which is advertised as the cultural hub of Pakistan.

“ I don't go out much because I'm a loser who likes to stay in. ”

She classified herself as more of a stay-at-home person, a part of her personality I feel may have been more nurture than nature because of how desi households relegate their daughters to

the private sphere. The vast gates to the cultural hub of Lahore seemed tantalizingly out of reach; accessible only to those that possess the privilege of being cis-het, male, Sunni, Punjabi.

SS and I spoke twice, both times in the dead of the night so her family wouldn't invade. The fluid and unpredictable manner of her diction was enamouring because it would take the conversation to surprising turns. As I look at my notes after our conversation, I notice the word "wholesome", and that's the single word that befits the entirety of this interaction.

How to write a poem:

think of a word and write it down.

have it followed by whatever comes to mind when you read it.

repeat. repeat. repeat.

pause as necessary.

you need not go longer than

the last line you write

before the first tear spills.

a demonstration:

speak. voice. throat. choke.

*lungs. cigarettes. lollipops. lana del rey.
summer. sweltering. sunrise. empty roads. silence.
wintertime. sadness. madness. sylvia plath. ovens.*

poor taste.

bitter. spitten out pills.

angelina jolie in girl interrupted

“I’m playing the villain baby just like you want me to.”

psych ward. veronika decides to die. dreams.

sleep paralysis. screams.

sedatives. restraints. helplessness.

childhood.

triggers. warnings.

hello kitty. shrine. teeth. rotting.

mulch. dirt, filth, grime. rhymes.

[giggles]

smitten. crush. obsess. Spirals.

tired.

perseverance. reward. withdrawal.

syringe. blood. veins. heart. love.

you.

gone.

- Swamp Slut

II. The Personal: Cartoons, Crushes & High School

Anomalies are always expected to be resilient in our society. Born and raised in Lahore, Swamp Slut never felt aligned to the cultural or intellectual cosmos that Lahore offered. I imagine a barefaced woman with a pixie cut wearing purple lip colour; outshining her environment with her sublime confidence. That's how an ideal world would look at her. Wait till gazes shift; sellers, buyers, travellers and their unbreakable standards of a traditional pious woman are shattered in front of their eyes. Wait till you hear the words *behaya, larka numa*. Wait till you witness smirks and cackles, fingers pointing like razors and even then, women should be resilient. She asked for it. She shouldn't have to be brave or resilient. Resilience should not be a requirement or consequence of queerness. No one should have to fight to exist in public.

When I imagine Swamp Slut, the words serene and mysterious come to mind almost instinctively. Superfluously, objectionably and passionately queer, Swamp Slut's demeanour is

telling of the battles she's fought to reclaim her space. Our interview conversations opened my eyes to the subtle reserved-ness Swamp Slut embodies.

As I reflect on our interaction, I have a newfound respect for SS as a friend. Our shared context allowed for an ease of communication I was immensely grateful for.

“**A:** Would you be comfortable sharing with me the gender identity you conform to? What pronouns do you prefer?

SS: Woman. She/her.

A: Would you be comfortable sharing the sexual orientation that you conform to?

SS: Bi-sexual.”

She spoke of cartoons, crushes and new-born feelings. I found myself being drawn in and drowning in her sea of memories.

“**A:** When did you come to terms with your queerness?

SS: I feel like it has always been there for me. You know when we're younger, from the media that we consume like: cartoons like where, we know we're attracted to characters like Richie Rich or

whatever but I always had this thing for *Miss Sara Bellum* and *Blossom* from Power Puff Girls. It was never weird to me, but then when I got older, I saw my friends having crushes on boys and no one ever really mentioned having a crush on a girl.”

As children, to adore, cherish and fall in love with the personas we catch on the media we’re consuming is an almost natural reaction. As SS recalls her days of cartoon crushes, I catch my wistful self desperately wanting to escape my chaotic twenty-one-year-old existence and return to the simpler mind and body of my eleven-year-old self. While SS lets me in on her secret cartoon crushes, my mind wanders, reflecting on how naturally we claim those characters as our own and learn to explore sentiments of adoration through them. While I found myself relating to SS’s reflections, I couldn’t help but notice her tone shift – exposing a kind of loneliness in her childish innocence. An isolation I note all queer folks hint at in the formative years of their lives. She speaks of an inability to relate to her friends’ crushes on opposite gender characters. As a child born into Pakistani society, pretty much governed by a heteronormativity that’s enshrined by any and all power structures around me, I find myself reeled into SS’s experience of alienation.

“**SS:** In 7th or 8th grade I had an intense crush on this girl who was my best friend at the time. This was when I started looking things up, but I remained in denial. Afterwards, I met another queer friend in O-Levels, let's call her Superwoman. They hadn't really come out to me. I had feelings for them, and they had feelings for me too. However, for their sake and for the sake of taking the relationship forward and making something out of it, for the first time ever, I accepted the fact that I was into women.”

Here's an excerpt of Swamp Slut's poem on heartbreaks:

Homosexual Heartbreak pt. 1

It's not easy loving a girl who doesn't love you back.

You walk into her house.

Carrying a potted cactus

and love notes you wrote for her,

infused with your scent

so she can hold on to them when you're away.

She will miss you, right?

Wrong.

*It seems your visit interrupted something,
She was caressing a beautiful brunette man.
You realise that this was the god she was cheating on,
The religion that forbade her from seeing you.
She was never yours to love.*

*It's not easy loving a girl who doesn't love you back,
but you do it anyway.
You share a pair of lungs between yourselves.
And she's kind enough to gift you some air.
The sort of kindness that disguises cruelty.
You're better off with pale skin and blue lips.
Six feet under with dirt filling your chest.*

- Swamp Slut

Talking to SS, a realisation becomes glaringly obvious to me: a yearning for normalcy and acceptance that's embedded into queerness. As high school students, we latch on to the security and normalcy the people we call friends give us. We peruse the books we read, the music we listen to and the movies/TV we watch for some form or relatability and representation. It's an

almost uneasy longing to see ourselves reflected in the mainstream. Sometimes, all it takes is one friend to learn to be able to be different and feel loved and special at the same time. SS always felt like there was something wrong with her. Like she was something no one wanted to talk about. Smiling, she talks about how her friend, Nova made her little world more hopeful. To have a queer friend was the single most special thing in her life. Nova introduced her to art that reconciled with her identity, and for that SS is immensely grateful.

Broaching the concept of sexuality as a queer Muslim Pakistani is a venture that's almost designed to hurl new confusions at you. I recall myself in my naïve pubescence, the hushed conversations about pubescents about crushes, tingling feelings and whispered secrets in girl's bathrooms, excited, but always confused. SS paints a vivid picture for me – her and her best friend sneakily updating each other on their latest crushes and the butterflies in their stomachs. It's a rose-tinted image, kind of like the Sepia filter overlain on a photograph. But the image soon turns dark. Highschool girls can be vicious.

“When we walked out of the bathroom, a whole bunch of these girls were gathered around the stall. There were a lot of people and

it was overwhelming, and they were throwing these slurs at us and making fun of us. You know, in that moment I was so scared.”

Painstakingly, SS recalls the many ways in which she was persecuted for her queerness throughout high school. I notice the way her tone shifts and the extra bit of effort it takes for her to maintain her composure when she remembers being labelled *ganday log*. I feel overcome with shame. Ashamed of how straight people weaponize their privilege to shove heteronormativity down everyone’s throats. Agents of the system, reacting out of their insecurities – fighting to uphold an oppressive status quo. SS talks about how her first love was effectively transformed into a nightmare. The butterflies in her stomach morphing into ulcers gnawing away at her insides.

