Saman Tariq Malik

Lahore University of Management Sciences, Class of 2016

NAVIGATING THROUGH LOSS: Death and Digital Possibilities of Women's Grief Memoirs in Pakistan

I read the lines repeatedly. I remember the words by a bereaving woman about losing her eleven year old son: "We won't become better next year. It is unrealistic to even think of it. If someone loses an arm or an eye, will he be able to forget it? Absolutely not. What we become is not better but different with time". These lines were part of a longer public note posted by Dr. Fatima Ali Haider on the Facebook page of "The Grief Directory". The Grief Directory was formed in 2015 two years after Haider lost her husband and son in an act of targeted violence. The group offers support—material and emotional—to families who have lost their loved ones in similar situations like Haider herself. As a researcher trying to understand representations of death and grief in digital cultures, my interaction with the online space of "The Grief Directory" made me think differently about women's experiences of loss. As a woman journeying through other women's self writings on this Facebook page in addition to reading responses in the comment's section of these public posts, I began thinking about the gendered dimension of grieving in the digital sphere. I turned to study 'The Grief Directory' (TGD) as part of a woman's journey of survival, one that brings together a community of women mourners who actively interact with this online space to construct solidarity, convey empathy and maintain networks of mutual aftercare in the wake of death. How do online spaces act as texts written by women grieving the death of loved ones? How do they bring together women sharing similar losses?

Examining the Facebook page of 'The Grief Directory' I work closely with the notes posted by women that share personal remembrances of the deceased, thoughts on death,

healing and survival. These engagements point towards alternative acts of grieving at a time when conventional practices of mourning in Pakistan turn women's grief into isolated experiences. To a generation in Pakistan for whom death and grief are increasingly public spectacles, it makes sense to understand how mechanisms such as Facebook allow women to navigate through loss as well as the ethical possibilities of identifying such narratives. I suggest that there is a need to identify such acts of self writing as "dialogues of mourning" in the form of grief memoirs written and published by women in an ever changing digital environment (Leader 85). But such online texts, I argue are also prescriptive of a certain kind of a grief memoir which I refer to as "memoirs of textured recovery", borrowing a term coined by Amy Prodromou. (13). What characterizes this "textured recovery" is the performance of recovered selves that show how recovery, ambiguous and shifting in nature, calls for more complicated theories of mourning, those that can accommodate an understanding of grief, not in terms of Freud's model of absolute recovery nor Tennyson's "loss forever new" (qtd. in Krasner 226), but rather located somewhere in between. The public nature of these memoirs resituates this in-between space of loss in the social sphere to be recognized by others, therefore contributing to the socialization of women's grief and creation of mourning publics.

How can one attempt to understand the in-between space of loss in writings on the Facebook page of TGD? How do these texts resist the healing and redemptive nature of women's loss? In one of her public posts, Haider discusses how the grief of losing her son continues to transform her in unexpected ways:

> "A few months ago, I noticed a change in myself. I was able to mention him in the past tense. I started talking about him without crying. The happy moments I shared with him began to bring a smile on my face again. I kept thinking about this new

> development in my grief. Was I forgetting him? This thought immediately made me guilty. But then another part of me answered this question with counter questioning. If you have forgotten him, then why don't you cook his favourite *kaali daal* [lentils] anymore? If you don't think about him, then why do you contemplate the idea of how tall he would have grown in three years?".
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> And then I realized what had happened? Just like he was a part of me, his loss had also become a part of who I am today…my pain and loss had become something almost physical for me. I knew it was there only when it hurt." (17 December 2016. The Grief Directory. Facebook post)

'Memoirs of textured recovery' are unlike "conversion narratives structured around a radical transformation from a faulty before self to an enlightened after self" (Smith and Watson *Reading Autobiography* 192). Consequently, Haider does not describe "change" as one that could be understood in terms of a Freudian definition of "mourning as a way of divesting ourselves of pain, of getting it over and done with" (Woodward qtd. in Tanner 94). Rather, she analyzes this change in terms of having internalized her loss: "Just like he was a part of me, his loss had also become a part of who I am today". The physicality of loss points to the embodied nature of a woman's grief and the manner in which she perceives her altered self: "I knew it [the loss] was there only when it hurt". Many grief memoirs, talk about the experience of loss as one that takes place within the body. In *Craft for a Dry Lake*, Kim Mahood believes death of family members can be felt "in the cells of your body, a kind of genetic shudder that recognizes the extinguishment of some of its own material" (253). Following her father's death she writes: "I wanted to consume this damaged body and make

it a part of myself" (253).In her memoir *Tiger's Eye,* Inga Clendinnen writes that her brother who died several years ago "rests quietly enough, just below the breastbone, where grief has hollowed a place for him"(160). Both Tanner and Krasner emphasize the importance of the lost body and how that loss shapes the mourners grief. Krasner argues that because the loved one is part of our "body schema" we "experience our loved ones' bodies as contiguous with our own" (221). In many ways these stories, similar to Haider's online grief narratives, are articulated as body stories where the body figures heavily in understanding the process of grief.

