

## Queer Futures | Workshop Report

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What does it mean to be queer in Pakistan? What possibilities and spaces exist for non-normative expression? Must a history of queer existence be traced or is queer presence in the now testament enough? What discontents, if any, surround the term queer in Pakistan and is there a need to develop locally-conversant vocabularies of queerness? How important is the role of language and location in speaking to queer discourse elsewhere? How must we imagine our place in time or what shapes can queer futures take in Pakistan?

These were some among many questions brought up at *Queer Futures*, a three-day workshop, which centered around themes of aesthetics, politics and sexualities. It was jointly organised by Dr. Nida Kirmani, Associate Professor of Sociology at LUMS, and Dr. Omar Kasmani, Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Social and Cultural Anthropology at Freie Universität, Berlin as part of the Saida Waheed Gender Initiative at LUMS from 14-16 March 2019. More than 25 participants presented their work including academics, activists, artists, writers and students.

To ensure a diversity of perspectives, the workshop drew upon a number of formats including academic talks, artist dialogues, literary readings, a round table discussion and a film screening. The aim was to create a space for cross-cutting conversations while efforts were also made to ensure a queer-affirmative environment for learning, sharing and critical inquiry.



In a time when significant legal progress is being witnessed in Pakistan, an event like *Queer Futures* was but inevitable: In recent years, three additional gender categories have been introduced into the national data-base; the *Transgender Protection of Rights Bill* was approved by the parliament in 2018; a vibrant scene of trans activism is in place and public feminist initiatives have been gaining new salience, especially through a more confident and inclusive [Aurat March](#). Such achievements, though remarkable, cannot relieve us of our duties and aspirations towards imagining a better and more equal future. The workshop acknowledged that while conditions for queers in Pakistan remain restrictive and their everyday lives are often marked by a great degree of precarity and vulnerability, it was crucial to undertake a discussion on queer concerns in a public setting. In this regard, the daring efforts of the participants constitute a significant milestone for queer visibility in the country.

The workshop commenced with an opening keynote by Dr. Anjali Arondekar, Associate Professor of Feminist Studies at UC Santa Cruz. Fitting to the theme of futures, she pointed how history, though considered an unparalleled treasure of narratives, should also be divulged into critically. As a scholar of histories of sexualities in South Asia, she highlighted that the gaps present in these histories were numerous and had been filled from archives of slavery, colonialism and nationalism — almost always presented in a language of lament and loss. This put queer subjects in a constant hold of precarity even as they stumbled towards legal structures of survival. Legal reformations were needed and advocated for, but they did not entirely redeem queer individuals. She challenged the preoccupation with loss as the structuring mode of narration of histories of sexuality and probed the audience into reverting the lens from loss to abundance. By situating ourselves at loss, we would always stay with it, she asserted. Records for truth have been demanded, and continue to be, even though the paradox of truth in them is evident since they are always contaminated. Yet proof of existence is always demanded from minority communities, who bear the burden of that representation. It was therefore necessary to adopt new modes of thinking through the standpoint of abundance. She provided the framework for reading archives and set the stage for subsequent conversations.



The opening night witnessed a full-house and the mood in the room was palpably festive. Earlier, Nida Kirmani welcomed the participants on behalf of the organizers. Omar Kasmani presented the concept of the workshop, highlighting its cross-cutting interest in ideas of time and longing, language and location. In the not-yet-here of queerness, he stated, Pakistan might be imagined as a theoretical site of future-making. Drawing from Munoz (2009), he pointed out that *Queer Futures* is the name the workshop gives to the transacting ways in which desirous performances be it writing, art, intimacy, religious rituals and political participation among others gesture at temporal ideations; how these transact in the present as forward-dawning illuminations. Following him, Kamran Asdar Ali, the Dean of MGHSS, LUMS – on the day jovially termed *Qutub-e-Queer* or the ‘Patron Saint of Pakistani Queers’ – addressed the gathering. Kamran’s mention of prominent Urdu literary figures Sara Shugufta and Saadat Hasan Manto was a poignant intervention, which helped one connect their negotiation of non-normative identities with others who had contested concretized societal renditions and left their indelible marks in history. It also pointed to workshop’s interest to tackle queer as a broader rubric, which is not limited to identitarian logics. The opening talks emphasized feelings and experiences to imagine and shape the futures of queer individuals.