“In University I started being more open about it because I wanted to start over and a friend of mine said hey you know you need to tone this down because this is Pakistan, and someone will kill you here.”

Rejection at home. School. Haters. University. Death threats.

Can it be anymore linear? Listening to SS, I so profoundly felt the need of living in a world that is three dimensional. That didn't make an individual disappear out of a straight assembly line because they have a disjointed ankle. This myth of routineness and standardization needs to end. People don't reside in black and white TV shows.

They have names.

Pronouns.

They exist.

Homosexual Heartbreak pt. 2

I dare you to open your eyes in the morning without thinking of her. I dare you to shove your pillow aside, instead of wrapping your arms and legs around it to quench the ache inside your chest, this longing for her touch. I dare you to listen to her favorite song without so much as the flicker of a smile or the beginning of a flinch. I dare you to watch the sun set without imagining the warmth of her hand over your palm, or the image of her backyard with its porch swings and wildflowers inside the back of your mind. I dare you to say her name without feeling like all the air has been punched out of your lungs. I dare you to say it again. To hold back the tumbling landslide of emotion inside your otherwise hollow throat. I dare you to say it once more without sobbing so much you're

afraid you'd blind yourself. I dare you to find one part of yourself that isn't tainted with her. I dare you to seek out a millimeter of this universe without her shadow on it. I dare you to burn out everything you see that reeks of her presence. In other words, I am daring you to lose yourself in nothingness, because nothing is what you are in her eyes.

- Swamp Slut

“**A:** To whom did you first come out to and how accepting were they?”

SS: I was in an all-girls school you know what they (smirks). I had a friend, Nova who was kind of open about her queerness. I would talk to her about this and we used to look at gay fanfiction together. We shared yaoi fanfic of the anime haikyuu (yaoi is basically queer boys) our favorite ships were oikawa and iawazumi. We watched this anime ‘Yuuri on Ice’ and listened to music from it (it's a super gay anime) and she introduced me to these book series - “Captive Prince, The Raven Cycle, Six of Crows” - these all had gay people in them whose fanart we shared. We used to listen to Troye Sivan which is almost the most gay music ever. So, Nova was the first person I came out to. It's really nice to, you know, put a name to how I felt as ‘queer/ bi.’”

Insert picture 8

a fandom themed birthday card that Swamp Slut edited for nova on their birthday.

Creator: unknown

What I noticed about SS was that she made a consistent effort to liven up the conversation every time it would take a morose turn. She was painfully cognisant of the conversation becoming melancholic and would actively make an effort to make it livelier. Juxtaposing her stories of bullying with the importance of accepting, queer friends was her exercise in staying focused on the silver linings.

Homosexual Heartbreak pt. 3

*If there was a name you answered to
I'd shout it out until my lungs corrode
If words could bring you back
I'd spew them forth until I ran out
and then I'd make up some more
If it was blood and gore that caught your eye
I'd slaughter for you every creature in sight
If magic spells could summon you
I'd sell myself to the devil
in hopes that he'd grant me a few
But all these efforts I make are in vain
for something that was never yours
can't possibly make its way back to you again*

- Swamp Slut

III. Trigger Warnings: Sexual assault, Depression & Suicide

“**A:** What does art mean for you?”

SS: I started writing when I was about 11 years old and I feel like at that time in my life I used to derive a sense of identity from it. These are my class fellows, they go out, they have fun, they smoke shisha. I can't do all of that but that's okay because I can write and that's my thing.

When I'm reading or writing I feel like, you know, like I am someone. I feel like I'm living a life.

I use my art to express my queerness because in Pakistan you don't really have a lot of other avenues to express it. For example, if you dress a certain way, people talk:

ye kaisi ladki hai.”

“So, when I write stuff, it's my space and no one can judge me for it. So, yeah I do write about my queerness because it's one way that I can talk about it.”

At this point, she pauses, giving me a trigger warning. She sighs. She talks about a friend with whom she used to share her poems with. I see SS struggling a little, with a serious expression on her face she says talks about how that friend got annoyed with

the fact that all her poems are r*pe poems. SS looks into my eyes and I feel her gaze piercing through me. She exclaims:

“What else am I supposed to write about? I had some experiences as a child that haven't left me since.”

After she got that comment, she used to deliberate upon society's definition of a *perfect victim*. A victim who is not too displeasing to their archetypal beliefs.

“Why are my rape poems offensive? I used to think about it a lot and it influenced my writing a lot. Eventually, I realized that a perfect victim doesn't exist.”

Wrong(ed)

*They say
the human heart
beats 72 times per minute.
This battle, I thought I'd win it*

*even while I counted my
dying heartbeats
72, 66, 63, 57, 54*

0.

*I didn't have my body no more
to tell them with my sore
mouth that
I was wronged.*

- *Swamp Slut*

SS talks about writing of pretty sunsets, flowers and close friends. She talks of writing about everything and anything; the inevitability of those poems turning into r*pe poems.

On Writing

*The best poems come out of me
At three in the morning
With my knees bent
My legs clamped
My naked body spent
And your ten slick fingers*

That scream

"We didn't."

- Swamp Slut

The other major themes of her poems are s*icide. She explained that the nature of her poems doesn't usually allow her to share them. Her tone suddenly shifts, she holds her arms and gives me a wide smile.

“ Besides that, I also write about being gay a lot. I love writing
about girls.”

It is here where SS opens up to me about her strife with depression. At the start of A-levels, she got diagnosed with major depressive order and hence, she started taking pills. She had a clear understanding and drew sharp contrasts between the world before and after pills.

SS uses words like overwhelming, plentiful, sheer happiness to paint life before pills.

SS uses words like numb, robotic, stuck to describe the world post-pills.

Swamp Slut derived her identity from two things: writing and being thin. Pills turned her life around. They washed out overwhelming feelings from her life. Pills made her overweight.

“I'm on antidepressants and the way that they work is that they dull all of your emotions, so you don't feel sad. So, they're not just taking away sadness, they're basically taking away everything else.”

Swamp Slut is a storyteller. Even while recalling life experiences which can be jeopardizing and moments of sheer pain, she will tenderly guide me through her journey. I sometimes had to snap myself out of it and remind myself that I had to be mentally present with her. She talks about having an eating disorder at age 11. She got really skinny because of that. She eventually started deriving a sense of identity from it.

“That was the first thing that people would notice about me. They treated me like this delicate person. Taking pills made me overweight and I felt like I lost a huge part of my identity. People would treat me differently. Now that I have gained weight, I feel like it's not the same and I don't feel the same anymore.”

“A: Did pills have an effect on your creative process?

SS: Before, I took my pills, emotions were plentiful, and you know I was able to write about them and process them. When I wasn't taking any pills, I used to feel these moments of sheer happiness. I'd be showering. I would look at a really pretty light in the window and I'd think:

'oh! what a joy to be alive'.

Writing was really good in those moments. I could save that moment in a little poem in like two verses, but I don't feel that anymore.

I don't feel a lot of happiness.”

She explains her creative thought process by drawing a contrast between her younger and present version. Being young offered her a gift of feeling emotions. In those days, she said:

“The poem would write itself.”

Post having taken pills; she would undergo periods of extreme writer's block.

