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Anxieties of Memory: Caste and the Ashraafiya in Iqbaal Majeed's *Namak*[1]

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Of the many changes that came to pass in Colonial North India as a result of failure of the Revolt of 1857, one with particular importance and far-reaching significance was the radical transformation in ideas of respectability and nobility. Having participated in the revolt, the Mughals, and by extension the Muslims, were left particularly vulnerable. As Khoja-Moolji has noted, dispossessed of power, and targeted by the existing regime, Muslim intelligentsia realised that for them, the one way to ensure their survival and betterment was to fit into the new social, administrative, and judicial order that was introduced by the British (24). This resulted in a process that initiated the alignment of Muslim intellectual and social life with British norms of acceptability and propriety under the leadership of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817–98). Having lost political and cultural currency in wake of the failure of the revolt, Sir Syed advocated that the only way for Indian Muslims to gain political and cultural legitimacy again and fulfil their social aspirations was to posit themselves as a people who would be perceived as loyal to the British establishment and thereby obtaining and channelizing power from modes of education and administration established by the Britons (Mujahid 4)

This resulted in the formation of a class of western educated, English speaking and upwardly mobile individuals who answered his call and laid great emphasis on conforming to British ideas of respectability and social order (Lelyveld 122–23). This paper shall explore the far reaching and still lingering effects of these changes on questions of gender, social

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imaginaries of acceptable womanhood, and the resultant complexity of dynamics and intersections between respectability and *sharafat*, by looking at portrayal of the character Zohra, a former *tawaif* (courtesan), in Iqbal Majeed's novel *Namak*[2] (1998). The primary thrust of the argument would be to exhibit how discourses about the *tawaif* shifted substantially owing to oriental sociology in British India, and how these changes are echoed in the treatment meted out to Zohra by her son and grandson. Any historical associations with the *tawaif* have been shown to be shunned and obliterated from public memory by Zohra's son and grandson, in order to forge and consolidate an *ashraaf* position for themselves and their family in Independent India, through the creation of a narrative identity. The paper will also explore the issue of caste among Indian Muslims through a discussion on the history of construction of *ashraaf-ajlaaf-arzaal*[3] divide among South Asian Muslims. Thus, through an exploration of the intersection between caste, sexuality, and narrative identity, we shall reach a comprehensive understanding of how Majeed's book allows readers to probe the long reaching implications of discursive formulations of colonial sexualities that were inherently biased and lopsided in their approach to Indian cultural and social milieu.

Consolidating Caste Identity

Published in 1998, Iqbal Majeed's *Namak* a narrative of the unfolding of Zohra's life and its eventual obfuscation and termination through the eyes of her maternal grand-daughter Simsim. For most part of the novel, Zohra's is confined to room number one of *Darul Istikbar*, which is an ancestral home to many generations of the family. Zohra is ninety-two and Simsim, a journalism student, tries to know about the history of her family for a college project by engaging in multiple conversations with Zohra throughout the length of the novel. Thus, major sections of the work evolve for the reader as reminiscences narrated to Simsim by Zohra. Significant sections of the book also transpire as conversations between Simsim and Istam (Zohra's paternal grand-daughter, who lives in *Darul Istikbar* as well). In the opening pages, we are presented with the process that led to Zohra being confined to room number one;

[2] Namak translates as salt. In the context of this text, it signifies essence, soul, and substance. It can also be taken to mean beauty, youth, and vitality.
[3] In Urdu, *ashraaf* (singular *sharif*) refers to the land owning, educated and noble classes. *Ajlaaf* are the middling classes consisting of artisans and professionals like carpenters, cloth makers etc. Lastly, the *arzaal* are a class of people involved in menial labour like cleaning, disposing of the dead, tanning etc.

