

From the Depth of the Trunk

to the

Spine of the History Book

to the

Memory of Your Dupatta



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Fig. 1 Image of my Khala's photo album, where I first found the photos of Nani.

I wish I could say that I had a more intimate relationship with my Nani, but like many children of immigrants, our ties were strained by distance and language. My mother's mother was a relatively quiet person. When I was young, Nani would often come from Pakistan to visit my Ammie and Khala in

Canada. Because her English was limited and my Urdu was poor, I cannot recall any profound conversations between us. To her questions, I remember responding "Muje nehi patha he," meaning, 'I don't know,' a phrase I had mastered in Urdu by about age five. She would giggle in response.

In 2015, at my Khala's home in Toronto, I found images of Nani in an album. It had been damaged when the basement flooded and Khala asked me to repair the album for her. Most of the photos were small, black and white images that were yellowing with age. Many of them had fifty-year-old scotch tape applied directly on to the photos. This album included photos of my grandparents when they were newlyweds and my mother with her siblings when they were children in Karachi, Pakistan.

Photo historian Martha Langford writes that "an album is an oral-photographic performance."¹ She suggests that the photographic album must be activated by an informed reader or interpreter, one who is able to decipher the clues laid out in the photographs and relay them to an audience. In this instance, the interpreter is my mother, my Ammie, who would look at these images and explain her interpretations to me, a keen listener. The information that I know about these images comes from Ammie's knowledge of her parents and her understanding of the lives that they had lived.

As I went through the album from Khala, I came across the images used in this project - of Nani dressed in men's clothing. I asked my parents about them immediately. The images were

not a secret; Ammie and her siblings knew of their existence but what they knew came from information they had pieced together over the years. The relationship they had with their parents was a formal one and they would not have dared to ask them directly about the photos. It was not a child's place to ask about the personal photographs of their parents.

As my grandparents are no longer alive, I can not directly ask why they chose to engage in this act of cross-dressing. What I know about the photos is gathered from my intuition, what I have been told by my Ammie, and my own considerations of the socio-political contexts from when the photos were taken. I have responded to these found photos by creating my own images that attempt to decipher the many clues I read into this performance. I chose to activate this part of the album by adding fiction, re-performance, archival objects, and posthumous dialogue; displaying my position as someone who is outside the performance but embedded in its legacy.

Nani had a difficult youth, receiving only an elementary education. She was a compassionate, and well-mannered individual who kept to herself. Nani's marriage to Nana was her second; she was briefly married to another man, who

quickly asked for a divorce for reasons that remain opaque to me. My Nana was the eldest of his siblings. The family was at one time affluent, but his father had a problem with gambling and lost much of their fortune. Nana often shouldered the responsibility of supporting the family.

Nana and Nani, my grandparents, were married in 1948, in Karachi, one year after the Partition of India and Pakistan. They both came from upper middle-class Bohra Muslim families, a close-knit

community with roots in Gujarat, India. Both families had been living in Karachi for many generations. In the community, and at home, they spoke Gujarati. After Partition, the official language of Pakistan became Urdu but at school they studied in English. My mother told me that with Nani they would speak Gujarati but with Nana they would speak in Urdu or English. Nana wanted his children to seem educated and cosmopolitan, so much so that he insisted they call him "Daddy" and their mother "Mummy," rather than Abbo or Ammie, as was the custom in Urdu and Gujarati.

Some of the images in this project were taken during my grandparents' honeymoon in Quetta, the capital of the province of Balochistan, a mountain region close to the border with Afghanistan. This northern region of Pakistan continues to be a popular vacation spot, because of its cold, lush and mountainous landscape that is seen as exotic by those coming from hotter, desert climates. My grandparents stayed with distant family members

while there. It was likely the first time in their adult lives that they were allowed to be alone together. For many women like Nani, marriage in a patriarchal society can be liberating, as it is the first time they are permitted to be out of their family home and have some autonomy in their own lives.

When I came across these images, I already had a history of working with family albums as part of my art practice. The photos I had worked with prior to this were vernacular images that held migration stories of my own family and those of close community members. I



Fig. 2 Map of the Indian subcontinent with national divisions at the time of Partition (1947) and today.

examined these images from my lens as an artist, photographer, and archivist; locating political meaning in personal family archives, while questioning ideas of belonging, home, and citizenship. These images of Nani, however, were so striking on their own that I immediately knew I had to spend time with them. Yet, I struggled to find ways to activate them that maintained their gentle beauty and carried the weight of what they represented.