“ At that time, all I used to do was read people's work on the Internet and think that oh shit! I can't write like that. I feel like I'm very, you know judgmental about what I'm writing. I read it again and I don't like it and I feel like it hasn't really conveyed the emotion that I'm feeling properly. As if there's something stuck and it just doesn't feel the same anymore. ”

Numbing Gel for the Brain

*One pill for the boy
And one pill for the girl
They both have been prescribed
These pills to change their world*

*They cure them of depression,
Anxiety, and grief
What they also take with them
Is their rest of their personality*

The doctor is their dealer

*And these pills, their drug
“This medication,” claims the healer
“Will make you forever numb”*

*They come one by one
These boys and these girls
Paying money in huge sums
For their respective cures*

*These tablets they swallow
For every scary situation
With its brain now hollow
Sleeps the Prozac Nation*

- Swamp Slut

I felt as though there was correlation between a lot of the experiences that SS shared. Talking about pills and their ability to hinder SS’s creative process, led us to talk about *depression*. Depression for her wasn’t always there. She referenced back to the incident of her being demonized by high school girls in the bathroom. Post that incident, SS used to self-harm: cutting and burning herself. After the bathroom incident, she felt:

“ a profound sense of disliking myself.”

I see SS struggling a little when connecting the dots to spot the origins of her depression. Pondering about the little chunks of memory that she could reference back to, she thinks it might have to do with either being gay, the homophobic encounters or the sexual assault.

IV. Writing, Queer Community & Friends

SS writes poetry. I wish I was not the one who made anonymous entries of her poems into this ethnographic piece. I wish she could publish these and be queer outside the confines of her mind. After receiving her brilliant poetry pieces which were gratifying to read, a strong growing sorrow started shadowing over me. I was angry because this society shames women to explore themselves in all their entirety; to get a room for themselves. The more I read her poetry and thought about how brilliance was brimming from it. The angrier I got. Maybe that's because I know SS personally. Maybe because I have seen her doubting her writing skills. She has only ever made anonymous Tumblr posts with excerpts from her poetry. Those pieces do not deserve that. Maybe if there was a utopian Island full of women and no male

intrusion. Or maybe an underworld where people thrive on poetry, I'm sure she would have a hundred lovers. Maybe then she would have a platform to publish those and not have the slightest worry.

SS and I talk about comfort places, to which she gives an interesting insight.

“ I feel like I can write best in the shower or in bed. I feel like these are two places where a person is most themselves mostly because you're alone and you have your guard down. ”

SS had always been secretive about her writing. Back in the day, SS only ever showed them to her friend Nova, who being a poet herself would give her feedback and encourage her. SS had not come out to her family due to which she kept her writings as a secret from them. SS took me back to her O-levels, where her English essays were used as examples for the class by the English teacher. Both of us gushed over the role of English teachers as to how nurturing they can be in students' lives. Her eyes suddenly sparkled as she re-lived a moment from an award ceremony. She told me about her English teacher seeking out her mother saying:

“Your daughter is an ocean, and she hasn't been explored yet but she's so deep and she writes such great things.”

She told me about how she still remembers crying at that moment.

“Now, I read sometimes out loud at spoken word/poetry sessions. My friends were very supportive. My friends have always been very encouraging, but I have never really shared my poems on Instagram or WordPress etc.”

SS talked about the ambiguity she likes to incorporate within her poetry. She likes giving the big reveal in the end:

“So, this was about a woman or this was about hot gay sex, in your face!”

We both laugh and I savor the much amusing directness of her diction.

SS gives a chronological order whenever she describes an experience. We were talking about the evolution of her writing with the passage of time and the factors involved in shaping it. She ran me through her childhood where most of her poems were inquisitive in nature, questioning her normalcy and identity. They were also complaining in nature: about not being able to be with a girl because she was straight. She explained the downsides of being a young queer individual is having to deal with the ingrained homophobia of every other kid around the corner. As young people we yearn for acceptance and SS's poetry portrayed such themes.

It's not easy loving a girl who doesn't love you back.

She puts her head in your lap.

You run your fingers through her hair.

In your arms you hold the most precious thing in the entire universe.

No, you hold the universe itself.

She smiles up at you and your insides are molten gold.

It's a gay thing, right?

Wrong.

- Swamp Slut

“When I grew up, I learned and got better at navigating the relationships around me. I met more people, had access to more people, had relationships and heartbreaks; my poetry evolved because my experiences changed because the way that I had relationships changed.”

“**A:** Can you tell a little about the queer communities that you have been/ and are a part of at the moment?

SS: There is a queer WhatsApp group but all of them are druggies. All they do is ask people to link them up with dealers (both of us are containing our laugh at this point but SS continues). Since I don't smoke up, I couldn't bond as much with them. But it's nice to know that this place exists, and other people are deriving comfort from it.”

She talked about how the feminist society called Femsoc in her university, was queer friendly and nice. She made pleasant friendships in Femsoc. She wasn't a part of any queer community persay but has queer friends around which she feels safe.

V. Sexuality & Marriage

Swamp Slut does not think about her sexuality a lot. It's not like she has suspended this conversation with herself for a more accurate time. The repression of her sexuality is something that she owes to her family. Especially the part where a family is characterized by their brownness/desi. SS's family is as brown and conservative as it gets. Brown families fixate on marriage. Being an elder daughter brings her the offerings of such topics being obsessively discussed in her household.

“I've had cousins who wouldn't get married past a certain age and it was a huge issue and I know that I'm gonna eventually have to get married and obviously it's not going to be with a woman.”

She puts a conscious effort to not think about her sexuality; on the grounds that marriage is inevitably going to take precedence above anything else be it her sexuality or more exploratory thoughts.

“How do I think about my sexuality when this question and this thought of marriage is looming over my head? It’s so harrowing to even consider this right now that I don’t do it.”

VI. Online Spaces

“Social media is the biggest thing that has happened for us
gays.”

The existential diminution of queer individuals is a battle they combat every day. The impalpable tremors caused by the fear of erasure of their identities becomes indiscernible, almost subatomic in size. In these circumstances, online avenues act as safe spaces perpetuating the existence of queer identities. They give them a voice, a corporeal shape and a reality.

SS also talked about the limitations of safe physical interactions that a lot of queer individuals must deal with in Pakistan. She talked about safety risk when talking to someone about her queerness in a physical space. The likeliness of inviting someone to her private decreases because of the constant fear of

being judged and/or harassed. According to SS, it's easier to gauge someone's stance on LGBTQ+ rights based on the content they share; hence, the reluctance to talk to them about it decreases.

“ As a queer artist, you get an audience if you're sharing art. I'm not saying that it's completely safe but it's relatively safe and it gives you the option of being anonymous which is a blessing for a lot of people because they can share their and other stuff without worrying. ”

It's not to say that online spaces don't have their downsides. SS referred to physical spaces having:

“ presence/intimacy which isn't replicated online. The way that you can hear their voice, or you can make eye contact with them or you can look at their face. I feel like in exchange for the security and the accessibility you do trade so much intimacy, it's crazy. ”

SS and I slowly strolled through her social media journey. I see an immense nostalgia invading her speech as she dives into her childhood. Tumblr has always been an escape for her. As she tells me about Tumblr and her escapes, I think about how queer

people are banished from their own realities. They become champions of the escapades they choose for themselves. They choose these online spaces where they don't have to *try to* fit in. They make these online avenues a foundation for their realities. They don't need the moguls of the world to give them a scrap of land to survive. Queer people have an innate survival mode on. They choose their lives and that is something no one can take away from them.

“Tumblr is very gay. I found a lot of gay-ships and found a lot of gay fanfictions out there. Me and Nova used to read gay fanfiction, re-blog it and then we would write fanfiction on our own. We didn't really understand our queerness as children and this stuff really helped us understand it. That was the way that we first discovered queerness.”