Zohra Khanum is ninety-two; when she was sixty, and, had spread her fame far and wide, her grandson cleared the civil services examination, and in order to preserve the name and dignity of the family, and wipe her off of public memory, confined her to room number one of Darul Istikbar. She has lived there for the past thirty-two years.[4] (16)

And, as Istam says;

Zohra Khanum, alias Mehboob Jaan of Atraulia, is my grandmother. I cannot feed this into my computer's memory. Because soon after independence, my father exhausted all efforts and successfully became a part of a few bourgeois circles, and successfully secured the managing directorship of a trading firm for himself. Soon, he cast off his old boots, bought himself a new lot from the marketplace, and declared himself and the family a part of the *ashraafiya*. (17)

The interplay between memory, *ashraaf* identity, and Zohra's past as a courtesan with ties to feudal Awadh culture is worth noting here. The male members of her family are keen on protecting their good name, and privileged social position as *ashraaf*, from being sullied by obliterating any associations with a *tawaif*. Significantly, it is not mere acquisition of wealth and money that allows one to be perceived as a part of the *ashraaf*, certain prerequisites like social acceptability and sanction also have to do with the perception. It is this peculiar trait of caste within Indian Muslims that allows one to switch from the lower *ajlaaf* or *arzaal* categories to the higher *ashraaf*. As Pervaiz Nazir notes, there is an important distinction between caste and its concomitant practices in Hindu and Muslim societies. These can be understood through two distinct terms, caste system and caste label. The former is 'a local and hierarchically ordered corporate group' that advocates and strictly enforces 'social division of labour, professional specialization, and recruitment by birth', while the latter 'refers to non-local, non-corporate groups that provides a ranking hierarchy but does not specify professional specialisation, unequal dependence, and recruitment by birth only' (2898). Nazir emphasises that in South Asian Muslim societies, while something resembling the Hindu caste system has been practised, the boundaries between the *ashraaf-ajlaaf-arzaal* groups are not as strict as they are between the *Brahmin-Kshatriya-Vaishya-Shoodra* groups in Hindu caste structures. Mines notes something similar. He claims that within the *ashraaf* too there are further classifications that indicate superiority, with groups claiming distinction and ascendancy based on their proximity to the Prophet's genealogy. Thus, Saiyyeds claim to be foremost among the *ashraaf*, followed by Sheikhs, Mughals, Pathaans and finally upper caste Hindu

[4] All translations, unless otherwise specified, are mine.

converts (335). The respective caste positions are ascertained in the act of command, i.e., those who can command ritual and economic services are higher than the ones who offer those services. However, both note that these distinctions are not watertight and that caste in Muslims is an aspirational category rather than a monolithic one, and therefore there is a distinct possibility for people to actually 'switch' from one caste position to another. Nazir quotes a famous saying among Muslims of Punjab, 'The first year I was a butcher, the next I was a Sheikh; this year if prices fall, I shall become a Saiyed'[5] (Blunt, Qtd in Nazir, 2900). Mines also notes that these practices tend to be more prevalent in northern India as compared to southern India (342, 347).

Zohra's confinement to room number one of *Darul Istikbar* and its relation with the family moving up the caste ladder to claim an *ashraaf* position becomes evident and plain in the context of the preceding discussion. While Zohra was once a renowned courtesan and had Nawabs visit her, in independent India, her presence has become a marker of humiliation and ignominy for the present generation of males in the family. Lindhol indicates the presence of such practices in many South Asian Muslim communities. He observes that these wide spectra of distinctions based on social position might be a remnant of initial days of Islamic expansion when a careful and studied differentiation was made between Arabs and Non-Arabs, again based on proximity with to Prophet. He cites the example of Swat Pathans living in the mountains of northern Pakistan, who too indulge in caste-like practices. While there is no scriptural sanction for such behaviour within Islamic doctrines, this behaviour is rationalised through the ascription of shame, uncleanliness, and sexual depravity to people and groups lower down in the social ladder (134, 137). It is, hence, the possibility of being found out to be descendant of a *tawaif* and resultant shame owing to connotations of sexual (and therefore moral) depravity and lacking purity, which results in Zohra confinement. As Ali notes that there is a conscious effort to alter their ethnic identity through what Weber calls segmented assimilation. These identities are situational and contingent, and are 'produced at particular interactional economic and political circumstances' (Ali 599). To claim participation in these identity groups, one not only seeks to make others