How does such a loss affect the narrative performance of an embodied self? Is an embodied self indicative of a recovered self within memoirs that resist conventional ideas of healing? To that effect Haider further writes in the same public post:

> "….I had stopped waiting for the so called healing to come to me. All those around us keep telling us that we will be better next year or that we will heal. So I kept waiting for the magic to happen and then realized that healing won't come, just like he won't come home from school. So I stopped waiting. I also understood another reality. We won't become better next year. It is unrealistic to even think of it. If someone loses an arm or an eye, will he be able to forget it? Absolutely not. What we become is not better but "different" with time." (17 December 2016. The Grief Directory. Facebook post).

Instead of complete recovery, these writings emphasize a lack of healing, the evolving nature of the grieving self; "what we become is not better but different with time". She further states: "you will just get used to the pain of this loss so much that you will stop realizing it is still there". Reminiscing about her son ("I still long to see him tickling his little

sister while she laughs uncontrollably") she informs her readers that "the list of 'would have beens' is endless. The only thing that helps is to understand and expect that this list will always be there, rather than waiting for the day when it won't be, because that day will never come". In response to her notes, several women shared the changes in their personal journey's coping with their loss, something which only cements Haider's claim that one only becomes "different" with the passing of time. One such bereaving mother, posted on the TGD a small anecdote titled "A Change in My Name". In this personal note, she articulates the process of adopting the name of her son whom she had lost when he was only ten years old:

> "Ali Farzan was a combination of two names. Farzan means 'more than intelligent" and my husband insisted to put Ali as the initial name. For me it was the most magical combination of names in the world….. He left before getting 10 years old and the world got empty of the sound. I miss hearing that melodious combination of words in these three years after his departure and I miss it madly.
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> The first attempt to hear it back was the adoption of his name as my second name for the academic writing. I did that after a year of his departure. My official name was Isbah Mustafa and my new academic name was Isbah Ali Farzan". (9 September 2016, The Grief Directory, Facebook Post)

This difference or change which most women in these memoirs point towards is not a sign of having evolved to a state that is better than the previous one. In fact, most of these online narratives are ambiguous about recovery and recognize the many types of meanings of loss and the inevitability of unanswered questions. Another woman's public post grieves the loss of her brother whereby she writes about a change in the nature of her prayer. As can be seen in these examples, the

performing/writing self struggles to reconstruct a coherent, unified whole. In some of Haider's notes this instability emerges more powerfully, revealing the body in sheer agony. For instance, she posts about not being able to travel away on the death anniversary of her son and husband: "Every year I plan to be away from this city or this country….and my planning fails miserably". She confesses her inability to come back home from the graveyard:

> "I don't visit the graveyard because, on my every visit, I don't want to come back. I go looking for them [Murtaza and Ali Haider]and come back empty handed. I then dig up my grave next to Murtaza and lie down right next to him so I can find him. People then see me coming back from the graveyard all red eyed and hysterical, but I see an empty shell without a soul coming to a 'house' because a young man who lost his father at a point when boys need their father the most, and a three year old angel with innocent eyes full of questions, are waiting for that empty shell at home. So I bury Murtaza's mom and Ali Haider's wife, and bring back a widow and a caretaker who is Asad's and Sheharbano's mom…A split personality is what I am these days".

Such examples of self writing complicate notions of survival pointing to what lies between the process of coping and not being able to cope. But they also complicate the relationship between writing and recovery. In "Writing About Illness" Hawkins asks: "do these performative narratives help people get past their experience and incorporate it into their new sense of self so they can get on with their lives? Or do such narratives embed them further in the experiences, in the way that trauma victims often seem compelled to enact and

experience over and over?" ("Writing About" 115) Reading through the comment's sections of the above posts on The Grief Directory, more examples of women's writing reveal their inability to move forward and create a new normal. What does moving forward look like when forgetting is not possible? What does it mean to create a new normal when grief becomes a part of the everyday? For instance, responding to the note titled a "Change in My Name", another woman describes being unable to live the same life after her miscarriages. What we read is only a 'performance' of a so called 'recovered' self, which at times, enunciates its own failure—the inability to write away one's grief and move on.

Such extracts from the writings of women in this online space challenge packaged and frozen notions of loss and recovery that stem from standard models of grief. They complicate grief theories that speak of recovery as "completion" or "resolution" to argue for a new view of recovery as "accommodation" which means living with "imperfect reality" (Prodromou 128) and where "it is never clear whether one is able to accept a loss or to resolve one's grief" (Hooyaman and Kramer 49). In the grief writings of women on TGD, closure is hardly a possibility.

