

# The Enunciation of Space in Autobiography: Two South Asian Accounts

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While relationships between people and their environments are culturally specific and historically grounded, they are also open to individual elaboration. Autobiography is a medium where these relations are rehearsed, reconstituted, and reformulated. This paper essays some observations on the shadow play of self and place in two narratives of home-coming and leave-taking: Attia Hosain's autobiographical novel, *Sunlight On A Broken Column* (1961) and Sara Suleri's memoir *Meatless Days* (1989).

Hosain and Suleri — two South Asian women émigrés — weave complex narratives of identity: both displacement (the routes traversed) and location (the roots that bind) are seen as constitutive of meaning.<sup>1</sup> Their interpolations within a grid of memory, experience, and language produce complex itineraries through dense cultural landscapes. Paying close attention to the manner in which they reconstruct and re-present the passage of their lives tells us much about the terrain they passed through as well.

## THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LENS

Autobiography is a complicated literary genre, caught between reportage, retrospection, and revision. It is fraught with contradictory pressures, straddling a shifting line between event and account, between truth and memory, between revelation and exhibition, between a self-referential view of the world and a more catholic sense of one's place in the world. Yet it is precisely this ambivalent relation between a subject and her environment, between a life and its re-telling, that makes autobiographical accounts extraordinarily resonant instruments for deciphering the symbiosis of self and place within a specific cultural context.

Reading Suleri's and Hosain's life-stories for the ways in which a culture is spatialized and lived underscores this proposition. It suggests that autobiographical accounts signify — not only in their accumulation of everyday detail, but also in the rhetorical strategies through which the subject narrates itself. In this sense autobiography is a two-fold transformation of lived life: first the figuration into memory of experiences and sensations, and then the transmutation of that memory into a coherent narrative.

The span of a life, and its retrospective accounting, allows for the possibility for multiple descriptions of the same material artifact or cultural practice. Autobiographical accounts can, therefore, complement and flesh out the sometimes reductive readings of social and spatial relations produced by disinterested observation or research.

Autobiographies may even be construed as a rarefied form of social science: as inverted ethnographies, where the field of inquiry is the anthropologist's own trajectory. Certainly the self-reflexive turn in anthropology itself has led to an examination of the "interior terrain of the field", the pressures on the self-identity of the ethnographer that field-work produces.<sup>2</sup> Much recent writing in anthropol-

ogy recognizes how the presence of the anthropologist "disturbs" the site under investigation — inserting, in the process, a remarkable degree of the "personal" into field observation.

As culturally thick descriptions, autobiographies are a rich source of architectural imagery, spatial codes, and their metaphorization in language. Images, terms, and architectural types particular to specific cultural discourses, for example, find more resonant articulation in autobiographical narrative than in discipline-specific glossaries or in studies that interpret material culture narrowly (in terms of climate, or technology, for example).

In the books under investigation, the repeated descriptions of the domestic "compound," of the synesthetic (and not only visual) dimension of the *zenana* and of *purdah*, and of the bodily regimens of furniture, for example, lead to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of domestic space in specific cultural contexts.

The domestic arrangements and spatialized negotiations of familial rules and rituals recounted in these texts articulate specific social and cultural milieux, the changing structure of domesticity, and the boundaries — spatial, social, and psychological — that define an individual's sense of self and her relationship to family, community, and society.

Both books are itineraries of the *self* that articulate their relation to *place* through operations that re-route and re-root. Both engage the dynamics of cross-cultural transactions, working the vein of 'in-between-ness' with the ambivalent (and bi-valent) perspective of the émigré. And both choose to keep the focus of their works intimate and domestic, even as the force of historical and public events wash over them.

Taken together, these two books make for a culturally coherent pairing: they extend one another's stories further back into the past and forward into different futures. In a sense, Suleri could very well be the modern Pakistani daughter of one of Hosain's Muslim characters who emigrated from Lucknow to Pakistan via England. Certain tropes and patterns remain strikingly constant even as their articulations vary: the relationships between women: between the home and the outside, "historical," world; and between domestic arrangements and their architectural accommodation.

## STYLE AND SELF-ARTICULATION

Self-articulation in autobiography is not a matter of simple narration but rather of *narrativization*. In the recalling and re-telling, the details of spaces, events, and people are rhetorically reconstituted. The critical effort on the part of the autobiographer is to find an "enabling style," for "self-hood" is as much "a matter of style and rhetoric" as it is "historically produced and culture-specific."<sup>3</sup>

The issue of style, of crafting an appropriate idiom for autobiography, is particularly central to Suleri's and Hosain's efforts at

making sense of their lives and their social and cultural milieux. Straddling as they do different cultures, languages, social conventions, and geographies, theirs are not simplistic narratives of identity caught between the bipolarities of the modern versus the traditional, or the authentic versus the metropolitan.

Their need to find their own voice, to reterritorialize their lives beyond the narrowly local (or glibly global), gives their accounts a particular currency for those who work and live between, across, and at the margins of cultures. Their deracination, it seems, exaggerates their sense of belonging and of displacement, making their stories all the more vivid.

Carolyn Barros suggests that autobiographies are essentially "narratives of transformation" where "someone tells someone else something happened to me."<sup>4</sup> While transformation and change are operative metaphors in these books also, something else is going on as well. The subject of transformation is also a *questing* subject: not simply recording the facts of her life, but trying to take stock of and make sense of them as well.