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[5] Butchers traditionally fall in the *arzaal* group, the ones at the bottom of social hierarchy. Sheikh's belong to the higher group of *ashraaf* who engage in trade and hold positions of local authority. The Saiyed's are considered to be the topmost among the *ashraaf* group (and hence the highest among all groups) because they are thought to be the direct descendants of the Prophet. The quote here highlights the possibility of fluid movement between various caste positions among Indian Muslims.

perceive the self in a particular fashion, but also modifies one's own exploits to suit the established norms of admissible conduct in those particular coteries. In urban India, Ali notes, these markers increasingly take form of employment and educational attainments (611).

We can now, based on the preceding discussion, begin to unpack deliberate constructions of favourable and socially valuable identities in *Namak*. Zohra, as a former courtesan, brings shame with her 'morally degenerate' selfhood, which is seen to be at odds with the newly found wealth and social prestige that comes with being highly placed government officials and businessmen. There is, therefore, the resultant need to eliminate any past associations that would cause 'shamefulness' to be ascribed to such an upwardly mobile family. Hence, Zohra is confined, and there is an attempt to annihilate her memory from public domain. Two strains of argument, then, acquire importance here. The first is the discourses grounded in legal and medical sciences that led to the *tawaif* becoming an ignoble character. Secondly, the narrative construction of self-identity by supplanting public memory with new images and symbols that elicit respectability.

Courtesan, Reform, and Colonial Sexualities

In recent scholarship, much has been written about the discursive construction of sexuality in Brtitish India and its relation with *tawaifs*. Important examples of literary works that represent indigenous attitudes to the *tawaif* in colonial India are Deputy Nazeer Ahmed's *Fasana-e-Mubtala* (1885) and Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jaan Ada* (1899) in Urdu, Sharatchandra's *Charatitraheen* (1913) in Bangla, and Premchand's *Sevasadan* (1919) in Hindi.[6] Oldenburg and Sengupta have highlighted the tendency in British administration to pin blame on the depraved 'Nautch Girls' and prostitutes for the exponential rise of venereal diseases among British soldiers. It was observed by the British that in the 1857 mutiny, many of their soldiers died not because of injury and wounds sustained during battle conditions, but because of contracting diseases of the genitalia, and the *tawaifs* were considered to be the source of this pollution of the body, a signifier of their inherent impurity and depravity.

This was radically different from the privileged positions enjoyed by the *tawaifs* among the Mughals, Nawabi elite, and noble culture. Originally, the *tawaifs* sustained the morals, manners and distinctiveness

[6] It is noteworthy that *Sevasadan* was intended to be first published as *Bazar-e-Husn* in Urdu by Premchand. Owing to his inability to find a publisher it was published in Hindi first. *Bazar-e-Husn* was published in 1924.

of high culture, provided patronage to classical musicians and dance tutors, and were versed in those art forms themselves. Additionally, they were highly literate and were frequently poets and/or connoisseurs of high Urdu and Persian literature. Their establishments were visited by the political and business elite. Oldenburg notes that following the usurpation of the kingdom of Awadh 1856 and the subsequent end of Mughal rule in 1857, traditional patronage for the *tawaifs* ended. Additionally, they were also at the receiving end of the wrath of British administration for having aided the mutiny and supporting the Nawabs (263–265).

Their participation in the mutiny, and the spread of diseases among British soldiers, were together employed by the British to mount a restrictive and regimental control on the bodies of these women. This resulted in the enactment of the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 (later repealed in 1888) which required periodic medical examination of their bodies by the local British medical establishment.[7]