How do these online memoirs speak of recovery as accommodation? One method emerges in women's attempts to redefine new norms for living that are an outcome of their personal experiences. For instance, in one of her public posts Haider talks of a "new ritual by allowing everyone around us to go through their journey of loss in the way they feel comfortable". She writes:

> "We can start by asking our friend or relative in grief a few days before an important day about his or her ideas about spending the day. It is ok to follow the old rituals, because they too can be comforting for some, but it should be equally acceptable for us to understand if someone wants to

> spend the day differently. After all, we are trying to help the grieving family spend the day in comfort and surely the loved ones for whom they are grieving would want nothing more than seeing a smile on the faces of their family and friends". (11 February 2016. The Grief Directory. Facebook post).

Another example emerges from the more recent post on TGD's Facebook page where Haider shares her struggle to decide whether or not to take her daughter on a birthday party on the day of her husband and son's death anniversary. In these public memoirs, she also shares her thoughts regarding new family structures that come into being in the wake of a loved one's death, especially on important days like her daughter's first day at school. Largely, however, accommodation is inextricably tied to remembrance. Most of these Facebook notes deal with Haider reminiscing about past days such as remembering her son's birthday or thinking about her husband on Father's and their wedding anniversary.

Interestingly enough these struggles to adapt involve a set of reading practices as well. In these online grief memoirs women not only write about personal experiences, they share with other women what they read, fostering an interpretive community of women readers. What is then the identity of these grieving women in the online space? For me at least, these women's identities oscillate between being readers and writers who recreate themselves continuously by engaging with a community of women through their writings as well as consuming and drawing inspiration from the literary material around them. The literary texts that they consume could best be considered as empowering texts appropriated by women to understand their circumstances. These includes texts by Maya Angelou, an article titled "What It Means To Hold Space For Someone", Huffington Post's article titled "Getting Through the Fog of Grief During Holidays", "Loving My Son, After His Death", stories on the theme of loss and why it is not appropriate to bottle up one's emotions and Michael

Rosen's illustrated anatomy of loss among other reading material. Consuming these texts also allows women to continue their personal narrative in light of what they have read in the comment's sections of these posts.

Why should one read these autobiographical writings by women whose experiences and lived histories may not have any relation/connection with one's life? Why should one read the intricate details of a woman's everyday life coping with her grief, such as Dr. Fatima dreading the coming of her husband and son's death anniversary each year, her inability to know how to pass the hours of that day, her dilemma to grieve the family she has lost or to protect and give happiness to the one she has, her inability to try to ignore the absence of her son and husband on the dinner table or being unable to come back home from the graveyard. When we speak of life histories, Walter Benjamin's concept of writing a history that is "citable in all its moments" surfaces as a key concern (246). This means that engaging with women's grief memoirs requires us to be, at very best, conscious of the everyday acts and practices of grieving. What difference does it make if we take these writings as testimonies? Alternatively, how might they be considered for evidence? What does it mean to read self narratives that articulate interrupted lives? What are the silences that these writings seek to uncover? Why should one also read the literature that these women writers consume? How may this help us understand the kind of interpretive community of women fostered by online mechanisms such as the pages of Facebook? All these questions, which the scope of this paper does not allow to be answered completely, point towards new possibilities of reading women's self writings in light of modern, everyday grief cultures in the digital space.

The grief memoirs as a genre fills a gap left by the professional literature of bereavement and itself contributes to a community of mourners that is missing from contemporary grief practices as argued by Sandra Gilbert in *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* and Darian Leader in *The New Black.* If we consider the sheer

amount of professional literature on grieving and loss, literary texts and criticisms on grief and mourning themes, and the long history of the grief memoir, perhaps this gap has more to do with our "sophisticated death-denying society" (Mahood 253) than lack of information available. As Gilbert believes, we are at a "historical moment when death is in some sense unspeakable and grief—or anyway the expression of grief—is at best an embarrassment, at worst a social solecism or scandal" leaving people at a loss as to how to grieve appropriately This paper, then, sees itself as marking an intervention in death and grief studies but also in the growing field of Digital Humanities and trajectories of loss in the digital space/. For one, this essay challenges theories that attempt to understand the grief memoir solely in terms of how this genre of writing is intended to overcome one's trauma. In contrast, online grief writings by women on the Facebook page of The Grief Directory suggest that in memoirs of textured recovery, coping with loss is not a neat process and there are those who do not necessarily overcome. The main limitation, of course, lies in the number of women's writings that I have analyzed. From a methodological perspective, I confine myself to a few personal narratives, especially those that would help illuminates the "in-between-ness" of grieving as a characteristic of women's grief writings in the digital space. The in-between space that mark these writings as memoirs of textured recovery answers Nancy Miller's question: "What does the narrative arc without redemption look like?". At a time when "no one is publishing against the arc" ("My Body"), looking at how women textually navigate through loss in the digital space, allows us to look beyond conventional practices of mourning. Memoirs of textured recovery make mourning present. They haul experiences of grief and experiences of women into the public sphere where they can be witnessed as testimonies. I choose to work with women's online grief memoirs not because I wish to suggest that men and women grieve differently. It is equally important to study grief writings by men, however in Pakistan where women's lived experiences are often at the margins of histories, it makes sense to think

about grieving women in the digital space. It makes sense to think how such grief writing contributes to the emergence of gendered selves.

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