The text which accompanies this project is an imagined interview I have written, in which I ask Nani about these photos and her memories of them. I was inspired to take this approach after reading “The Politics of Translation,” by Gayatri Spivak, which considers translation a vital tool in archiving feminist legacies.² I read this text after attending the workshop “Translation/Annotation” by feminist working group EMILIA-AMALIA, of which I am now a member.³ In the workshop, we were encouraged to write about an experience

from the position of our mother or a mother figure of our choosing. I have used this strategy in a few of my works. In the case of *Dear Nani*, it seemed to be the most appropriate way of conveying the oral history that has been shared with me, while also maintaining some of the opacity surrounding these images. In this text component, Nani is giving me the facts, things I have learnt from my mother, but she is also ignoring my questions and refusing to answer me. I choose to pay homage to my family and culture by respecting this distance between generations.



Fig. 3 Photo of Nani and I at a portrait studio in Canada in 1994.

In her text, Spivak laments the need of the third-world subject to translate their writings into English for the sake of the majority, or for gaining access into other feminist spheres. Spivak states, “If you want to make the translated text accessible, try doing it for the woman who wrote it.”⁴ One of the most obvious indications that the text I have written is fictional should be that it is written entirely in English. If I wanted to be more authentic about

my relationship with my grandmother, it would be written with my questions in English and her responses in Urdu. In reality, this text is closer to a conversation between Ammie and I, as that is how she has relayed what she knows about these photos. The performance of this text is revealed towards the end, when I admit, “I wish I had. I wanted to ask you things but I was too shy and I didn’t know how.” In this phrase, I regret the loss of knowledge exchange and intimacy that could have been fostered between Nani and I when she was alive - had it not been for the language, distance, culture and time intersecting to make our relationship a distant one. This project is an attempt, on my part, to foster a relationship with my memories of her.

Children appear in many of the found photographs of Nani. They are in the background, playing or simply looking at Nani and Nana. At times their faces are visible and, at times, they are not. In the image of Nani in the garden, clearly visible are two young girls with long braids who are playing with a paternal figure. They are not looking into the camera, nor do they seem particularly interested in what my Nani and Nana are doing. In other images, we see bodies of children hiding behind pieces of furniture; they are passive bystanders in the gendered performance, watching

curiously. I imagine these children looking at my grandparents, observing what these adults are doing and perhaps wanting to take part themselves.

I see my position in this project akin to the position of these children, as someone who is looking and attempting to make sense of this performance. For this reason, I have created self portraits in which I am re-enacting the poses of the children; often my figure is only partially visible, or out of focus in the background. This is to keep the focus on the original artifacts but to also address my hand in bringing these images to light and unpacking their significance. In some of the self-portraits, I wear a white ribbed tank top, or banyan as it’s called in Urdu. I chose to wear it because it’s something that my father still wears as an undershirt, and I used to wear it as a child before I hit puberty. To me, the banyan represents a state of being in one’s body that is at times masculine, feminine, and childlike.

My Nana was very particular about photography and documenting; insisting that my mother and siblings have their photo taken at a studio every year on their birthday. He had a passion for the arts, although he was never able to pursue them himself. As part of my understanding of the gender dynamic and the relationship between

my grandparents, I believe that it was my Nana's idea for Nani to dress in his clothes. I imagine that Nana would have suggested she take on a masculine appearance, because to see her as a liberated woman who wore pants and suits rather than her usual feminine clothing might seem new and attractive to him. Perhaps this is also a way in which Nana could see Nani as more of an equal. After all, with the dawn of a new country also came changing roles for women and emerging desires for feminine representation.

Judith Halberstam in "Female Masculinity" states, "At the beginning of the twentieth century [...] there was a sense that women could only be powerful and intelligent to the extent that they were like men, and to the extent that a woman showed signs of brilliance, she must be masculine."⁵ This argument was presented in reference to writers such as Gertrude Stein, who in many respects was able to navigate society and her work in such a way that was similar to the privileges a man of that time would have.⁶ Some might believe that it was the way that Stein conducted herself in the presence of men that enabled her to be taken seriously, to be part of conversations that women would not have been included in. Looking at these Western feminist strategies, I wonder if Nani's masculine

dress opened a similar space of equality and possibility in my grandparents' relationship.