Philippa Levine, borrowing from Gauri Vishwanathan, makes the vital observation that such stern and uncompromising categorisation and control of the *tawaifs* body resulted from the colonisers need to understand the colonial milieu and its subjects from within the framework of classifications that already existed within their ambit of knowledge. This selective and incomplete information was delivered and used as 'objective knowledge'. The 'manufacturers' of colonial knowledge found it difficult to define and ascertain what would count as prostitution and which acts could thus fall in this rubric (5–6). Levine insists that in the popular British imagination, no significant difference existed between a common prostitute and a *tawaif*. They were both sex workers and 'the general social acceptance accorded to the prostitute *caste* was emblematic of oriental degeneration' (11, my italics). Significantly, Levine also quotes the Divisional Commissioner of Kumuon in the North West Provinces who claimed that 'the class of women who in India resort to prostitution…is mainly composed of persons of the *caste* of "Paturya" or prostitute' (12, my italics). Sara Waheed alludes to similar facts in her work on literary representations of *tawaifs* in late 19th and early 20th centuries. In her discussion on formulations of ideal and deviant womanhood in colonial India, she claims that during the latter half of the 19th century little distinction was made by the British between prostitutes and dancing girls, however, by the early decades of the 20th century there was a tendency to acknowledge a difference, owing to numerous reform

[7] Ironically enough, these medical examinations were put into place to ensure that no more diseases spread when these very women were subsequently supplied to British Garrisons as prostitutes for soldiers. Sengupta (131–132)

movements, between the common prostitute and the upper-class dancing women. Though, importantly, the actual '*caste* of such women' was to be decided by elite men in local bodies of authority (1008, my italics).

The above discussion brings two noteworthy strands of ideas into sharp relief. First, that courtesans and prostitutes began to be looked at as members of a particular caste, and second, that this caste occupied the lower rungs of society and was thus to be looked down upon. As has been made amply clear, colonial ethnosociology contributed to this articulation, and the upwardly mobile new *ashraaf* social groups that rose to prominence after Mughal and Nawabi nobility faded in wake of the failure of the revolt, increasingly subscribed to British notions of acceptability and prestige[8]. These new a*shraaf* groups consisted of scholars, educators, businessmen, and land-owning gentry. Additionally, norms of *Sharafat* changed too. One's distinctiveness no longer came from being a part of the aristocracy, but by being a hard-working, educated, pious, and self-disciplined individual who could keep his affairs in order and attain marital blissfulness.[9] One could argue that the British rule in India made the subjects emulate and reproduce the Protestant work-ethic. While a new *ashraaf* group was born, the basic premise of being *ashsaaf* underwent changes too.[10]

Zohra, being a former *tawaif*, becomes for the male members of her family the cause of a peculiar predicament. As we have seen, conceptual distinctions between *tawaifs* and common prostitutes were done away with, and the two were clubbed together. Moreover, there is evidence that these women were thought of as constituting a particular caste and were thus assigned subordinate positions in social hierarchy because of the polluted and defiled nature of their work. This, along with the fact that caste-like practices are prevalent among South Asian Muslims and that new formulations of *ashraaf* identity post 1857 effectively looked down upon female sexuality as polluting and in need of being controlled, allows us to establish links between Zohra's past and the pressing need to remove it from public memory. It becomes imperative for people as *shareef* as the two men in question here (a businessman and a civil servant) to project a sanitised image of the self and, therefore, manufacture a past that fits

[8] A number of scholars of colonial South Asian history have argued along similar lines in their assessments of late 19th and early 20th century British India. Minault (1998), Chatterjee (1998), and Pernau (2013), have all drawn attention towards the loss of power in the public sphere of erstwhile nobility in North India, and a gradual turn of focus towards the domestic sphere as a site where new *Sharaafat*, or good breeding, could be performed.
[9] See Deputy Nazeer Ahmed's *Miraat-Ul-Uroos* (1869).
[10] See Gail Minault *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (1998) for changing notions of "*sharif*"

neatly with their present narrative construction of self-identity. In the novel, this is done by supplanting Zohra's lived history and its memories (which are presented to the reader as memories narrated to Simsim) with fabricated versions of *sharif* lineage in order foreground a favourable image in the public sphere.