The authors return to old *haunts*, in the double sense of the word that conjoins memory and place. The haunting that marks these autobiographies is a result of these obsessive forays along the locus of one's memory and to a series of sites from the past and in the present.

These exercises in self-understanding — archeological reconstructions of subjectivity and identity — are by necessity self-conscious. Self-disclosure and self-discovery are predicated on a distancing of the self from the subject of the autobiography. The point of view is neither singular nor fixed. The locus of enunciation in autobiography shifts constantly as the narrator, though apparently omniscient, is acutely receptive to the evolving and multiple voices a subject incorporates.

The problem of autobiography's audience raises the rhetorical ante further, as the audience is by definition split, even splintered. Autobiographical narratives are stories told to one's present self as well as to a multitude of readers: the strangers who will chance upon it in addition to all the past ghosts and present characters that populate one's life.

The sheer specificity and particularity of detail gives these accounts an arare phenomenological density. While Suleri focuses on the domestic locations and locations of the nuclear family, Hosain restages the extended or joint-family household. In both domestic detail serves contrasting yet complementary functions indexing both the ornamental and the everyday.

The literary critic Naomi Schor suggests that detail carries within itself a bi-valency that, culturally and historically, has been gendered as feminine: the detail is "bounded one the one side by the ornamental with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence and on the other by the everyday whose prosiness is rooted in the domestic sphere presided by women."<sup>5</sup> Whether this stylistics of the particular is implicit in narrations of domesticity or in a feminine aesthetics of looking, it gives the narrative of these memoirs a density that deepens our understanding of lived space.

This obverse relationship between the quotidian and the ornamental may perhaps be integral to the formation of memory itself. The autobiographer further elaborates and amplifies the echoes of everyday events. In his introduction to *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, Vladimir Nabokov lists some of the earlier titles for the first English version of his autobiography: *Conclusive Evidence* — "evidence of my having existed" — and *The Anthemion* — "Anthemion" being the "name of a honeysuckle ornament, consisting of elaborate interlacements and expanding clusters."<sup>6</sup>

## LIFE-WRITING IN ENGLISH

Like Nabokov, both Suleri and Hosain write in English, employing an ornate, self-consciously literary, sensual and somewhat overwrought style in their autobiographies. Hosain's allusive voice draws from the poetic idiom of *Lukhnavi* Urdu, with its vernacular

treasure trove of aphorisms, proverbs, and burnished banter. Suleri works the particular frisson of living in two languages, shaping sentences and worlds that deftly avoid both orientalist essentialisms and post-modernism's hot-house hybrids.

Unlike the subcontinental narratives of Salman Rushdie, however, Hosain and Suleri do not explicitly polemicize their writing in English. Rushdie, among others, self-consciously forges an idiom for an Indian English in order to legitimize its status both as a form of English (on par with "American" or "Australian") as well as an Indian language (on par with Hindi, Bengali, etc.). This strategy, for example, gives the autobiographical conceit of *Midnight's Children* a pan-Indian scope, drawing upon an understanding of English as the only "Indian" language that does not "confer on the [Indian] writer a regional identity", in the way that writing in Hindi, or Bengali, or Tamil, inevitably does.

Its trans-regional status within India notwithstanding, writing in English signifies in other ways, marking, for example, the particular class and cultural status of those who write in it. While growing up "at home" in English, Hosain and Suleri were also acutely aware of how it set them apart from their surroundings. Writing their life-stories in English reiterates it as a sign of their being simultaneously at home and not at home, a marker of their status as insider/outsider both when growing up and as émigrés in England and America.

Similarly, neither account maps tidily on to either "western" or South Asian autobiographical traditions. Barbara Hletcalf, in her study of Muslim pilgrimage narratives, suggests that biographical writing in Urdu and Persian emphasizes the givenness of "personality" over its chronological, and self-generated, development. Biographies are occasions "for showing contexts within which [personal] qualities manifest" themselves; in this scheme there rarely are "radical breaks in self-perception," epiphanies, or conversions.<sup>7</sup>

In Hosain's and Suleri's accounts, there is something of the anecdotal structure of *hikaayaat* ("tales") or *malfuzaat* ("table-talk"), genres that illuminate "a personality from different angles... like a prism, held up to the light of multiple contexts so that its constant characteristics are revealed."<sup>8</sup> Unlike these local genres, however, there is a palpable sense of agency in their accounts, a desire for the self-representation that autobiography, if not life, makes possible.

Style is inextricable from an implicit politics, from an intensely particular view of the world, for any particular person, and is itself a product of a unique nexus of class, race, gender, and other socio-cultural accidents.<sup>9</sup> Reading Suleri and Hosain brings home the centrality of rhetorical choice to constructions of the world, whether in the luminous world of memory or in the clear light of the everyday.

## HOSAIN AND SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN

While *Sunlight On A Broken Column* is purportedly fiction, it maps very closely the cultural and historical contours of Hosain's life. Hosain's family was part of the feudal elite that managed to continue its cultural traditions while carrying on a limited though mutually beneficial commerce, with the British ruling classes. By the time of Hosain's parents' generation, this cross-cultural and unbalanced commerce had produced a group of English-educated 'technocrats' who served the bureaucracies of the Raj while continuing to assert their traditional feudal ties and profit from them.