These images of my grandparents were taken before the increase in religious conservatism that was implemented in the 1970s under General Zia, who brought in Sharia Law and rules of Islam into the judicial system, as well as, values of piousness, modesty, and limited rights for women.⁷ Pakistan in 1947 was founded on a secular legal system that was inherited from the British. When the nation was formed, people were eager for new freedoms and opportunities based on the ones they had been promised by their colonizers, such as women's rights to vote and equal place in society. It was a hopeful time, in which the potential for a new nation was boundless.

When considering where my Nani and Nana might have gotten the idea for gender play, I immediately thought of Bollywood cinema in the 1940s and 50s. I know that my grandparents were avid cinema goers in their youth. I heard stories of my mother sneaking off to the theatre with her Dadi, my Nana's mother, then running into Nana himself alone at the cinema. Through my research, I have noticed that a few Bollywood actresses of the time, engaged in gender play. Actresses, such as Fearless Nadia, would



Fig. 4 Film still from Bollywood film *Baghdad Ka Jadoo* (1956) featuring actress Fearless Nadia on the right side.

appear as the heroine while taking on more masculine activities such as fighting and horse-riding.⁸ In the film *Baghdad ka Jadoo* (1956) she even dresses up as a man to woo a princess and fool the king.⁹

Filmmakers during the partition era looked at figures from pre-colonization to inspire the public towards supporting the independence movement. One of these figures is known as the virangana. Rosie Thomas explains that the virangana is a "woman who manifests the qualities of virya or heroism" which is a character in Indian folklore dating back to the Mughal period.¹⁰ One of the four defining qualities of the virangana is that she

crossdresses.¹¹ Kathryn Hansen aptly summarizes, "The virangana constitutes an alternative paradigm of womanhood, repeatedly surfacing to challenge the patriarchal premises of north Indian society and assert the female potential for power as well as virtue."¹² These figures became prevalent in popular culture of the 1940s once again, to remind the public that everyone had a role to play in the movement towards independence. Importantly, these films employed techniques of "mimicry we associate with sites of anticolonial struggle" while also captivating the memory and nostalgia of Indian audiences.¹³ I believe that the audience would have seen this kind of

role-playing in cinema and been inspired to embody these performances in their daily lives.

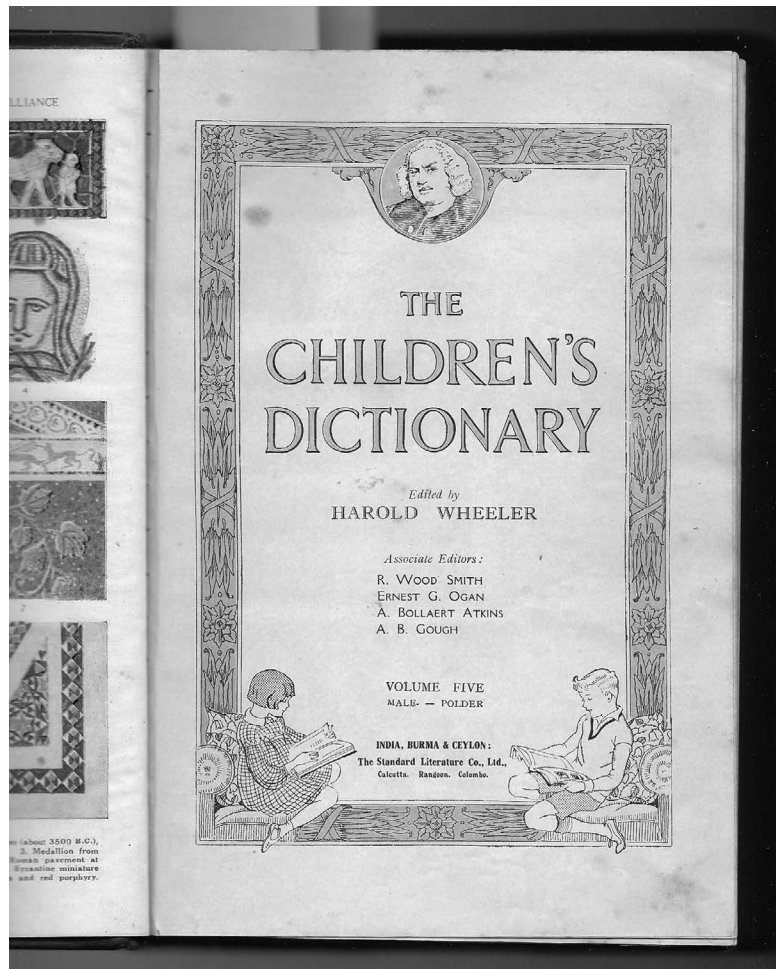


Fig. 5 Inside cover of my family's copy of *The Children's Dictionary*, edited by Harold Wheeler.