The second day started with an academic panel entitled *Translating/Transacting (Visualities)*. Naveen Minai (Assistant Professor, IBA) kickstarted the session with a clip from a Bollywood song *Khalli Bhalli (Padmaavat, 2018, dir. Sanjay L. Bhansali)*. Weaving sexuality, historiography, masculinity and popular culture, Naveen highlighted the co-working of queerness and monstrosity through her material. This was followed by Gwendolyn Kirk’s (Assistant Professor, LUMS) discussion on crossing gender and linguistic boundaries in Punjabi films like *Yakkay Wali (1957, dir. M. J. Rana)* and *Aurat Raj (1979, dir. Rangeela)*. Amira Khusro (PhD candidate in Art History,

Cornell University) questioned the existing dimensions of theory in place and pointed to a politics of refusal. Their material exemplified the case of inhabiting multiple inheritances and complex genres.

The succeeding session, *Translating/Transacting (Identities)* continued from the earlier discussion and introduced themes of historical literature and personal identity formation. Ihsan Arslan (Undergraduate student, LUMS) explored the presence of homoeroticism within Islamicate literature in greater South Asia. Perusing different literary texts, he described how these were dotted with tales of desire among men be it Mughal emperor Jahangir's pining for Persian poet Urfi, Khalifa Haroon Rashid's escapades with his friend Jaffer, and numerous accounts from the renowned Sufi poet Amir Khusro. Ihsan, citing Shahab Ahmed, questioned the validity of 'truth' by arguing that every truth statement was in fact an act of meaning making, which was understood from a personal standpoint instead from an external, structural imposition.

Over the course of the workshop, certain themes remained buoyant. For instance, the politics of archives and representation were addressed repeatedly. Mehlab Jameel (anthropologist) evidenced through her research that no one universal meaning could be applied to the experience of gender variance, transgender or transwoman. She employed *hijra* as a local umbrella term for individuals who do not identify with gender binaries. She shed light on the roots, connotations and legal implications of assigning different labels to queer individuals in a context where sexualities were often understood through misrepresented and misread colonial materials. She proposed utilizing existing archives in conjunction with alternate histories, legacies and lives of contemporary queer individuals.

Sara Shroff (PhD candidate, New School for Public Engagement) corroborated Mehlab's work by positing six different categories for queer individuals in Pakistan: intersex, eunuch, transgender man, transgender woman, *khwaja sira* and gender non-binary. She steered the debate towards language and demonstrated the foreignness for the local community when using the term 'trans', which was mainly a legal category in Pakistan. Even if terms might become hackneyed or are replaced over time, the inclusion of *khwaja sira* as a legal category carries significance in that it references complexities of location.

Muhammad Moiz (drag artist and stand-up comedian) shed light on the politics of space and performance in Pakistan. Speaking about his drag persona, *Ms. Pudina Chatni*, Moiz highlighted the politics of gender performance as well as his experiences of performing in Pakistan. According to

him, queer experiences were often marked by vehement criticism, ostracization and harassment in the local landscape. Too often, content had to be sanitized and performance rethought according to local norms.



The future of queer activism was more profoundly discussed in *The Activists' Roundtable* on the final day. This comprised a 7-member panel featuring Mehlab Jamil (anthropologist), Aun Shahid (HOPE Foundation) Khursand Bayar Ali (Saathi Foundation, community activist), Sarah Suhail (scholar and activist), Raza Haider (Sabrung Society and Humraaz), Aqib Ali (faculty, LUMS). This session was one of the most-attended during the three-day program.

Multiple voices engendered multiple debates which revolved around visibility, state attitudes, societal policing of thought and bodies, queer alliance with women's movements, donor agencies and activist outcomes, among others. Sara posited that lesbian women had historically been at the forefront of women's rights movements in Pakistan but refrained from revealing their identities out of fear of reprisal, or forced abdication from their organizational posts. Raza justified the struggle in the present as one that would bear fruit in the future as it would initiate a more tolerant and compassionate future for the next generation.

Aqib drew attention towards the politics of activism and issues of privilege. Activism was also discussed as a luxury, which few could afford. Women's visibility and the marginality of transmen's participation in activist circles was also brought up. Aun added that transmen often found themselves subjected to greater pressure and were coerced into adopting roles and ways of living, they necessarily did not agree to. He recalled accounts of transmen being forcibly wed, and impregnated.