As much as one should breathe sighs of relief that social media provides spaces for queer individual, it is deeply troubling to witness ignorance on topics of sex and gender in the first place. With all the hefty course loads about geology, astronomy and the physics of the world; where is the course that teaches us that we all breathe the same air? That we are fundamentally amalgamated.

Why don't schools put in effort to educate children of being more accepting? Why does Urdu Literature in our schools not inculcate works of Ismat Chughtai or Manto? Why does our curriculum scream *ignorance* at the top of its lungs? We all fail as teachers, parents and mentors when we don't have conversations about queer identities. In our perfect little worlds, who will talk about people who don't fit all your boxes?

SS continued her social media journey. She joined twitter in 2015. "I've had this anonymous Twitter account where I sometimes post snippets from my poetry and I talked about my queerness, my sexual relationships and all of that stuff a lot". The anonymity of her account provided comfort to her with sharing her private thoughts.

“ I feel like social media is actually the biggest avenue for me to
talk about my sexuality and channel it. ”

VII. Covid-19 & Mental Health

Covid-19 always becomes a delicate topic to approach. The havoc that it has brought upon our lives is incredulous. The multitude of lockdown topics suddenly becomes too much to

unpack. It makes it all the more necessary to do so. As we begin to unveil the misery of lockdown, we both gain comfort in each other's grumbles, whiny moods and inexhaustible rants.

Swamp Slut is a day scholar. This entails her having to come home after her classes end. So coming home was always an obligation for her. However, she misses hanging out with friends, smoking and the liberty of doing things without having to explain them to anybody.

“When I’m at home, I have to account for every single thing that I do. So, when I spend time alone in my room, they constantly poke me about what I am doing alone and why do I not come to the air-conditioned room. Brown parents just don't know where to disconnect with their children; they just don't know where to give them space.”

Insert picture 9

Moments on campus when Swamp Slut felt at peace with the universe

Initially, she dealt with lockdown by denying it. It took her a good few months to accept it fully. She dealt with the forlornness of the situation by journaling a lot. Talking to friends, watching movies and Netflix partying helped. She is also a part of several group chats where people share and discuss literature, books, literature and poetry. Reading circles curated by Femsoc were also a pleasant experience for her. She specifically emphasised on the importance of the internet in this regard; how it made her regain a sense of community at home.

“ All this made me feel like I was a part of something and that felt really nice and I used it to deal with quarantine. ”

“ A: Did isolation during lockdown act as a catalyst for you to make more art or did it hinder your creative capacities? ”

SS: I've been so depressed and all I do is sleep and lay in bed which is why I haven't been able to write a lot at all. I wrote some poems in quarantine which I call a new brand of poems/new feature - depression poems because that is the state of my head right now. So, the lockdown has not helped with my art at all. Other issues that I was already going through got exacerbated due to quarantine.”

The lockdown triggered a lot of bad mental health episodes for SS. To overcome this extreme writer's block and to keep in touch with her art, SS would open old poems that she wrote during the ages between 12-14 and re-write them. She would also email random people *love letters* through twitter. Such things helped her creativity flow. She talked about how quarantine has triggered her insecurities which is why some of the poems that she has written revolve around her eating disorders

Love Letters:

hi love,

it's funny how i can compose long emotion-drenched emails for strangers yet when it comes to you, i stop short.

It's like there's a cat stuck up my throat (that isn't the right phrase).

*in the past few weeks, i must confess, i've been trying not to daydream.
if circumstances were otherwise, i would have asked you out. nothing serious.
i would've taken you for ice cream (that is, if you like ice cream), visited you in
your room and sat on your bed and played with my phone while you did your
assignments (that is, if you're ok with letting strangers in). i would've held
your hand while we sat in the f4 lawn (that is, if you feel comfortable holding
hands) and partaken in all-nighters at the library with you, looking at you
while you looked at your books (that is, if you do pull your all-nighters at the
library). like i said. nothing serious.*

*but with i don't even know how many months between us, i try not to
daydream.*

you talk to me and the cat in my throat purrs.

*you spend your days watching indian matchmaking while i think, how useless
could this matchmaker be, for a stupid exam hall seating plan to do better
than them by putting us together. and i try not to daydream.*

i'm afraid i'm daydreaming.

yours in longing,

[redacted]

my beloved [redacted],

I often wonder if we exaggerate when we throw words like godly, celestial, and heavenly around.

seeing your pictures, though, makes me decide otherwise.

*a mirror amongst green, offering just a little glimpse of the deity that is you.
just enough to make one thirst for more, to crave your presence, to yearn for
your warmth, to hear your voice.*

*i wonder what your voice sounds like; is it as golden as your face makes me
feel? as sweet and soothing as honey, like your eyes? as irresistible as, dare i
say, your lips?*

*if i haven't made myself clear by now, this is me asking if someone as ruined
as me is worthy of bearing it.*

pining for you,

[redacted]

-Swamp Slut

VIII. Words & Queerness

The interview came to an end with Swamp Slut getting more personal. She talked about quarantine, which for her, sheerly translates into physical isolation.

“My love language has always been touching or holding hands
and I haven’t been able to do that.”

With a lack of means to express our affection, we look for supplemental ways. Ways that bring forth a hint of what we felt with a loved one. Ways that are artistic yet enmeshed with the whispers of our lovers.

“We just have words, that’s all that we have. Being in quarantine
has made me negotiate what it means to be intimate with
someone. It made me use my words more than ever. And
obviously that translates into my queerness as well, as in, with my
romantic relationships.”

I have noticed that Swamp Slut's representation of queerness doesn't only pertain to her own identity. She majorly derives it from her platonic plus romantic relationships.

“I would have found different ways to express my queerness and my love for other people because of having spent months of not being able to do it in the usual way.”

The last exchange of words with SS leaves me feeling dismal yet hopeful towards living in a post-Covid world. A world where attachments and ways of living will have reassembled in ways which we are currently processing while many are yet to unravel.

Insert picture 10

Moments on campus when Swamp Slut felt at peace with the
universe pt. 2

five.

Simba

Insert picture 11

Creator: Simba

I. Introduction

On one of my queer headhunting expeditions, I landed on an Instagram page by the name of TheQueerMuslimProject. I felt like I'd hit gold. I pursued the posts on their feed - taking in the creative prowess of hundreds of Queer Muslims around the globe. As I was scrolling, I almost instinctively found myself pausing at the Simba. I could already envision myself interviewing him as I went through his art account, thousands of questions popping up in my mind as I went through his art pieces, each one piquing my interest as I scrolled deeper into it. Next thing I knew, I found myself typing out an introductory message to him. Nervously trying to get all the words right so he would be baited into responding. After a good thirty minutes of pondering the text, sharing it with the rest of my team and some friends, I decided it was time to hit send. It wasn't long before I heard back - a hearteningly enthusiastic response and a confirmation of his

will to speak with me. This is what accomplishment is like, I suppose.

9:45 pm, August 12, 2020: Woke up from a short nap, more like a failed attempt to take a nap as the anxiety and buzzing of those thousands of questions in my mind barely put my brain to ease. Brown *jhumkas* or the beaded ones *Zareepa* got me from Turkey?? A bun or should I just let these waves flow? a half-bun maybe? Clearly the quarantine has deprived me of these daily-life choices that naturally came to me at a point. Looking presentable has been the last thing on my mind in the past few months and getting used to it scares me. Multiple inner conflicts and technical issues later, Simba and I were finally facing each other (*virtually*, sadly).

An exchange of hellos and laughter later, while Simba struggled a bit with turning off his video instead of audio, all anxiety dissipated, and all I was looking forward to is getting to know this person sitting miles away with a story to share.