When I look at these images of my grandmother, it is clear to me that Nani's performance is not just about gender

but also about representing ideals of modernity. After being educated under the British system, the modern ideals shown to my Nani and Nana would have been modeled after the colonizer, in the image of a British man. In this process of reenactment, my Nani's performance is emphasizing this idea of mimicry or double theatricality. She is not only performing the role of a man but she is performing the role of an Indian man, who is performing the role of a British man, or a subject who is mimicking their ruler. Nani is pushing up against the patriarchal society while being embedded in it.

Another apparent symbol that leads me to consider the duality of Nani's performance is *The Children's Dictionary* that she is holding in one of the photographs. It is from a set of illustrated dictionaries that were gifted to my Nana by a school

teacher, and were beloved by the whole family. This set of dictionaries, called *The Children's Dictionary*, were produced by the Standard Literature Company Ltd., a British publisher who printed in India, Burma and Ceylon.¹⁴ I have included in this project some spreads from these books, which by today's standards would be considered racially insensitive. For example the illustration "The Gifts of Other Countries to the English Language" shows racialized people from all over the world happily offering gifts to two British children.¹⁵ This image perpetuates the narrative that colonies were happily contributing to the British Empire with their resources to feed a new generation of British children. Similarly, the illustration under the definition of "Occident" shows "A Chinese superintendent of police in Occidentalized dress."¹⁶ The rigid posture of this Chinese superintendent is eerily similar to the stiff poses that Nani was emulating in her own performances, which leads me to question who it is that Nani is attempting to mimic.

In his essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," Homi K. Bhabha discusses the British empire's plight to create mimicked states throughout all its colonies.¹⁷ As the British realized they were outnumbered in a region as vast as India, they chose

to create a class of interpreters. In other words, they created "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."¹⁸ British education became the highest standard of teaching in the Indian subcontinent and, with it, English became the language of academia and citizenship.

The Partition of India came with desires for self-representation and self-governance but the style of governance was inherited from the British. Both Indian and Pakistani political leaders, such as Gandhi and Jinnah, wanted freedom from the colonial powers, however, they were also trained in British schools. The men of this class continued to hope for a new country that valued their own traditions and customs though British in order, infrastructure and principles. My own family fit into this class of people who were educated in this way and these priorities have continued through the generations.

I began this project from a place of intuition and activated it through what I learnt from my mother's memories and history. The theoretical references that I have included in this long-form text came after the visual component of the project was largely completed. The need for this critical text, and for it to be written from

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my position as artist, maker, and archivist, comes from a sense of protection I feel in presenting these images to the public. When I first started working with these images, I was worried that they would be read from an Islamophobic and Orientalist lens; that the viewers would see a suppressed Muslim woman acting out against the values of an oppressive state. I knew in my gut that what was occurring here was much more nuanced and that it needed to be disrupted.

From my perspective as a maker working in the West, I see these images as complicating what we expect historical images of South Asian women to look like and depict. From my perspective as a daughter and granddaughter, I see evidence of a young couple at the height of their love for one another. There are socio-political layers beneath this act of performance but alongside them run currents of romance, youth, liberation, and the hidden lives of our elders, which children do not often have the opportunity to witness first hand. Through these images I can interact with a version of Nani that I did not have access to in my life.

As I write about this work I realize it will never be fully complete; all of the pieces overlap and intersect, yet often lead to new questions rather than

answers. Ultimately I will never know precisely what led to this act of gender play and to give agency to the legacy of my grandmother I believe this work must maintain an aspect of opacity. I have fought to keep the gaps alive and maintain that not all aspects of our histories and relationships are meant to be uncovered. I see my role in this project not as an excavationist, but as a maker who lays out the clues at hand, makes interpretations, and keeps space to appreciate what is now gone.

ENDNOTES

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- 16 Ibid.
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FIGURES

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

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ESSAY

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