

An Other Country

By

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In the three days before my departure, I have defended my PhD thesis, kept myself awake through two Christmas parties, bought several kilos' worth of Swiss chocolate and hastily assembled a wardrobe for the month-long trip. It is December 2021, and the latest wave of the coronavirus is sending ripples of anxiety through the global psyche; travel restrictions are making a comeback, masks are once again in vogue. But I am determined, risks notwithstanding, to board my flight from Zurich to Karachi, the first time in three years I will be going home.

The high expectations I have placed on the trip live in tension with an ever-present dread of disappointment; past visits have not been frictionless. But my ambivalence towards Pakistan, which once manifested as a refusal to return, has now conceded to an intense longing for 'home'. On the cusp of thirty, I have lived abroad for the last twenty-three years, variously in Greece, the United Arab Emirates, England and Switzerland. My identity is not cleanly bisected by a single uprooting and resettlement but fragmented and constantly in flux, trying to find in itself in an amalgam of past, present and future. Maybe this is why it is not with nostalgia but with a more prosaic yearning that I look to Karachi: I want to forge something new, discover something fresh, rather than polish away the patina to reveal the sheen of a bygone era.

At Jinnah International Airport, an immigration official asks for a negative PCR result, then ushers me along without so much as glancing at it. I emerge into a crisp, pre-dawn Karachi and wander around arrivals for a few minutes, looking for my father. When he doesn't materialise, I use my Swiss number to send a text message into the ether, knowing on some level it will never be delivered, and seeing in this small act of desperation a shade of the fish-out-of-water helplessness I so despise. Eventually we find each other, and in the car I experience a lurching panic - one whole month?

The sun has risen by the the time we reach home and I'm desperate for some sleep. As I make preparations for bed, I find a baby gecko in the late stages of rigor mortis half-poking through the drain in the sink, and I'm again filled with queasy trepidation. One whole month? But a few hours of rest are enough to restore me to buoyancy, and we head to my uncle's place for lunch, where my cousin Mehreen unveils her grand plans for us. She is eager to take me around, show me a good time, and after a meal of dal and bhindi we head to Dolmen Mall - a shiny, modern shopping centre on the Clifton waterfront. Snuggling into a booth in one of the fancier cafés, I order an Americano (horrendous, as I find all coffee here) and, for the first time ever, the two of us enjoy a tête-à-tête.

In the past, interactions with my cousins have been communal affairs, but time and distance have atomised the extended family system somewhat, so a one-on-one is in order. I learn that Mehreen is quite the firebrand, espousing ultra-progressive views on minority and women's rights. She is also extremely loquacious, and as she fills me in on the veritable tapestry of family drama that has played out in the last three years, indeed the last three decades, I quietly salivate over the novelistic potential of her juicy intel.

Talking to people as research for my novel-in-progress is only one way I hope to get a better understanding of what makes Karachi tick. For years I have clung to the notion that my flaneurial tendencies can be transplanted from the clean streets of Zurich to the mean streets of Karachi; exploration on foot, I maintain, is the best way to get the lay of the land. Mehreen alone is gung-ho about the proposition and ready to accompany me on my adventures, but we are gently encouraged to abandon this fanciful dream on the grounds that, well, the ground is cracked, crumbling, muddy, garbage-strewn and awash in sewer water. Eventually, we are persuaded to settle for a tour of the city by car. My uncle appoints himself

tour guide and leans back in the passenger seat with his bare feet up on the dashboard, while Aslam, their laconic driver, takes the wheel, and on a calm Sunday morning, the four of us set off on a jaunt.

First stop is Empress Market, a vibrant hub of commercial activity in the old town of Saddar. Built in the Victorian era (Victoria being the Empress), the square-shaped building encloses a central courtyard where vendors shelter under makeshift tarps, selling all manner of edible and inedible goods. Nuts, spices, dates, vegetables, candies and fabrics are just a selection of items that spill out of sacks, tumble out of boxes and bulge from people's shopping bags. I am documenting with my camera the various forms of activity going on when two beggar girls decide to attach themselves to me, tugging at my blouse in the assumption that my photo-taking and foreign attire signal access to wealth of a different order. I tell them repeatedly and truthfully that I don't have a penny on me but, understandably, they don't buy it, and remain in my orbit until we move on to our next destination: the Parsi colony.

There are in fact several Parsi colonies in Karachi, home to a dwindling Zoroastrian community that migrated to Karachi in the mid-nineteenth century and flourished financially and demographically under colonial rule. Many were successful in business and trade, and often adopted as surnames their chosen profession with the suffix wala appended, such as SodaBottleOpenerWala (as my dad later informs me with perhaps a little too much relish). Parsi numbers began to decline in the 1960s owing to an ageing population, high rates of migration to the west, and strict adherence to a custom which dictates excommunication for women who marry out of the religion. Today, there are fewer than 2000 Parsis left in Karachi.