The social schisms produced by this cultural equivocation were exacerbated when Hosain's generation, born around the First World War, chose to apply the precepts of their English liberal education to question both the *noblesse oblige* of an increasingly bankrupt feudal society, and the legitimacy of British rule.

Some women from this class and generation were the first to be allowed to attend university. Hosain herself was the first woman to graduate from among the feudal families of Lucknow. While her intellectual horizons broadened, the field of action for women of her background remained circumscribed by the ubiquitous reach of

tradition, social custom, and spatial protocol. Even as the fetters of the "zenana mentality" were loosened, the *zenana* remained the dominant spatial, cultural, and emotional frame.

It was only after Partition, in 1947, had sundered irrevocably a geography and aculture, and in the process, a way of life, that women like Attia Hosain were able to maneuver a space of their own, though at tremendous emotional cost. Both Hosain and her stand-in in her novel leave their family homes, exiling themselves to neutral environments. Hosain emigrated to England where she worked as a broadcaster, actress, and writer. In 1953 she published a collection of short stories, *Phoenix Fled*, that detail episodes from the *zenana*. *Sunlight On A Broken Column* is her only novel, an account written across the distance effected by time and emigration.

*Sunlight On A Broken Column* is structured as an autobiography: a girl gives an account of her life that is also an accounting of herself as well. As she re-imagines herself in place, she also attempts to understand her "subjectivity," her place in the world and the position from which she speaks.

Hosain reconstructs *Ashiana* [literally, "nest," or "abode"], the house of her childhood, the typical sprawling compound of a Muslim joint-family in pre-Partition India. The first three sections of the book give a chronological description of her life in the house up to her marriage (in 1938) when she leaves *Ashiana* for her own home. The fourth section breaks and reverses the direction of the narrational flow, returning her to the house for a final visit, five years after Partition and the domestic dispersal that followed from it.

This section takes the form of an extended inventory of spaces and events as she wanders, in real time, through the ancestral house, now half-empty and partly tenanted by strangers. As she walks through the evacuated rooms, the echoing halls and tarnished mirrors play back and review her life, chapter by chapter, chamber by chamber, performing, as it were, an extended exorcism that readies her for her second, and final, leave-taking.

While in the first three sections the house is her world, subtly shaping and demarcating her experiences, in the final section the house itself takes center stage; it becomes both the drama and the drama's decor. As she drives back through the gates of *Ashiana*, the shiver of memory produces a rush of emotions that leave her nauseated. The sheer evocative power of spaces, and the memory of them, transforms the house into an animistic landscape, a stage just abandoned, with the uncanny presence of people who have just left the room, the echo of their footfalls not quite having died away:

The silence in the house was more disturbing than the signs and smells of being uninhabited through the long summer and the season of the rains. It was not the peaceful silence of emptiness, but as if sounds lurked everywhere, waiting for the physical presence of those who had made them audible.<sup>11</sup>

Every object is both a fetish and documentary evidence, summoning up and summarizing her life: "My most private memories were contained by this house, as much a part of its structure as its every brick and beam."<sup>12</sup> Where memory fetishizes, history forces an objective distancing. The ancestral house becomes simultaneously a haunted burial ground and an archeological site.

After Partition the house had been declared "evacuee property" and had been "allocated" to refugees from newly-created Pakistan. The post-Partition cross-border bartering of property between evacuee and refugee, overseen by bureaucrats, had rendered the house, once so private and guarded, into mere real estate. The house that had formed her, where her subjectivity had come into its own cognizance, now was peopled with strangers and their belongings. The house, "having buried one way of life and accepted another" during Hosain's growing up, had now accommodated yet another.

The interweaving of memories of the house and its sensorial immediacy are crucial to Hosain's reconciliation with herself, with the "girl who haunted me". Unlike the straightforward recounting of the first three sections, the accounting of the final section invests the house with the weight of memory and the weathering of history.

## SULERI AND MEATLESS DAYS

Sara Suleri's memoir, *Meatless Days*, maps the domestic terrain of upper-middle class nuclear families in post-Partition Pakistan. Suleri retraces herself through a series of houses in different cities where she lived with her sisters, her Welsh expatriate mother, and émigré Pakistani father (Sara's father had emigrated from India to newly-formed Pakistan after Partition).

With her journalist father constantly in and out of jail, Suleri's memories are of a "company of women" very different from the cloistered world of Hosain's *zenana*. Yet the relations, both spatial and familial, that she evokes, and invokes, are as complex and layered as Hosain's labyrinth. While Hosain frames both the past and present through her ancestral home, the spaces of Suleri's childhood and adolescence constantly seep into her consciousness, reshaping and coloring her present American domicile.

Suleri moved to the United States in the late seventies to continue post-graduate work in English. She now lives and teaches in New Haven. *Meatless Days*, written ten years into her American sojourn, is her attempt to give her memories, and herself, the coherence of plot. Yet, as she herself acknowledges, character has a way of escaping the over-determination that plot implies. "Daughter, unplot yourself; let be," her mother admonishes Sara who responds: "But I could not help the manner in which my day was narrative, quite happy to let Mamma be that haunting word at which narrative falls apart."<sup>13</sup>

Suleri's memoirs renounce the clarity and obviousness of a chronological stock-taking. In contrast to Hosain's, they offer an alternate route through the spaces of memory and experience, an indeterminate itinerary loops back and forth in its search of "the sweeter peace of inadvertency and a world less heavy with the expectation of its ability to gratify" with answers."