Simba is an Omani born man, identifying as a gay cis male. He gives me a brief lesson about the history of Oman and explains his descent as a Tanzanian. Constantly torn between his identity as an Omani versus his identity as a Tanzanian, he says

“ I’m a bit of both, but I’m none, and all at the same time. ”

II. Coming Out

“ **Z:** Who did you first come out to and what were their reactions?

S: I came to terms with my queerness in my young teenage years - somewhere around 13 years old. I didn't really have an identity crisis about it, and I was very aware that this was something about me that would never change. But I also had my eyes open to the obstacles I would have to face in trying to be myself.

The first person I spoke to was one of my best friends. Considering they were also inexperienced with the concept of 'queerness', they were actually almost indifferent to it. *But I struggled with finding that solace or support because they didn't know what to do with this information and how to give me that comfort I was seeking.* ”

As Simba hints at feelings of alienation from his environment, I recall all the other conversations I've had with

people for this project. The process of coming out is almost always alienating because the experience of being queer can only truly be understood and empathized with by those who walk a mile in those shoes themselves. I find myself pondering what Simba's expectations of the "obstacles" he mentioned earlier were, and how close to those expectations his reality moulded itself. As I ask him this question, I notice a short pause, a deep sigh, a regathering of thoughts that adult Simba attempts to unpack from the mind of baby Simba.

“When I came out as a teenager, my biggest motivation was to be seen, to be heard, and to be accepted. I was seeking a lot of approvals - from my friends, my family, my peers. If I noticed I wasn't getting a certain kind of positive response, it felt like I had *failed*.”

Isn't that all of us, I thought? Conditioned to run after approvals, measuring our worth through the eyes of our critics. Suppressing how exactly you feel about yourself. The queer experience and feelings of failure seem to always go hand in hand with one another. As Jack Halberstam points out in his work "The Art of Failure", a capitalist society places heteronormativity at its centre, relegating all other modes of existence to the margins, labelling them "failures". The very use of the word "queer" is a

game of power - classifying anything under the umbrella of LGBTQ+ as “odd” and deviant. To be queer is to fail. Fail at reproduction, fail at family, fail at finding love the way heteronormativity outlines. And so, every step of the way you’re reminded of that failure; made to internalize that failure.

It takes a lot of labour to make a home out of that failure. To realise that failing is queerness, and owning that failure is an act of resistance and reclamation; an alternate way of being.

“As I got older, it wasn’t so much about finding acceptance and validation in the people around me, but more about finding that acceptance in myself, and surrounding myself with the right people.”

III: Religion and Ethnicity

Being a brown kid, my religious conformity was decided for me in the form of the first words whispered to my ears, the *azaan*. The brainwashing since childhood for and against certain religions always served as a hindrance for me to discover and choose. I am that brown girl who successfully managed to maintain a dual personality overtime; *one to please the fam, the other to please the femme*.

“**Z:** Do you mind talking about your religious upbringing?

S: I was brought up in a typical Muslim family. You can imagine the way that looks when you come from the Middle Eastern Gulf part of the world. There was never much space for even dialogue - to talk about things like sexuality and gender orientation very
openly.

My parents are quite religious. As a South Asian yourself, you can probably understand how they use religion to justify certain
attitudes.”

At this point, it feels like organised religion and homophobia are impossible to separate from one another. Throughout my conversations with different people for this project, the masculinist authoritarian nature of organised religion becomes more and more glaringly apparent to me. From Oman to Pakistan, no matter what the permutation of the structure you interact with, deviance is enshrined in scripture, and if you cross over to that side, the agents of that structure will come at you with pitchforks unless you either abandon their camp entirely, or forget the parts of yourself that position you outside of it.

“Z: Do you think your dual/fragmented ethnic identity affects you and the way you express yourself artistically? If so, how?

S: It definitely does! I definitely did struggle with my identity as a Black person in Oman. There were things that I was teased about in school, things that perhaps my family didn't tell me to be aware of. When you're let into the world, it's a jarring thing to suddenly confront. High school can be tough on a lot of people.”

Insert picture 12

I never quite felt one thing. I always felt like I was a bit of everything.

Creator: Simba

As Simba reflects on the fragmentation of his identity, I find myself thinking about all the ways in which queer experience is defined by a constant breaking down of one's sense of self. As you move forward in life, you realise how important to your survival it becomes to present certain selves in certain spaces, to specific people. While on the inside you're an amalgam of all those selves, a society defined by heteronormativity will demand of you to compartmentalise. If you don't, you're a failure. In Simba's case, his sense of self was always fractured - in a limbo between Arab and African, trying his best to embody a bit of both as he went along in life.

IV: Art and Expression

Don't know if I am looking forward to asking this question or not. As much as I want to have a holistic view of the significance of art in his life, I am quite sceptical about the next couple of questions as well. Maybe because I am too afraid of being asked the same questions at some point?

“**Z:** As cliché as it may sound, I would really like to ask you this.

What do you think art means to you?

S: I actually don’t often get asked this question! For me, art is a form of *self-care*. I wasn’t really good at a lot of things at school, but the term ‘talent’ was always kind of thrown about when I would draw something and exhibit it.

Slowly, it became a refuge for me. Whenever I felt down about something, or was spiralling, I found myself escaping into my artistic expression. It became an avenue to express certain themes or topics I didn’t have another medium to express in.”

I was migrated back to each instant where art has been the only escape in my life, as Simba spoke in the background. Whether it was aggressively moving the brush in circular motions, leaving tones of yellow, red, black and brown on the sheet while experiencing the Karachi breeze. The breeze giving direction to the tear drops falling on the sheet. Or waking up to faint sun rays fighting to get through small spaces left by the muddy green curtain on a purposeless Sunday at 3pm in my dorm. I take out my dusty art supplies as I light a Camel, toss them on the bed, open the curtain to let the gentle sunlight fall on the dried gloomy

sunflower on the desk. *Painting*: An attempt to shift my gloomy day to a sunny one.

“**Z**: What themes do you find yourself mostly exploring through your work?

S: I would say my art is very introspective. A lot of the work I make has a lot to do with certain insecurities that I have, my relationship with body image issues, certain things to do with how to deal with the world waiting on you. I try to introduce themes about skin colour, often turning to some cultural motifs and including them in my work. Some of the work I’ve done has subtle nods to Omani jewellery, for example, which I’ve always loved as part of my heritage.

But it’s also not just that. The way that I take it to the next level, so to say, is to juxtapose things that are considered ‘sacred’ with things that are considered to be completely taboo and profane. For example, some of my drawings will be self-portraits of me in a *burqa* and I’ll also have some facial hair popping out, as well as an Omani cap on my head. Some of these emblems are sacred to Omani culture, but I like playing around with them and layering them on top of each other, accompanied by mundane cultural emblems to portray that tension and juxtaposition.”

This part of our conversation takes me back to Jack Halberstam and his analysis of queer art. He notes that there is often a deliberate effort to capture the failure embedded into queer identity, and to make it a centrepiece in the work. The photographers whose work Halberstam comments on make darkness and emptiness a central theme in the pictures they take. I see glimpses of that technique reflected in Simba's work and can't help but draw that parallel. Queerness is inherently an act of bending cultural norms, and Simba's art makes a deliberate effort to consciously participate in that act.

“Z: Do you want to elaborate on how you use your art to reflect
on personal insecurities?

S: One of the things I've always struggled with is my own body image. As a gay man, I think we are often exposed to examples of what the 'ideal' body looks like. A lot of people can relate to the anxieties that come with that - the Instagram 'liking' culture, etc.