Memory, Forgetting, and Narration

Zohra's life emerges in moments of recollection, narrated to her granddaughters. Equally crucial is the fact that in the process of narrating her history, Zohra's becomes a narrative herself. Her experiences as a young courtesan Mehboob Jaan, the tussles with her husband, her heyday and eventual decline ending in confinement are abstracted and take up the nature of commodities to be recorded, preserved, and dissected. Simsim says;

> I need the story of Room One, *Darul Istikbar*. I need to know about Zohra Khanum, alias Mehboob Jaan, who reached fruition not behind drawn veils, but who blossomed in nightly *Mehfils*. I need that story of dazzling success and tragic fall which is today called 'success syndrome' among the socialites. (36)

Upon the exhortations of her journalism professor, Simsim realises the need to foreground knowledge about her grandmother in historical and cultural relationalities. Zohra's lived experience, then, becomes an artefact from the past that should be looked at not as something objective, signifying a static set of meanings, but rather as a constantly shifting and volatile agglomerate that can be taken to mean different things depending on where the viewer looks at it from. Stories, memories, and narratives thus acquire the nature of artefacts and culture can be read through them. In *Namak*, Majeed states;

> One day, a greying professor walked into Simsim's journalism class and on the black board wrote 'knowledge or morality outside culture is a fantastic product of imagination'. (46)

Zohra gradually comes to be understood as not a human being, but a site where intergenerational memory manifests itself. Simsim's descriptions of Zohra make her seem an intellectual curiosity more than anything else. This is also conveyed in Simsim's descriptions of her as a lost document finally retrieved and opened for reading and interpretation. This is the outlook that her professor has encouraged her to adopt. Majeed notes;

> The professor had urged her to 'recreate' her grandmother. He had mentioned that all stories are unique in their own way, embedded with their own logic and prejudices. For him, this is

> how media and communication students understood how to unpack and decipher their own identities. (73)

And;

> When Simsim had left Zohra sleeping and returned to her bed, she was reminded of how her professor had suddenly displayed great curiosity in her grandmother. He had mentioned to Simsim that Zohra was beginning to acquire a significant *textual* identity. And therefore, as a pupil fears the loss of a rare book, in the same vein, Simsim rushed out of bed at the crack of dawn and peeped in room number one to know if her grandmother was alive. She was. (106–7, my italics).

In the light of this discussion, later developments in the novel acquire renewed significance. Zohra's identity is a repository of meaning and it then becomes important to control the meanings that can be extracted out of her. It is therefore important to remove the Zohra that we come to know through Zohra's own recollections, and replace her with a lifeless, monolithic signifier that would project an acceptable and unblemished image of family history which would be acceptable by the society at large and also help the family to sustain the narrative of their *ashraaf* identity. The real Zohra that Simsim and Istam talk to and who talks back in order to facilitate contributions to her narrative identity, is simply eliminated. In her stead is placed a portrait of Zohra in the outside hall, dressed as a noble *ashraaf* woman, complete with rosary and books. Her son then manufactures a narrative about her being a social reformer, no longer alive. Majeed writes;

[S]imsim told Zohra Khanum that a sham portrait of her now adorned walls of the drawing room. In the portrait, she holds a book and a rosary. She also holds in her hand a message against the Purdah system which she sent to All India Women's Conference. The message too had been inscribed in a plaque and placed on the wall. (146)

Zohra's son seeks a unified narrative identity, and therefore, the past must be carefully recalibrated and reconstituted for there to be a continuity in his narrative conception of himself and to bolster his social standing. Douglas Ezzy, drawing on George Herbert Meade and Paul Ricoeur's work, opines in his essay on narrative identity that an individual constitutes himself through narrative, and is resultantly a self-narrating organism. In order for these narrations to stand true, it is important for individuals to remove any aberrations that would lead to their narrations being discredited, and thereby emerges the need to maintain what Ricoeur calls 'concordance' between the past, present and future. Ricoeur defines concordance as a form of self-sameness that temporally unifies identity (242). Ezzy notes that pasts are empirical not because their veracity can

be objectively confirmed, but because their truth claim secures a position in social memory and therefore affects material relations. He states;

> The criterion that people use to assess the truth value of a statement is its consequences for current conduct. Fiction is empirical because it can affect current actions. The difference between history and fiction is thus more complex than the simple assertion that history is empirically grounded and fiction is not… history is quasi-fictional and fiction is quasi-historical. (243)