Suleri conjures herself out of parables, allegorical tales, and apocryphal conversations that she reconstructs with and for her immediate family. The nine chapters that make up her book, each revolving around a character, draw upon submerged memories and recall, re-imagine, and re-choreograph scenes, in an attempt to remember the people, events, and spaces of her life.

Bodily metaphors are central to this task, even as she acknowledges the impossibility, the propriety or even the necessity of a literal re-membrance. Perhaps even more evocatively than Hosain, Suleri's memoir suggests that while specific spaces may disappear from one's lives, they live on in the body's memory as it continually shapes itself after the physics of some long-forgotten moment.

The voice of Suleri, the post-colonial diasporic academic, is not the predominant voice in these accounts. Suleri's rhetorical use of everyday detail, and the daily give and take of relationships, enables multiple voices and registers to suffuse the spaces she describes. Her accounts startle us with the precision with which she locates the emotional resonance of material things in different cultural situations, as when she notes that for her American boyfriend a "dining table was so markedly more of a loaded domestic space than was a bed."<sup>15</sup> Combing through, with remarkable decorum, the intimacies and cultural entanglements of domestic life, Suleri's memoirs reveal without exposing and thus, "in a double sense, re-cover the lost."

## SELECTIONS FROM HOSAIN'S *SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN*

### The *Zenana* as Spatial and Cultural Frame

The *zenana*, from the Persian *zan*, "woman"; the apartments of a house in which the women of the family are secluded. The *underoorn*, literally the "interior" of a house; the rooms around inner courtyards away from the public, and male, domain of the house.

In pre-colonial *haveli*'s (urban residences), the *zenana* lay within the fabric of the house. During the colonial period, the *haveli*'s of the

more established feudal families (such as Hosain's) developed an articulated spatial arrangement where the zenana was twinned with the free-standing bungalow, a type that itself had evolved during the early years of the colonial encounter. This grafting of a zenana on to the *bangla* produced a hybrid that reified, through overt spatialization, the class, gender, and cultural distinctions that marked colonial society.

The two arenas, while part of a singular domestic regime, had distinctive spatial and social patterns. The public, male, and westernized "front" of the house had a full complement of formal living and dining rooms, verandahs, front lawns, porches and driveways. The zenana rooms, however, were not articulated by specific function; the diurnal cycle of activities moved its inhabitants from interior halls, to large verandahs, and on to rooftops or courtyards.

Within this constellation, the zenana was an inverted world, folded in upon itself, the restrictions giving rise to a parochial dynamic: "Life within the household ordained, enclosed, cushioning the mind and heart against the outside world, indirectly sensed and known, moved back into its patterned smoothness."<sup>16</sup> The jealousies and frustrations in the "household of women were intangible like invisible webs spun by monstrous, unseen spiders. And yet, without each other they had no existence. Physically and mentally their lives crushed each other" (251).

Hosain's descriptions of life in the house map with precision the spatial and familial commerce between the two wings: "The day my [spinster] Aunt Abida moved from the zenana into the guest-room off the corridor that led to the men's wing of the house, within call of her [ill] father's room, we knew that Baba Jan had not much longer to live" (14).

Hosain describes the screened corridor that links the "walled zenana, self-contained with its lawns, courtyards, and veranda'd rooms, to the outer portion of the house" and the old *baithak* [literally 'sitting place'] that united the two wings of the house where the closest members of the family, of both sexes, could meet when necessary: "Into this vast room the coloured planes of the arched doors let in not light but shadows" (18).

Hosain describes the zenana's daily activities, its social protocols, its inhabitants drawn from an extended network of kinship and social obligations (widows, poorer relatives, and other dependents), and the punctuations in its rhythms marked by festivals: religious and seasonal, but especially, the two events that transform it temporarily, marriages and funerals. Marriage is what makes the world of the zenana spin, both the reason behind the cloistering of women and the emblem of escape, for it is the event that promises a liberation of sorts:

The zenana stirred and vibrated with movement and noise as guests and maid-servants and children and groups of village women milled around, their voices raised and shrill with excitement. For every woman and girl there was an excuse to wear the richest of clothes and jewels... the house throbbed with the rhythm of... marriage songs... and the insistent beat of drums." The elders were curious about the bride's dowry displayed in the dowry room, while "the only quiet corner was [the bride's room] where she was kept in seclusion... [all the girls] wanted to sit and stare at the bride they would be one day" (113).

The spaces of the zenana are literally cut off from [the world]. The only views out are from the rooftop and the courtyard from where one can get a glimpse of the day passing, the light changing, and the sun moving across the sky:

During the rainy season we used to hang a plank on thick ropes, on the thickest branch of the tallest mango tree, and Zainab would sing the songs of the season, as we swung, with our dopattas streaming behind, high above the walls [of the purdah orchard], able to look at the green world stretched out under purple clouded skies (106).

One gets a sense of this framing from the genre paintings of sub-Imperial and provincial courts, with their ever-present embrasures, lintels, arches, and screens. This spatial regime restricts the perspectives of the inhabitants even as it imbues the architectural elements with metaphorical resonance:

My life changed. It had been restricted by invisible barriers almost as effectively as the physically restricted lives of my aunts in the zenana. A window had opened here, a door there, a curtain had been drawn aside: but outside lay a world narrowed by one's field of vision (180).