For me, I use my drawings to appreciate what I've got. Through my drawings, I accentuate certain body features that don't fit the bill of 'desirability'. It's an

*exercise in focusing on the parts of myself I really don't like and making them
beautiful.”*

Insert Picture 13 and 14

Creator Simba

Insert Picture 15 and 16

Insert picture 17

A concoction of self-portraits inspired by my conversation with Simba. A display of me being unapologetic.

Creator: Zil E Huma

“Z: When and how did you start using your art to express your
sexuality?

S: Yeah! Every time I complete a piece of art, it’s almost as if I’ve noted it down; something of an archive that can be looked back at in history and acknowledged as a reminder of my existence. It’s a journal of how I existed and how I saw myself.

Sometimes talking isn’t enough.

Sometimes you just have to sit down with yourself and your thoughts and let them flow out as they please. Sometimes, through

that process, you take a step back and look at what you've ended up with, and it reveals something to you that you didn't even know or realise was in it.

I've been an artist for as long as I can remember, with paintings in my grandmother's room dating back to 1996 when I was six years old. But I didn't turn to art as a mode of catharsis until I found myself confronting and dealing with questions around my sexuality and the consequences of my being.

I've been in a situation where I've had to have my work destroyed by my family a week before an exhibition, because they just *didn't like it*. In 2016, I was putting together a series of portraits for this touring art exhibition in the Middle East, and I was staying at home, so I asked my father to help me build the canvas for one of my pieces as an exercise in bonding because I'm not generally very close to him. When he was done making the frame and I pulled the canvas over it, I asked him to sign the back of it, keeping him in the dark about what I was going to be painting.

A couple of weeks later, I finished a few of these portraits, which were actually nude self portraits. The canvas that my father had helped me build was actually the size of a doorframe, so it was quite big, with a Francis Bacon style nude of me plastered across it.

A week before the exhibition, my mother had an event at the house, and she invited some of her friends over and gave them a tour of the house. One of the guests walked into the studio and saw what I was working on. The rest of the guests followed, and my mom was the last one to walk in. Needless to say, she was mortified.

I remember my brother texting me from the house warning me to be careful when I got back because our parents had seen what I was working on. That evening I walked into a big mess. My mom was fuming! But even then, I couldn't help but think about the irony of the situation. I had grown up fighting for my parents' attention, trying to get them to look at the work I was doing and accept or validate it, to no avail. And now, so many years in the future, they were finally doing that!

I took this opportunity to talk to my mom about my art, but she didn't really want to listen.

Shortly after, my father appeared, handed me a box cutter and commanded me to 'destroy these right now!' And there was no negotiation.

They watched me as I literally took a scalpel to these portraits and destroyed them piece by piece.

It changed my perspective on the *purpose* of art entirely. I was always called talented, but my parents were never consumers of art

and so never understood the purpose of art beyond the dichotomy of a ‘pretty picture’ versus a ‘bad picture’.”

As I’m listening to Simba talk about the enforced destruction of his artistic labour, I shudder a little bit at the thought of my father chancing upon a piece of my life that is not only deviant, but completely outside the circle of acceptability in a typical middle class brown family. In such a situation, I envision him not as someone who has nurtured me and sustained my existence for 21 years, but as a patriarch monster. Someone who has unchecked power in this compact three bedroom apartment when it comes to deciding what is acceptable and what isn’t. Suddenly, my father’s face isn’t his own, but the face of the millions of Muslim patriarchs around the world, his rage valorised by the thousands of clergymen sworn to upholding the glory of Islam. I tremble with fear at the thought of my mother coming across all the “*haram*” art pieces I have created. Losing all her trust I have managed to gain in all these years. I find myself slipping away into a world of dread, when Simba’s voice draws me back.

“**S:** There was nothing explicitly queer about the work my parents made me destroy. But it was still there. And some part of

them recognised it even if they didn't want to outrightly confront it. It was interesting to me, because they suddenly started pointing fingers at my appearance, at how I dress, or how curly my hair is.

It made me wonder whether there's something about the work that gives queerness away even when it isn't explicitly there. Why can't a straight person paint the exact same thing? Or better yet, would a straight person get away with it if they had? ”

V: Conclusion and Parting Words

As our conversation draws to an end, I feel a weight settle on my chest. A remorse over the fact that I'm probably saying goodbye to a friend. A friendly I barely knew a couple of weeks ago, but a friend I could resonate with like no other in my life. A friend who understands art in similar ways. A friend who recognizes the struggles of an artist at every stage. Whether it is the creative process or the exhibiting process. A friend who has experienced the pain of giving away an art piece to the world, even if it is virtually. A piece of yourself.

Simba: Someone I've never really met, but who let me into his life - trusting me with his story and his experiences. It's weird how intimate a zoom call can come to be under the circumstances.

Before we sign off, I ask Simba to tell me about his experience of quarantine and what that's meant for his creative process. As someone who's used to hearing people around me complain about how COVID has turned their lives upside down, I was surprised at Simba's contrary response. He told me he's actually been thriving under quarantine circumstances. Fitting neatly into the artist stereotype, he tells me he's enjoyed quarantine because it's allowed him to actually dedicate a lot more time and energy to his art. He's had the time to reflect on things he never could before, and it's fuelled his creative process a lot. I notice his tone change and can almost see the smile on his face as he speaks. I know it would not have been the same if he was living with his family today, but this is what gives me hope, the silver lining of his whole journey. As struggle never goes in vain.

six.

Maymana Arefin

I. Science, Sexuality & School

24, cis-gender and a neuroscience major, Maymana preferred she/they pronouns. They are still trying to locate themselves on the spectrum of sexuality. Previously identifying as bisexual, Maymana is now more inclined to define herself as pansexual. In their view, bisexuality as a category reinforces the gender binary.

“Sexuality is something that I think about a lot. I studied science so there’s a part of my mind that’s actually quite used to categories in some ways (laughs but then also they’re really problematic, so it’s kind of like this constant to and fro in terms of how I identify.”

Maymana reflected upon how sexuality is fluid. She spoke eloquently and personally about it. Coming to terms with one’s sexuality is positive, but also painful. Maymana learned that discovering one’s sexuality is an ever-evolving process. She hopes that this realization will make it easier.

Maymana fondly shared their school experience. They went to a competitive all girls grammar school. The toxic

environment at school, their deteriorating mental health and their identity as a queer woman defined their time in school.

“ I guess the experience of being queer was definitely quite tied up with my issues around mental health. Growing up me and my closest friend both had issues with eating and body image and kind of all of that really tied into how we saw ourselves in society and like how attractive we felt or like a position as women or femme people.”

Maymana explained how her sexuality was a taboo, even with her close queer friend. A heteronormative understanding of queerness did not allow her to be true to herself. Moments of denial and doubts rolled back any progress she made. But Maymana has continued the search for her authentic self. They have continued to challenge their own and the rest of the society's perception of gender and sexuality.

Maymana also talked about how to this day, she has never really 'came out' to people. She talks about how it's always been a more casual and organic way to disclose their queerness, rather than coming out.

“I have a real problem with the kind of idea that you're not really ok in your queerness unless you've come out completely.”

II. Spirituality & Bangladesh

Maymana belongs to a Muslim household. They describe the nature of relationship between their religion and queerness as confusing. They are not practicing, but overall, they have developed a profound interest in spirituality.

Cultural norms associated with Islam have not been conducive to Maymana's devotion to feminism. She feels that mainstream and orthodox conceptions of Islam clash with feminism. Instead, Maymana explores spirituality in private, on their own terms.

“It's only now that I kind of think that I'm really ok with the idea of having a God... I feel really connected with their creation, or like I'm ok with a lot of the spiritual aspects of life, but it's still possible to turn away from a lot of the other things that I don't

agree with, and which are more tradition-based and more culturally rooted”.