The final stop on our tour is Lyari, one of the oldest settlements of Karachi. In

the 18th century, successive waves of migrants from Balochistan settled here and, together with Sindhi fisherman, established a fortified fishing village called Kolachi (from which the name Karachi derives). Lyari was also home to a significant population of Sheedis, an Afro-Pakistani ethnic group descended from East African slaves brought by Arab merchants between 1200 and 1900 AD. By 1886, it was the the most populous district in Karachi, but as a poor, Muslim area in an otherwise Hindu-majority city, development was neglected. After Partition, a large influx of migrants from India were settled in housing colonies in Lyari and the population ballooned, but with no attempt to invest in infrastructure, large parts lacked even basic amenities. Today, Lyari is the most densely populated locality in Karachi, and since the 1970s a hotbed of left-wing political activity and gang warfare. But, despite its notoriety, residents have carved out an identity through their passion for football, boxing and music (disco in the 70s, rap today).

Two weeks fly by and I have to admit I'm having a good time. I spend some time with members of another branch of the family (a third branch, the party animals, seem to be perpetually quarantining); my cousin and aunt take me to an art exhibition at Frere Hall, an Indo-Gothic colonial-era building, constructed in gorgeous yellow limestone and perhaps the most notable landmark in Karachi. I enjoy my mum's home-cooked food - chow mein is frequently on the menu because it is quick to make and a nationwide gas shortage has reduced the time for cooking to a brief window early in the morning. When I feel like going out, usually for *chaat*, the cousins are called upon to provide company and car. Mehreen is my co-conspirator and her brother, Faisal, a willing accomplice. Often, once we get talking, what is ostensibly an outing to pick up food becomes a joyride through the city. We lament the follies of our parents and exchange musings on love and marriage. One time we spot Wasim Akram's SUV. Another time we pick Mehreen up from a yoga class that had Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Jr. in attendance. And even in the domestic sphere there is occasional excitement: a childhood friend of my

father's drops by, having ridden in on what to an untrained eye looks like a Harley-Davidson, wearing black cowboy boots, a black leather jacket and a handlebar moustache. He consolidates his larger-than-life image by regaling us with stories of his business exploits, and when I request an 'interview', he gladly obliges, showing up with an entire dossier on the history of Karachi.

In my third week, we decide to venture further than Lyari, and my dad, Mehreen and I take a dinky plane to Sukkur, in the interior of Sindh. We stay at the Sukkur Institute of Business Administration (IBA), a sprawling campus with red-brick buildings peppered around lush, carefully manicured gardens, and on the first day are warmly received by the Vice Chancellor. He and a contingent of other university officials take us to a wood-panelled room where we are shown a PowerPoint presentation on the achievements and goals of the university (very impressive) before each being gifted a notebook, diary and Sindhi Ajrak shawl. Mehreen and I are privately bemused by the attention - yes, Sindhis are famed for their hospitality, but this kind of star treatment seems undue, and our impostor syndrome reaches peak intensity when my father is crowned with a Sindhi cap, a photographer on hand to document the auspicious moment.

After a quick tour of the campus, it's time for some sightseeing. We are brought to a van and placed in the charge of a chatty chaperone who takes us around the town, dandy in his blue jeans, black leather jacket and brown monk-strap shoes. Sukkur itself is not as pleasing to the eye as Sukkur IBA, but the Indus River, silty and turbid though it is, is a majestic presence. Built on its west bank, the city is surrounded by irrigated alluvial plains that support the cultivation of wheat, rice, cotton and - possibly giving it its name - sugarcane. We hit the main attractions: the Lloyd Barrage, Lansdowne Bridge and Tomb of the Seven Sisters. By the time we stop for lunch, my bladder is very full and I regret not having availed myself of the university's facilities. I quietly hope that we will eat at Pizza Hut or some such

reputable establishment so I can not only find a sanitary toilet but also minimise the chances of aggravating my slightly upset stomach - our next stop is an hour's drive away, in Khairpur, and gastric distress on the open road in rural Pakistan is a nightmare scenario I desperately want to avoid. But the chaperone has different plans for us. We stop at a dhaba, or roadside eatery, where I have recourse to a squat toilet and a sink with no soap. This does not inspire confidence, so I resolve to nibble at some naan and a small portion of vegetables but, the food being as good as touted, I end up eating heartily (suffering no adverse consequences as a result).

We move on to Kot Diji Fort, built on a limestone hill in the late 18th century by Mir Sohrab Khan Talpur, the then leader of Sindh. A sign at the entrance says it was 'considered invincible', although this was never put to the test since, according to the same sign, it was never attacked. We go through three sets of gates, each studded with thick iron spikes to deter enemy elephants, and climb the stairs to the top of the citadel where a boy or man (estimates of his age vary widely) is belting out Sufi songs. His mournful voice carries across the sandy hills, and although he could be confused for a faqir, he refuses to accept money, saying he is simply passing time until a business opportunity comes his way.