### **Purdah Operations**

The zenana indexes both a particular place and a particular view of one's place in the world. The spatial and cultural codes that governed the life of zenana women extended beyond the zenana itself through the notion of *purdah*, literally "curtain," "veil," or "screen": covers that carry with them connotations of secrecy, privacy, and modesty. In Urdu, it is idiomatically very resonant, with multiple phrases describing the subject and object of purdah, and the reciprocal actions of exposure and concealment.

While purdah may refer to a specific material object (a curtain, for example), Urdu has other words that identify the articles of clothing that effect the operations it implies. More generally, purdah indexes a gendered socio-spatial formation, a code of conduct, and a specific spatial regime for women.

Like the similar *chador*, literally "sheet" (more familiar in the west thanks to the geo-politics of post-Khomeini Iran), purdah is a central cultural trope. Phrases like *chador aur chaar-divaari* (literally "sheet" and "four walls") very precisely convey the culturally specific notions of the household, carrying within it the feudal understanding of chattel sequestered within defensible boundaries.

Hosain's account gives a sense of purdah's multiple invocations. In an instance of its complex protocols, she describes how her aunts did not observe purdah from her grandfather's orientalist English friend, but were "careful that their voices, even the rustling of their clothes, were not heard" by his Indian friends and male relatives (35). Through this acoustical erasure of bodily presence, purdah covers over all evidence of the female body as a sexed object: husbands never speak directly to their wives when in the presence of their elders. And in the zenana, husbands visit their wives in the cover of night, leaving before dawn.

During the extended rituals of the marriage ceremony, the twinning of objectification and erasure are enacted in the elaborate ceremony of 'seeing' the face of the bride (the bride sits unmoving under a heavy veil of flowers as guests come and part it to catch a glimpse of her face) and at the moment when the groom enters the zenana (after her siblings collect a "tariff") and sees the bride for the first time (under the cover of a sheet, and with the help of a candle and a mirror, the two exchange indirect glances).

The cultural allusiveness of such rituals survives even if the details transmute as they take on other cultural references and accommodate historical change. As the colonial cross-cultural encounter produced its own etiquette for social intercourse, purdah began to take on new locutions. Hosain, for example, describes, with delicious irony, the "purdah parties" given by the spinster sister of the local Anglican priest:

The sanctity attached to his profession — and the fact that the Governor attended his church — made it permissible for the highest born, most secluded Indian ladies to attend her purdah parties where she ardently established good relations between Indians and the English. So the wives of the Commissioner and District Officers balance their cups of tea, and teetered on the edges of gulfs of silence, with correct, polite smiles on their lips when language failed them, and the Ranis and Begums smiled back with warm unself-consciousness (49).

## Mixed Society

When Hosain's grandfather dies, her "westernized" uncle, now the head of the family, returns to *Ashiana* to live. Hosain describes the significant changes in the life of the household that ensued. The zenana was disbanded; spinster aunts married off and the assortment of relatives relocated to the family house in the village. Because of her dead father's wishes, and her uncle's belief in the education of women, Hosain stays on to continue a college education. As her world opens up, she finds herself doubly estranged, distanced from both the zenana that formed her and the social protocols and "western trappings" of her uncle's milieu.

Her account manifests the self-conscious tensions of her generation as well as that of her uncle's as both negotiate between the social and spatial protocols of different cultures, each attempting to find their own balance. Hosain sketches out the problematics of becoming modern while remaining traditional through deft descriptions of cross-cultural transactions. While she does not herself question the inherent contradiction, even fallacy, that underlies this complicated desire, she does provide vivid glimpses of its affect on the domestic sphere and, especially, on women.

The awkward, halting, and stilted miscegenation is captured in a telling phrase. The new social and spatial protocols of "mixed society" forced open commerce not only between the east and the west but, for the first time, between men and women. While the material texture of the domestic domain changed with the sometimes abrupt accommodation of new fashions of dress, furniture, and architecture, the proprieties and rites of mixed society were not as easily assimilated.

Hosain describes "the gossip of women whose minds remained smothered in the burqas [veils] they had outwardly discarded, and the men who met women socially but mentally relegated them to harems and zenanas" (207). She describes the desire of husbands to bring their wives out of purdah and groomed by English lady companions, a transformation of "dutiful purdah girls" into "perfect modern wives" that literally reconfigures their bodies: "No more loose shapeless clothes, no more stooping and hunching of shoulders to deny one's body" (141).

This transformation also brings with it an entirely different social and material regime. Hosain describes the changes in the main house after the arrival of her "modern" Aunt Saira: different furnishings, a new corps of servants (lady's ayahs, valets, butlers, instead of maid-servants sent in from the village), new rituals (tea in the living room, formal sit-down dinners at the dining table instead of the nomadic *dastarkhans* of the zenana), and a different hierarchy of public and private space (the sanctity of her uncle's study, the privacy afforded individual bedrooms as opposed to the flexible, common, and non-function-specific territory of the zenana).

The shifting valencies that attach to material objects in cross-cultural commerce are illustrated in Hosain's descriptions of the "taste" in furniture across three generations: her grandfather's, Aunt Saira's, and her own:

In their old age [grandfather and his friends] had taken to attending auctions in much the same spirit as had once made them big-game hunters, and they displayed their trophies with a similar sense of triumph. But while they were discriminating about tigers and panthers...[European objets d'art] were crowded together regardless of beauty or genuineness (120).