I ask Maymana about their ancestral history and I witness an immediate change. It brings a smile on their face and cheerfulness to her tone. She tells me that she feels an affinity with me because of our common South Asian heritage.

“Both my parents are from Bangladesh whereas I was born in the UK in London and I've always lived in London.”

They explain how Bangladesh feels immensely warm. It feels like a second home to them. They visit Bangladesh to visit their grandparents back and forth in a town called Dhanmondi. For their gap-year, Maymana went to Dhaka to teach in an elementary school.

I inquire further about Bangladesh and how living there feels. To this, Maymana gets immensely exhilarated. She told me that she will remember this question as a prompt for her poetry. They tell that their love for colors and nature comes from their

Bangladeshi heritage. I could see that love in her eyes as she opened up about her life to me.

“I think the one thing that always stands out to me when I get off the plane in Dhaka airport is that it's just so loud. There's a huge racket of traffic and the heat sort of hits you as well, so the whole thing just feels like you're already immersed in this kind of other world, especially compared to here in England because the climate here is so boring. I really like the kind of intensity of the heat and the colors in Bangladesh.”

Maymana recalls the memories of them visiting their grandparents on the fifth floor of an apartment in Dhanmondi. Rooftops remind Maymana of their visits to Bangladesh.

“The fact that I could see the whole skyline and I would always walk on the roof as a child there... I just found it really special.”

I had never pondered about the significance of rooftops until Maymana put it into words. We had this long conversation

about South Asian countries having flat roofs. To Maymana's dismay, England does not. Being so high up, hearing the bustle of the city below, and staring out into space on a dusky evening - it is the place which Maymana associates most with Dhanmondi; the space where she can just breathe.

We ended up talking about the shame we have learnt for the traditionally brown aspects of our lives. But we also bonded on anti-blackness and inherited colonialism. Our mutual desire to fight face whitening creams brought us closer.

Insert picture 18

Lilac mess

This hand carved piece is an attempt to portray the zing in the air as soon as there was a mention of Maynama's roots in Bangladesh. Chatts, charpayis, khula aasman.

Creator: Zil E Huma

III. Art, Depression & Healing

“AR: What does art mean for you?

MA: I guess this is going to sound really cliché, but I feel like for art, the kind of words that come to mind are healing and practice for my mental health.”

Maymana was diagnosed with chronic depression five years ago. She has since sought sanctuary in art and self-expression.

Maymana’s Instagram had concurrent themes involving posts regarding nature in the form of stones, plants and rocks etc. Other than the obvious watercolor paintings, I came across mosaics crafted out of clays and stones.

Maymana likes to keep in touch with forces larger than herself. She further explains how using hands is a receptive means for drawing in her thoughts. It helps her construe meaning from them. But Maymana stressed on the healing power of art as well. For her, art was a way to process her experiences, to confront what she was afraid of.

While being a science student, Maymana has cultivated her creative side as well. Poetry and painting are the art forms she relies on the most. Writing for Maymana is deeply intimate. She

has written hundreds of verses and unfinished poems on her phone.

“I've been writing poetry on my phone for as long as I can remember in notes alongside anything I've been doing. I've always been keeping up some form of writing or like painting” .

“**AR:** What is your creative thought process for writing?

MA: I'll be in a particular scene outdoors or something like a crowded market or maybe just like a friends' flat and I'll find something that would visually really stand out to me and then I think, 'I'd really like to write about this afterwards.’”

Insert picture 19

Creator: Maymana

In other words, unfamiliar experiences or scenes tend to get a reaction out of her in the form of art. Maymana opened up about the emotionally charged memories of childhood. With

embarrassed chuckles and a nostalgic smile, she talked about her teenager-self writing in an angsty and cringe worthy manner. I dabble into poetry myself and I can't help but think about how we've all been there, with our pretentious writing personas and romanticized ideas about life. Although now Maymana thinks that her poetry is more grounded and truer to herself because of the boost in self-confidence that ageing has brought.

“I usually use lower case now, with not much punctuation and I kind of just try not to over embellish when I'm writing so that I can actually think about what I'm saying and not how I want it to be read or how I want it to be perceived.”

She also does photography as a means of social and personal commentary on the larger vital structures of the world. She has over time trained her eye to spot certain things that feel true to her artistic spirit. She executes photography within the framework of coherent themes such as environment and nature (as being things that she cares deeply for).

“Photography is easier as I’ll just notice things that are mundane:
small details, broken parts, rotten food - street photography.
External things would really pop out to me and I would like to
take them out of context and put them in a frame.”

Insert picture 20

Creator: Maymana Arefin

Insert picture 21

Creator: Maymana Arefin

IV. Identity & Expression

They take some time to navigate through their answers when I inquire of whether they express their sexuality by means of art. They draw a correlation between the gradual process to accept their sexuality with the inadvertent and unconscious way their art manifests sexuality. They make a point about how their sexuality is a part of their hair, fashion and photography unintentionally; arguing that they never really had to sit down and come to terms with it. It's only with time, that they now have fully embraced

those traits; hence, it has become a more obvious expression. They explain this further saying:

“My sexuality has definitely now become a part of my artwork especially with my spoken word where I explore a lot of like these feelings within my body or the ways that I think about myself. I find it easier sometimes to express all these personal things in words than I do in painting. My sexuality influences my writing but in paintings maybe not so much in an explicit way.”

Insert picture 22

Creator: Maymana Arefin

Maymana also disclosed that she has not come out to her family due to the risk factors that it entails. This, too, adds limitation to the extent to which she expresses herself online. This factor contributes to a sense of privacy for herself versus anyone else.

“Sharing my poetry on social media would cause more anxiety than it would help me. I just don't feel comfortable with it, like I've tried it posting my writings a few times and then I've almost always deleted it. Also, because I kind of feel that the way that I can claim my poetry as mine is through the fact that I can choose to perform it when I feel like I want to or I can otherwise just keep it in entirely as a form of self-expression for myself.”

Maymana has only started painting since January 2020 when their mother bought them a little paint set. After taking time off their master's degree and with the Covid situation on hand, painting seemed like the ideal venture to step foot on.

The medium they use is watercolors because of how they can play around with their fluid nature. They also find the ability to layer a plethora of colors on the paper to be magical.

“At the moment I have just been painting faces and doing portraits of people. I really enjoy the use of color and just kind of making lots of different colors merge together and see how that can represent someone.”

Insert pic 23

A self portrait of sorts

Maymana Arefin

One of the first things that I have done with every single one of my informants is to look up their social media profiles. This helped me come across a few of Maymana's wonderful posts where she's singing whilst playing a guitar. I ask them about it, and I could see the exuberance in their tone where they talk about how they have been singing since primary school.

“Since the age of 8 or 9, I have been singing in embarrassing school plays and stuff like that. I just really loved singing at that time, and I didn't play an instrument or anything, but singing was the main thing that I would do to express myself in choirs and other little things.”

Maymana expressed gratitude over being supported by their mentors and teachers in school. They have also directed plays in their university, focused on diverse topics such as feminism and British politics. Moreover, coming from a family of artistic siblings has provided a nurturing environment for their art.

“I think I'm quite lucky. I have three other siblings and all of us have some aspects of creativity, like if we go on like a trip together, we will all have our sketchbooks and stuff.”