What Ezzy states about the complex dynamics between the past and present is reflected faithfully in Zohra's past(s). While the lived past is obscured, an invented past is used to supplant it, which allows the family to establish upper caste identity. Zohra's self, presented in the portrait becomes a signifier which points to meanings that need to be read in favourable ways by society. The aim is not to annihilate the past, but merely to fashion it for suitable ends. Narratives, once generated, seek conclusion (Ritivoi 29). Zohra's lie is summed up in a portrait on the wall as it lends itself to favourable 'reading', and allows the family to synthetically align the past with the present. Fiction about Zohra becomes 'real', while the 'real' Zohra remains hidden.

It is vital to note here the role of forgetfulness in memory studies. Thane emphasises that all memories are selective and thus intertwined with them, inevitably, is amnesia. Memory of one recorded account is also silence of another unrecorded one. Additionally, the fissures in public memory and the gendered separation of memory that has been identified to systemically ail historical accounts too are of importance. Sociologists have noted that accounts of family history and the consequent public memory tend to be dictated by fabricated versions of a narrative; and therefore, the silence of women in documented history gave rise to the need of engaging in oral history. Indeed, Simsim's entire project with Zohra is an attempt at capturing alternative versions of history though oral media. The portrait that unifies present narratives with the past, serves a site of memory by exhibiting favourable traits in family history to public at large. In the words of Luczewski et al, such sites of memory (re)constitute the public sphere by investing it with socially relevant meaning (340).

Projected through a manufactured image, Zohra in turn manufactures a desirable identity and in the process the reader witnesses the erosion of the real Zohra. This back and forth between what is real and what merely the perceived reality is one hinge on which Majeed's project rests; while the real is annihilated the unreal is invested with qualities of reality and the imagined past projected through this narrative construction comes to be universally accepted. Thus, in doing this, Majeed's work allows the

reader to complicate notions of objective reality and its relationship with memory. Since intergenerational social position depends on preservation of concomitant intergenerational memory, any change in those structures of memory (personal and social) results in corresponding alterations of social memory linked to a particular family or group. Not only this, but it should also be noted that as public and private spheres are gendered, so are public and private memories. Majeed presents this stark contrast with great acumen where public memory is controlled and designed by the males of the household, and personal memories are depicted to be the preserve of the women in the book. The divisions of public and private memory are also divisions of public and private spaces. Therefore, while public memory is imposed in the form of a larger-than-life painting that is immutable, personal memory in the novella unfolds as not a monolithic whole but in the form of oral history between Zohra, Simsim and Istam. Public memory remains the prerogative of the males while private and internal memories are neglected and remain unnoticed and this gendered separation of memory was the reason for the development of oral history studies.

Conclusion

Though the work ends with Zohra's death, it does not bear the tone of permanent loss of preserved memory. On the one hand, Majeed has made the reader aware that Zohra's memories though overshadowed for now, aren't lost or eradicated, but are rather safe is Simsim's project and in Istam's laptop. The fact that the memory is preserved not in a notebook but rather in a laptop is significant as is suggests preserving memory for the coming generation of educated and capable women who anyway have to bear the brunt of being treated as texts. While Simsim fears that Abu Bakr, her beloved, too treats her like a text, she is also at the same time harassed by her professors. Majeed suggests that the outside world continues to be hostile to extrovert women and it is in their collective memory and shared lived experience that they must look for solidarity. This is where the text takes its title form. Namak (salt) is used figuratively by Zohra to mean one's essence, substance and individuality. Towards the end too, Zohra claims of her namak being lost. She says, 'My child, Zohra has no namak left with her now. What little she does have isn't for flavour but to sprinkle on her wounds' (172). Abu Bakr mentioned how he is able to read Simsim. Majeed writes;

Abu Bakr had mentioned how he was coming to see her increasingly like a book, the lines on the back cover of which present a semblance of reading the essence of the inner contents. She had been taken by surprise. She hadn't expected this from Abu Bakr. And then, the thought that occurred to her made her all the more restless. Was she too, then, coming

to resemble a text for Abu Bakr, as Zohra had been for her? Is she, then, no more than a text? (140)