The next day we drive eighty kilometres to Mohenjo-daro, an ancient Indus Valley Civilisation settlement built in ca. 2500 BCE, around the same time as the pyramids of Egypt. The ruins of the city form a crisscross of low brick walls, with regular streets, a large network of wells and a sophisticated sewage system that suggest advanced urban planning (Karachi take note). Two salient features are the Great Bath, probably used for ritual cleansing, and a large dome-shaped structure, originally thought to be a Buddhist stupa built in first few centuries of the Common Era, but now believed to be an Indus construction after all. Surveying from this elevated perch the ruins below and the hilly expanse of red sediment and

brush beyond, I can't help but appreciate the vaguely abandoned feel, the almost spooky desolation that speaks volumes of the neglect and indifference of the Pakistani government, but which also preserves a naturalistic aesthetic that I find redemptive.

Mohenjo-daro faces two serious threats - erosion from the Indus River, and damage caused by salt deposits drawn up from the ever-rising water table. Excavation has been banned since the 1960s to prevent further damage through exposure, with some archaeologists even suggesting reburying what has already been dug up. It's some indictment, and our on-site guide is touchingly apologetic about the substandard conservation attempts. We follow him through a bare bones metal detector and into the museum, where he explains the significance of various Bronze Age artefacts on display. But I'm distracted: having struggled all morning to see in the mud and bricks the architectural features ascribed thereunto, I stare a while at an artist's rendition of what the city might have looked like in its heyday - a vast metropolis teeming with people.

Back in Karachi, I have a week left of my holiday. Aside from gorging on *chaat*, the only thing left to do is to get a haul of books from Urdu Bazaar. We park a distance away, and as we meander on foot through the dense urban jungle, avoiding donkey carts, motorcycles and rickshaws, my father points to an old office building from where my grandfather once ran a successful automobile distribution company. For a brief moment, a sense of estrangement from history, its profound and palimpsestic march, painfully announces itself. What was it like for my grandparents to leave their birthplace in 1947, to be given a few hours to grab what they could and vacate their homes with no hope of going back? My great-grandfather fell into a depression from which he never recovered, in comparison to which my own 'adventures in alienation', as the critic James Wood puts it, seem like the epitome of freedom and agency. Yet I, too, did not make a

choice to leave, and don't see a way back that doesn't induce panic. And then, as suddenly as it arrived, the fleeting sensation of loss has passed, and I am there, browsing through books, brushing dust off the jackets and evaluating the clarity of the print.

Over the last few years, I have clawed my way back from illiteracy to reach some semblance of proficiency in my native tongue. But perhaps this, too, is a myth of my own making. Ethnic and linguistic divisions, movement, migration, displacement, these phenomena are inextricably linked to the nation's history - it's birth pangs and growing pains. Urdu itself is a mongrel language of sorts, and the mother tongue of only seven percent of Pakistanis. To acknowledge this is to minimise the dichotomy between native and foreign, to concede a more nuanced explanation for why, for example, a tradition of Anglophone writing has flourished on the subcontinent (and in the diaspora). My foray into Urdu literature is thus a way of connecting to a culture and history that is mine and also not mine, of tempering my almost rabid identification with the English language without disavowing the historical forces - some confluence of colonialism, elitism and internationalism - that gave rise to it in the first place.

Is that why I write? To mitigate, or obliterate, or conquer the 'transcendental homelessness' that George Lukács believed was a form of eternal loneliness, a hopeless condition that manifested artistically as the modern novel? In any case, the motherland has not been the seat of inspiration I hoped it would be, as I've barely made a dent in my target word count. But there is something else; in my rapport with the cousins, in the boundaries I resolved to draw and drew, in my post-post-adolescent acceptance of certain invariables, I might have found a way of relating to the environment that doesn't require constant readjustment. And it's an easy peace. I'm already looking forward to the next trip.

In Zurich now, over Zoom, I resume weekly Urdu lessons with my dad. We began with some humorous heavyweights, Ibn-e-Insha and Patras Bokhari, but have recently turned our attention to Maqbool Jehangir's Dastan-e-Amir Hamza. It's a kids' version of the legendary Persian epic, and recounts at a dizzying pace the titular protagonist's adventures involving fantastical creatures, royal courts, wizards and treasure chests. My dad translates words I don't understand, corrects my pronunciation and explains historical references, and as I plod through the convoluted storylines, I almost feel, for these two hours, like I am in a different time and a different place. It's almost like reclaiming a lost Pakistani childhood.

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