The participants discussed how even the question of visibility was tied to certain politics. Simultaneously, the infancy of the activist movement in Pakistan was also acknowledged. Progress was slow but definitive since alliances with feminist and other movements were emerging. There was also emphasis on merging struggles of marginality. While the contexts may differ for discriminated groups, their grievances and aspirations resonated with one another. Envisioning the next steps, par-

ticipants agreed on different groups to come into contact with one another, to rally support for each other's issues, to learn from another, partake in collective thinking and shared labor so as to yield better futures for all.

Queer struggles take multiple forms, literary expressions being key to them. The workshop also featured a number of literary dialogues, readings, and discussions, where memoirs were read, unsent letters shared, tales of love, aching and loss shared. The literature read was often highly intimate; charged with feeling and emotion. These were reassuringly received, at times with laughter, at other times with a deafening silence. These presentations resonated strongly with those in the room.



*Poetry as Inheritance: Learning from Queer Elders* was conducted as a dialogue between the young queer poet Asad Alvi (Undergraduate student, IBA) and cultural anthropologist Omar Kasmani. The session traced Asad's relationship with language as well as his work's intertextuality with queer Urdu poetry. The session included readings of poems, some of which were his own, such as *Al-Qarea* and *Ghar-e-majaz: A Lyric Essay in Four Parts*. He also read out other works especially those by Iftikhar Nasim (1946-2011). The dialogue revolved around affects of language, its capacity for longing and as well as its power to injure. Complicating binaries of inside/outside, Asad talked of the double act of revealing and concealing through language. Silence, as he emphasized, did not always equate with loss.

Intimacy, loss and longing were center stage in *Queer Memoirs*. Momina Masood (Punjab University), Fazal Rizvi (artist and faculty, Indus Valley School of Art & Architecture), Omar Kasmani (Freie Universität, Berlin) and Madiha Aijaz (late photographer and filmmaker, d. 2018) featured in this session. It commenced with a recorded audio-performance of a short story by Madiha. *Swimming pool at the Rhiwaiti One Night Stand* is a woman's recollection of her last day of swimming



before her marriage and the hopes and fears it evokes. Fazal Rizvi's (artist, faculty IVSAA) performance *Dear Ammi* was conceived as a letter, a poignant account of a son's distance from and longing for his mother, over time. As Fazal read, two dots moved on the screen, first being in unison and then slowly separating from each other, two amoebae initially beating together, then parting. Omar read out *Scenes of Daily Loves* from his auto-theoretical writing on religion, queer affect and public intimacy. Momina's text *Of Dark Rooms and Foreign Languages* pointed to the impossibility of expressing certain experiences, feelings and modes of embodiment in and through language.

In another dialogue between Sanam Maher and Bilal Tanweer, Sanam read out portions of her newly published book, *The Sensational Life & Death of Qandeel Baloch* (2018). She discussed the process of writing Qandeel's story, how she retrieved data from multiple sources, and how she resisted a peculiar curiosity that engulfed the public's desire to uncover the 'truth' of Qandeel's life. The session highlighted the difficulty of reading and writing non-normatively lived lives. As Sanam herself pointed out, it was not her interest to decode Qandeel for people but to let her readers navigate the complexities and contradictions around her public persona.



A highlight of the workshop was the screening of Priya Sen's film *Yeh Freedom Life* (2018). The 70-minute documentary oscillates between two women protagonists Sachi and Parveen in what is a dense, low-income neighborhood in South Delhi. Their everyday lives, the tenacity of their desires to be with one another, while constantly challenged by societal barriers and norms are documented in great detail. Following the screening, in a Skype-session with Marvi Mazhar (architect and heritage expert), Priya elaborated on the motivations behind the film project, the labor that went into it, and the relationships that emerged during its production. *Yeh Freedom Life* allowed room for a discussion on representation and offered insights into how film serves to record queer lives. Included in the three-day program was an Urdu literary reading by Samina Nazir, a performance artist. For

forty minutes, she read aloud *Kallo*, a delicately descriptive and engaging short story about desire between two women which was laced with humor, love and aching.

The workshop ended with a short wrap-up session. Reflections were invited on the debates that had taken place, feedback including suggestions were taken from the participants. Concerns around safe space, the use of recording as well as participants vulnerabilities when presenting intimate work were brought up and discussed. The workshop was acknowledged as a small, yet significant step in the development towards queer discourse and space in Pakistan. Such coming together of queers and allies offers the hope that by embracing new measures and channeling collective effort into them, brighter, more compassionate futures could be imagined and subsequently lived in Pakistan.