Simsim's dilemma is echoed in Istam's troubled relation with her beloved owing to which she ends up adopting a baby girl and trying to find solace and contentment in her relationship with the child. The idea is that women in the text constitute a solidarity which is put in place to resist outside influences of the masculine world. Lastly, the writer, through Simsim, presents the possibility that there might be not just one but numerous Zohra's and though one of them is unfortunately dead, there are umpteen stories that need to be gathered, documented, and preserved (170).

Zohra's story, though unique, becomes a prototype of memory, forced forgetting, and subversive remembrance. It acts as a catalyst and allows women in the text to imaginatively construct a world of their own that would resist outside influences and defy odds of obliteration. However, this remembrance is not without its pitfalls. The ability to record and remember endowed to Simsim and Istam is a function of their social position which is derived from the education that such position makes possible, and as has been explained previously, these are endowments granted to these women by their *ashraaf* identity. Zohra's confinement and Simsim's and Istam's engagement with the modern world are made possible by the same set of ideological underpinnings, which allow only a narrow spectrum of acceptable feminities to be a part of the outside world at the exclusion of many others. This is also reflected in the way memory is preserved and articulated. Zohra's ideas a quickly translated into English and Simsim's professor frequently employs theoretical jargon far removed from the world Zohra has inhabited her entire life. Additionally, Zohra's memories themselves are elicited because Simsim's male professor takes a keen interest in her and wants Simsim to undertake a project that would narrativise Zohra. Therefore, while the writer makes important observations about the possibility of altering and preserving memory to suit favourable ends, both memories about Zohra (the painting and the life narrative) come to be ultimately controlled by men and cause a loss of their essence, their namak. In her death, Zohra is trapped between falsehoods and mechanical theoretical knowledge about herself, with the dim possibility of her story ever gaining the attention and recognition it deserves.

Julie Kirsch proposes in her works on memory what she calls an ethics of memory in order to effectively guide and control our interpretations of our own pasts. She claims that all interpretations need to contend with facts and thus prove their truth value (99–100). In Zohra's context this can be exceedingly difficult to do as both her representations

in public space stand in stark contrast to he lived objective history and has a greater truth claim compared to the latter. Commenting on ethics of forgetting, Kirsch also claims that there can be concrete and morally justified reasons to forget just as there can be reasons to remember, as forgetting can reduce personal and collective suffering (106–7).

Zohra's memories remain preserved but at the intersection of the axes of caste, respectability and *sharif* identity, and it seems therefore reasonable that it will not have the ability to alter social worldview at large about herself or her family. In her death she becomes solidified into a creature of false nobility and generosity of spirit, with mere memories about her preserved in a laptop and a project report. The writer thus fails to generate an understanding as to how memories that form a large part of the narrative can embody a subversive and counter hegemonic influence, leaving a vacuum at the centre. It suggests that memory itself as an interpretative category remains powerless as long as there is no thrust to propagate it and allow it wider acceptability.

In *Namak*, Zohra's image is cleansed through fabricated history and a process of forgetting. There is only a bleak hope to be found in the fact that her life story has been recorded by non-partisan agents and it might be transferred to the coming generations. The novella does present a semblance of defiance in Zohra's character as she refuses to willingly cauterise her past, but towards the end, and with the death of Zohra, that too stands compromised. Majeed makes the reader view Zohra's inability to present her life to the public eye, while at the same time making the attempt to preserve it.

We thus see that the three axes of memory, caste and sexuality intersect in Majeed's work to present the lingering effects of colonial laws and wide-ranging social changes that began in the latter half of the twentieth century. While there is the anxiety on the part of the new *ashraaf* to create an acceptable past, the counter side of the argument makes the reader see that such cleansing also contributes to annihilation of living testaments of history. Zohra, in her death, stands unintentionally redeemed of her sordid past while the portrait cements her and her family's upper caste and upper-class social position.

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