Aunt Saira's rooms, however, are tasteful copies of contemporary English homes: velvet curtains, linens, crystal and china services, and tasteful prints. Her uncle's study, for example, displays "Raphael's 'Madonna,' 'The Stag at Bay,' 'Dante and Beatrice,' 'Storm at Sea'" (108).

The traveled, progressive, "smart set" among Hosain's own generation lives in houses in New Delhi that are "very modern and Western in appearance and convenience, very Indian and ancient in

decoration" (295). Here the initial consumption, and later co-option, of western objects and styles by the previous generations has been substituted by a western "eye," with tradition transliterated according to a European aesthetics of recuperation. Tradition is reappropriated as heritage by these well-meaning nationalists, unwittingly setting into motion the process of its commodification as "ethnic" style.

## SELECTIONS FROM SULERI'S *MEATLESS DAYS*.

### The Company of Women

While there was no zenana, or purdah, in the houses Suleri grew up in, it was a household of women, and it is the relationships between these women (her paternal grandmother, her Welsh mother, and her four sisters) that give her stories a particular South Asian sensibility. "Leaving Pakistan," Suleri says, "was tantamount to giving up the company of women."<sup>17</sup>

Suleri's memoirs do not reduce all these women into some abstraction of "woman"; she does not "write" the sub-continental woman. Even as her account inevitably poses the question of her own positionality as a woman within a specific historical and cultural milieu, she insists upon crafting for herself her own "idiom for alterity." This is difficult territory and Suleri acknowledges it by raising the polemical ante. Pre-empting both feminist and post-colonial critiques, she ventures: "There are no women in the third world" (20):

The concept of women was not really part of an available vocabulary: we were too busy... living and conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother...once in a while, we naturally thought of ourselves as women, but only in some perfunctory biological way that we happened on perchance (1).

This is not the place to pick up that gauntlet. Yet Suleri's comments frame a warning against a singular reading of "woman" in cross-cultural encounters and, especially, in autobiographical narratives of identity that, by definition, pose and rehearse articulations of the self against both familial roles and conventional readings of what it means to be a woman, a third world woman, a modern woman.

While space is clearly gendered, it is in culturally specific ways. Even though the "Suleri" women are not cloistered away within a zenana, the space they occupy — the domestic everyday — is the one marked off for women. It is the private sphere of the household where "women are enabled to enter a community among themselves, as a vital collectivity."<sup>18</sup>

Suleri describes another instance of a community of women: the walled-off, single-sex college for upper-class women. Kinnaird College for Women, on Jail Road in Lahore, exemplifies the persistence of the zenana as a powerful South Asian chronotope, one that informs "modern" and colonial institutions as well:

The college was indeed on Jail Road, as was the jail, and the racecourse, and the lunatic asylum too. All those institutions looked identical, built out of the same colonial red brick in a style that suggested a profusion of archways and verandahs and enclosed gardens, highly walled. Massive thrice-locked gates dotted that potent street... the hostels where the boarders slept... were intended by college rule never to be entered by a man, other than at best a father or at worst a sweeper... (47).

The inhabitants of Hosain's zenanas were literally unable to step outside, to look back at their confinement and its physical particularities. Because Suleri and, to a lesser degree, Hosain had the opportunity to move in and out of, and between, secluded zones, they are able to conceive of the delirious draw of such spaces. Suleri describes Kinnaird in the imagination of the citizens of Lahore and

the "histrionic terror engendered by its secret locked-up space":

To the city, after all, Kinnaird signified a magical arena containing a few hundred women of primetime marriageability in an architectural embrace... And we who lived on the inside of that idea were caught in that curiously constricting position: we felt imprisoned in the very place we knew represented an area of rampant fantasy in the city's psychic life... Which was more real: we, Kinnaird, on the inside — or the little bits of fantastic longing that drove their traffic outside and around our walls? (48).

### The Spaces of Urdu

Suleri repopulates the houses she has lived in, and lives in, with tales spun from her memory, her imagination, and from the idiomatic richness of living in more than one language. Though twice-removed from the Urdu-speaking culture of her father's ancestry, and in spite of her present location as a sub-continental diasporic in the American academy, Suleri's stories are testament to the racination that language affords. The spaces of Urdu give even her post-modern "textual web" a specific cultural resonance:

Speaking two languages may seem a relative affluence but more often it entails the problem of maintaining a second establishment even though our body can be in only one place at a time. When I return to Urdu, I feel shocked at my own neglect of a space so intimate to me: like relearning the proportions of a once-familiar room, it takes me by surprise to recollect that I need not feel grief, I can eat grief; that I need not bury my mother but instead can *offer* her into *the earth*, for I am in Urdu now (177).

Suleri recounts the series of Urdu tutors employed by her father to initiate his children into the spaces of their patrimony, each a peculiar character who ends up reinforcing the children's sense of being different. Some spend the tutorial hour practicing their own English, rife with malapropisms and misuse, upon Suleri and her siblings.

Only one succeeds in opening up to them the world of the *ghazal*, that "rare breed of poem", and Suleri waxes lyrical at the memory, shaping an astonishing spatial metaphor for the structure of the *ghazal* and the rapture of discovering Urdu: "Chisti Sahib's face would transform at the thought of a verse, and we, spellbound, could only follow the lineaments of his expression as it coaxed us in precarious veers up to the vertiginous idiom of Mirza Assadullah Khan" (99).