V. Misery Party, London.

Maymana's journey into identifying with their sexuality is largely centered in London. They felt strongly about the secure and intimate relationship with a small group of queer friends that they have. The capital city, according to Maymana, is overtly viewed as a welcoming place to live, especially for minorities. At the same time, Maymana's experience says something else; they describe it as a space that is still very catered towards the white male gaze. From experiencing microaggressions during university, being fetishized and frequently harassed on the streets of the city; London can also be blatantly racist, sexist and homophobic. In all this havoc, Maymana found a community for themselves which hosted Misery Parties catering to the QTBIPOC (Queer/Trans/Black/Intersex/People of Colour). She built connections with hundreds of other queer people of colour by means of this community. It was a transformative and nourishing experience for them. It was their safe space.

Maymana talked about how the clubbing culture in London can be overwhelming and anxiety-inducing for people like her who don't like to drink. For her, misery parties are nourishing and healing sober spaces which act as a mental health collective.

“Misery Party just added to that extra dimension of security that I would get from queer friends - because all of my queer friends from University are also white - whereas the misery events brought out a different another facet of my identity which was immediately understood. It was just a really refreshing experience.”

VI. Online spaces

“I think social media, it's one of those kinds of beasts where it can really be both the bane of my life but it also has such a lovely supportive community at other times, so it's kind of both of those things simultaneously.”

Maymana's experience as a queer person was intimately intertwined with social media because of a lack of access to physical spaces.

They again come back to Misery Party which, since the pandemic, now holds its sessions virtually and have helped them regain a sense of community at home. They highlighted the importance of building connections and network through shared online spaces; especially about witnessing the growth and struggles of people online makes them feel less isolated.

“ I really find it super joyous and feel grateful to have connected with people like you! I wouldn't have met you for example ~without social media~, and I wouldn't have known that such a project existed and it just made my heart so full to know that someone on the other side of the world could have seen something ~referring to their art~ I made. ”

VII. The Coronavirus

The exuberance of Maymana's smile masked the underlying journey of catching the novel coronavirus. They narrated the whole journey with a sturdiness to their tone which was quite admirable.

“My whole family caught Covid-19 around the end of April.”

She described it as a horrible experience; with every single family member undergoing this crippling affliction. Isolation affected their mental health. While incessantly laughing, she forewarns me about sharing an embarrassing story about her first day outside her house.

“I finally went for a walk to like this forest that I really liked and I started crying recording these trees and I look at it now and I think, God I've not been outside for such a long time so I think the whole experience was just so extreme that it led to a lot of very high intensity and emotional experiences.”

Maymana referred to the initial period of lockdown as a hindering process for them to negotiate their identity. An impending hopelessness stagnated their fragmented and disoriented life.

Confronting their sexuality while being stuck in their childhood home was tough. The internal chaos of dealing with the coronavirus made matters worse. They gradually make an effort to add a routine to their life. Maymana tried continuously and consistently to engage in activities to recuperate from the illness. With the inability to compute their body's internal clock; painting in bed, planting seeds, attending misery parties and re-connecting with friends added continuity to their life. Maymana also accredits social media for providing her with a continuous sense of identity.

“I'm suddenly just like at home and a completely different person but actually I think all of this has made me realize that social media has been a really good mediator; like there's still the continuity where I feel free to post or being able to maintain honesty with a lot of people regarding my feelings. I would describe social media as a buffer really to a lot of the external

situation. It has remained something that I feel still really comfortable to express my true self in.”

Alongside social media, art too mitigated for an otherwise excruciatingly slow and lonely process of healing with covid-19. The confines of their room and the little paint set of colours became their creative space and as they call it: an extension of their recovery.

“I literally was painting from inside the duvet ~laughs~, but just like yeah it felt like a form of rest because I was like, ok well rather than like watching TV or something I could just sit in my bed painting.”

Insert picture 24

The afternoon Abbu came back covid-19 positive

Maymana Arefin

I inquired of Maymana about the effect that the virus had on their creative process. Being at home subconsciously makes them shut down their queer identity for the sake of survival. Correspondingly, this meant an unintentional compromise on their artwork; where they can't express it as readily, as they could have otherwise. However, having a space at home provided by their parents for the arduous process of healing from the virus was so necessary for them. Their artwork was moreover facilitated by staying at home where they were being taken care of.

“ I wouldn't have been able to paint my tiny room in London by myself. I don't think I would have had the headspace to make art while also recovering from the virus if I hadn't been at home. ”

“ **AR:** Did such circumstances evolve your artistic expression in a different way in terms of the way you had to negotiate identity and expression? ”

MA: I do imagine it's being influenced quite a lot by how I've been feeling 'cause I just think the process of kind of like being ill and being stuck in my room just made me crave a lot more strongly the really vivid sort of colors and like a more free sort of expression.”

Being at home represses their lurid imagination while taking away the comfort of exploring free expression. Their paintings in lockdown focus more on faces/portraits whereas ideally, they would be drawing nudes.

Insert picture 25

Missing the physical faces of my friends

Maymana Arefin

Laughing, they recall the beginning of lockdown where they would rampantly paint female nudes, but which are now at the bottom pile of their art pieces to avoid the risk of being seen by family.

Weaving my words carefully since I didn't want to trigger painful memories, I inquired about the process of healing from the virus. They had a seriousness to their tone but the easiness to their narration implied the Covid journey had been somewhat processed.

“I would mostly stay inside my bed because I was just so exhausted and had a really high temperature at times and things like that so I would just slip out the bed, do a little bit of creating and like go back to sleep. It was just like this whole delirium really, the whole period was just like drifting in and out of sleep, painting some things, getting back in bed. It was really quite a blur to be honest.”

They expressed feeling like they were on a standstill while the whole world was continuing. Resorting back to art as it allowed them to lay out a different reality at home in their bed. An escape for her to paint the things she deeply cared for but took for granted: natural landscapes, trees and a vast series of portraits.

“When you paint, you have to study something so much more closely, and I think it gives such a deep sense of appreciation and gratitude for it, so I think it was really a nice exercise to remember that even through being really ill and feeling really overwhelmed and kind of downtrodden... It was just helpful to remember there are some really fun things in my life that I can paint and just get back to them.”

Maymana had a deeply positive outlook for life. Despite the adversities they underwent, they would end every conversation on a hopeful note. With uplifted cheeks and a creased smile, Maymana tells me how profound it feels for them to be finally able to walk and breathe properly.

Insert picture 26

While Abbu was ill and i'm imagining landscapes I wished we
could be in

Maymana Arefin

VIII. Purple Silhouettes

After I finished my conversation with Maymana, our words danced in my head on repeat, for hours. Maymana reminds me of skylines, I decided. I adjust my gaze within the circumference of my four-sided gadget. Spotlights glistened across the purple of her monochromatic hair and I revel over the violet haze that draws around her like a silken scarf. I tell Maymana it feels like I've known her for a decade, at least. I remember I had glanced up at her once again during the Zoom call- if the sun were behind her in that moment, she would have looked like a 5pm purple silhouette. The room is consumed with sunlight and dispersive spectral colors radiate onto my screen, almost hypnotizing me.

Maymana was deeply perceptive during our conversation. She was simply present. She was curious about me and I could tell she wanted the interview to be an insightful experience for the two of us. She was easy to talk to. It felt like we almost reciprocated our energies; you could tell by our shared excitement

through our high-pitched voices. The relatability of our South Asian ancestry kept the interview a stunningly bonding journey. That is how I comprehend Covid-19; online avenues are extraordinary, and they promise a resounding human connection that was lost somewhere along the line.

By the end of the three-hour call, I felt rejuvenated. Who knows, maybe the two of us will stay in touch in the future.

Till then, I'll revisit purple silhouettes in my daydreams.

Insert picture 27

Shapes to soothe headaches with

Maymana Arefin