In America, Urdu words and phrases continue to serve as the magical incantations that reopen forgotten doors, breaching her American domiciles with a breath-taking immediacy. An entire parable revolves around her recoil at the anatomical specificity that the Urdu word *kapura* (generically "sweetbreads") takes on when translated literally into English ("testicles"), a sensation that periodically upends the ordered taxonomies of her Pakistani ingredients and her American kitchen.

Living in America changes the geographical registers of her idiom: the collective sigh — "another summer done" — that used to mark the long-awaited monsoon as it slaked the oppressive stillness of the Lahore summer is replaced by the renewal of hope in "winter's finally over", when the gloom of an endless New Haven winter quickens into spring. Living in the spaces of another people's language also effects a spatial and emotional circumspection. Suleri describes the "displacement" of her Welsh mother, especially when she could not freely converse with her grandchildren who did not speak English as their first language:

For a woman who liked to speak precisely, she must have hated her sudden linguistic incompetence: languages surrounded her like a living space, insisting that she live in other people's homes. . . [she developed] the slightly distracted

manner of someone who did not wish to be breaking rules of which she was ignorant. . . She learnt to live apart, then — apart even from herself... learning instead the way of walking with tact on other people's land (163).

### Memory and the Émigré

Memory for the émigré is a constant ebb and flow between a willed forgetting and a willed remembering. Suleri recalls how after a few years in her new home in the flat vastness of the American midwest, and the desolation following her mother's and sister's violent deaths, she woke up one morning to find that "my mind had completely ejected the names of all the streets in Pakistan, as though to assure that I could not return or that if I did, it would be to loss" (18). And she recalls her own grandmother's phrase, in response to the trauma of Partition and emigration, and the rupture of memory and geography that it entailed: "The world takes on a single face" (6).

Yet the tenacity of our sense of place is such that it ensures its survival, attaching itself to sounds, to smells, and even to particular physiognomies. Memories of her family members evoke particular contexts, lending significance to their features: "And it is still difficult to think of Ifat without remembering her peculiar congruence with Lahore, a place that gave her pleasure. 'It's blossom-time and nargis-time', she wrote to me in her last letter, 'and what a lovely city it is — a veritable garden'" (181).

### The Masjid Syndrome

The extended duration of an autobiography privileges a sedimented understanding of cultural commonplaces. In Suleri's account the mosque is one such topos and she builds up a composite description that captures its multiple registers and suggests the complexity of the mosque as a cultural formation:

If I must mimic the postures of the devout, I think I would rather go to a mosque for the odd half-hour and cool my head in its geometry of complete disinterest, which warns me that I better soon be gone before the courtyard is white with men and fallen angels (80).

Suleri's father's world-weary declaration (after his wife's death) — "Take me to a masjid; just let me live like a holy man" — and its subsequent absorption into the family's private idiom, illustrates the complexity of the mosque as a figure. Suleri's father uses it as a trope for renunciation, for leaving worldly concerns behind. His daughters, however, tuned to different cultural registers, hear instead the "preposterous" presumption implicit in his hyperbole: "For years we used the phrase, 'its the old masjid syndrome,' to characterize his, and our own, excesses of self-sorrow" (80).

The mosque is the symbolic heart of South Asian Muslim communities, for both men and women. Yet, while women may visit mosques, South Asian custom generally does not allow women to pray in mosques. The following anecdote indexes the various vectors — religious precepts, customary practice, gender distinctions, touristic consumption — that are in play. Suleri describes her interchange with the man at the gate of the Jami Mosque in Delhi:

Muslim women are not allowed in the mosque between the hours of *maghrib* and *isha*, he told me, so "of course I am not a Muslim," I replied. "Then I'll never let you in," he told me smugly, "because I am the vice-imam." "Then of course I'm a Muslim!" I screamed back. "My grandfather was a Hajji, and my father is a Hajji — he's probably in there now!" It worked as a threat on him as well as it would have on me, and I strode in, undeterred (81).

The degree to which the spatiality of mosques suffuses Suleri's sense of space cannot be accounted for by the centrality accorded to mosques in South Asian Muslim life. South Asian Muslim women,

after all, rarely enter mosques after puberty: for them the interiors of mosques are where their men go, from which they are absent. And for Suleri, a mixed breed growing up in a not particularly religious household, mosques would have been even more remote and unknown.

Perhaps it is precisely her outsider status that gives her entrée, allowing her to reimagine the space of a mosque and, in the process, inhabit it. "I used to think that it would be refreshing to live in a house that was shaped like a mosque, basing its center on empty space, with along kitchen where the imam should pray and four turret bedrooms, one for each minaret" (80).

Suleri the wayfarer (as tourist, as expatriate) articulates what the native intuitively experiences. She isolates with extraordinary precision the spatial essence of a mosque: space that is empty but is not a void; a "disinterested geometry"; a positive emptiness, one that resonates with the communion that is enacted there:

I always liked to see a vacant space intact – a room disinterested in seeming furnished – which surely shows the influence of growing up in houses built around courtyards designed in a world where people pray in mosques. I still miss it, the necessity of openness that puts a courtyard in the middle of a house and makes rooms curl around it, so that each bedroom is but a door away from the seclusion of the sky (174).

### The Compound

The word "compound" has a particularly rich set of significations in the spatial economy of Indian life. While the word has several competing etymologies ascribed to it, a derivation from the Malay *kampung* seems most probable. The type itself arose in the Malay archipelago, in the early eighteenth century, where it denoted the enclosed outposts and "factories" within which the mercantile and missionary activities of the colonial enterprise resided.

The space of the "compound" has a ring of self-sufficiency to it; an expansive world secure behind its four walls, very different from the stand-alone and fully exposed individual house of the Anglo-American suburbs. Originally "compound" referred to the "enclosed ground, whether garden or wasted space, which surrounds an Anglo-Indian house."<sup>19</sup> Its more common usage implies a spatially co-extensive relation between a house and the space that surrounds it, the two together as a single social, territorial, and affective unit.

Suleri reconstructs the emotional and physical landscape of the compound; specifically the single-family compounds her upper-class family lived in while she was growing up. Because her family moved with some frequency, the houses serve as the coordinates of another way of ordering eras and measuring history: "The family moved from the Fowler Lines house in Karachi to the 23-H Gulberg house in Lahore, and then to 9-T Gulberg, from where Papa went to jail, which moved us back to Karachi, and finally to London to live in Chiswick" (94).

Even though in its current suburban iteration the compound has devolved into little more than a big box penned in between four walls, arrayed along the arbitrary grids of anonymous subdivisions, it retains the territoriality implicit in the feudal *chaar-divaari*. And while the joint family has given way to the nuclear family, an extended community still inhabits these compounds: maidservants, cooks, nightwatchmen, "drivers," widowed grandmothers.

Suleri's memoirs resurrect the structure of such a place, and of a day in that place: Dadi "painstakingly dragging her straw mat out to the courtyard at the back of the house and following the rich course of the afternoon sun"; Mother "in the garden after the ferocity of the summer sun watering the driveway... the heady smell of water on hot dust"; the sisterly intimacy of an afternoon "chitchat bed"; tea-time with the whole family congregated on Papa's bed; reading on a monsoon verandah or on the lawn in the winter sun; asleep on a "sweet-smelling *nivar* rope bed" on the roof on a summer night.

Suleri's account is dense with the texture of lived space. From it

we can glean the surfaces of an architecture placed directly in the path of everyday life. There are moments where Suleri choreographs an entire sequence, incorporating into the scene movements of the body, material artifacts, a voice, a setting and the memory of it. It is in moments such as these that we see the scope of autobiographical re-visioning:

Some holiday mornings I would not wake to the sound of my mother calling up my name but instead to the sound of her privacy with some piece of music... there was always some filial obligation that she paid in the pleasure she took to sit down at his [her father's] piano, so when I stood at the top of the stairs and watched her play, I could see her spine swaying with loyalty... I would slowly go down the stairs, measuring my steps to the weaving movement of her body... She was paying a compliment to some lost moment of her life, and I felt startled to observe such privacy... (162).

### CONCLUSION

I would like to close by speculating for a moment upon the parallels between the effort of crafting an appropriate idiom for life-writing and the designer's struggle to read and enunciate space. As the preceding discussion suggests, the narrativization of a life is not a matter of simple narration. In the re-telling, the space and time of a life are produced anew. "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh. . . space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history."<sup>20</sup>

It is not just in the space of the literal descriptions but in their *literariness* — the architecture of the writing, the effort of facturing description — where the lessons lie. As designers we always move, however implicitly, from our own experiences of space, as we reimagine others. The designing "I" is a many-layered thing. In the course of our lives, in some aspect or another, we are all simultaneously "placed" and "displaced." The disassembling and reassembling of the autobiographical subject mirrors the design process; both are "inherently dialogic [in their] inevitable orientation towards another."<sup>21</sup>

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Susan Seizer, "Paradoxes of Visibility in the Field: Rites of Queer Passage in Anthropology," in *Public Culture* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1995): 75.
- <sup>3</sup> Samir Dayal, "Style is (Not) the Woman," in *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), p. 256.
- <sup>4</sup> Carolyn Barros, *Autobiography: Narrative of Transformation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 2.
- <sup>5</sup> Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 4.
- <sup>6</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 11.
- <sup>7</sup> Richard Cronin, *Imagining India* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 4.
- <sup>8</sup> Metcalf, Barbara. "What Happened in Mecca: Mumtaz Mufti's Labbaik," in *The Culture of Autobiography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 154.
- <sup>9</sup> Metcalf, "What Happened in Mecca," p. 155.
- <sup>10</sup> Dayal, "Style is (Not) the Woman", p. 264.
- <sup>11</sup> Attia Hosain, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), p. 275. First published in Great Britain by Chatto & Windus in 1961.
- <sup>12</sup> Hosain, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, p. 272.
- <sup>13</sup> Sara Suleri, *Meatless Days* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 157.

- <sup>14</sup> Suleri, *Meatless Days*, p. 79.
- <sup>15</sup> Suleri, *Meatless Days*, p. 37.
- <sup>16</sup> Hosain, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, p. 59. All subsequent references to this novel in this section are indicated in the text with a bracketed page number.
- <sup>17</sup> Suleri, *Meatless Days*, p. 1. All subsequent references to this novel in this section are indicated in the text with a bracketed page number.
- <sup>18</sup> Dayal, "Style is (Not) the Woman." p. 225.
- <sup>19</sup> Burnell and Yule, *Hobson-Jobson* (Calcutta: Rupa & Company, 1994), p. 240. First published in 1886.
- <sup>20</sup> Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 84.
- <sup>21</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), p. 117.

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