

Yours & Mine - a letter written from Rawalpindi by Hussain Khalid

Dear Paaji,

In this letter, I am writing to you about how during an art residency in Rawalpindi I found home in the city that was completely unknown to me. My intention for the project was to study the Urban Fabric of the old city and memories associated with it. However little did I know that in this hustling city, so unknown to me, I would end up finding someone so known to me. This person put so much in perspective for me, that no book or scholar could ever have.

8th November 2019, Friday

Today I landed at Raja Bazar, the name I had been hearing since my first day in Rawalpindi. Apprehensive, I stepped out of the rickshaw and saw this long road branching out from the Murree Road leading to a dense market offering a lot of sounds to hear and sights to see. Walking further ahead on the road I saw a street on my right which had a beautiful Hindu temple sitting on its Horizon. As I walked past old houses with intricately designed facades towards the temple; I saw a minaret of a mosque emerging right next to the temple. The view spoke of both its past and present. The street opened into alleys, having delicate houses laid across it on both sides. The houses spoke of different times, with celebrated portals and jharokas minimizing distance between houses opposite to each other; it appeared as if they were carved with love. Contrary to my perception of these alleys being suffocating, they were heartwarming. These streets started to fill my heart with joy and nostalgia. It was as if you were walking me through the precinct, helping me find my way; making it feel like home. Subconsciously recalling your pre partition memories I reached the magnificent remains of Sujjan Singh Haveli. The remains were both a depiction of strength and vulnerability.

A week ago, I was asked how Rawalpindi is my heritage. I was told it's remnant of people belonging to different religions! I have my answer to the question; I own it as my heritage because it represents you, many others like you and their memories of Partition.

9th November 2019, Saturday

I stood enthusiastic at the bus stop waiting for a wagon, to go back to the place where I felt closest to you and my roots than ever before. The wagon dropped me at Kutchery Chowk, from there I had to take another wagon for Committee Chowk. However, something at a small shop by the name of Qadri Tuck Shop caught my attention, it was Shezan mango drink. Reminded me of my childhood, during the visit to our village in summer break; you would deposit money at Azeem Kiryana Store and tell the shopkeeper to give me and Hassan Shezan Mango Drink every time we ask for it. Looking at the fridge, though not thirsty; I took out a bottle of Shezan and drank it, to relive the memory just one more time.

Soon after reaching Committee Chowk, I saw a young man walking towards me whom I remember meeting twice: once at a wedding thirteen years ago and at my Dadi's funeral four or five years before the wedding. Phupho Yasmeen's son Daniyal was my guide today. We walked towards Moti Bazar inquiring about each other's professions and interests. The Bazars were densely crowded today but I had the footsteps of a brother to follow in the sea of people. After roaming around in the Bazar and failed attempts to enter a Gurdwara in Nankari Bazar, Daniyal mentioned about a Gurdwara at HathiChowk in Sadar Bazar. A multistorey white building now houses a hotel with no record of its past available except a few elements on its roof top which speak of its past. The hotel looks into the Sadar bazar precinct, from above you can see houses attached together having roofs at the same level with no boundaries in between, as if sharing the laughter, happiness and sorrows with each other, not very different from our village. Today your advice of keeping the family and community close made sense because these are not just words but a lifestyle.

10th November 2019, Sunday

Today I stayed back in bed thinking, it's been one week since your demise. One week ago, I searched for you in every place where I used to see you on every visit to the village. Paaji, I could not find you anywhere this time.

11th November 2019, Monday

With an aim to enter Gurdwara in Nankari Bazar I went back, this time the doors opened for me but only to tell me to come back with a reference letter. Obeying the order, I left. Again losing myself in the place which had become my muse, enjoying the sounds, sights and smells of the bazar; I heard cinematic sounds of punches and slaps. On my left was an old cinema playing regional movies, I took back and forth steps between the portal and cinema twice or thrice deciding to watch a movie or not. I decided not to, may be with someone some other day. Exiting from the periphery of the cinema I traced the sight of an old temple at a distance, Shiv Mandir. It was a small temple but at a few footsteps there was another gigantic temple, Ragu Nath Temple with Gurdwara Complex. I was told not come close to temple by a labourer working at site and soon was sent out of the premises. Lost in wonder about the melody of Puja and Bhajans that once echoed within the walls of these temples I figured that this was a Hindu-Sikh majority area prior partition. I walked further ahead and saw huge domes and a minaret of an old looking mosque; I followed the vision of Minarets and started walking through a thin alley which brought me to Kohati Bazar road from Bagh Sardaran. On my left stood an ornamented Jamia Hanifia Masjid constructed in early 1900s, my assumption of the area being Hindu majority was wrong; the area had heard sounds of both Azaan and Hindu Puja. How? What was the atmosphere when the sounds collided? Were people tolerant?

I think they were, remembering my ancestral house, Gurdwara. Which I have grown up calling gurdwara, I heard people of yours and my father's generation calling it Gurdwara only. However, people of my generation now feel religiously threatened to call it Gurdwara.

12th November 2019, Tuesday

After spending the day at NCA Rawalpindi, I and my fellow artist Farrukh decided to take a walk in the old city to absorb the atmosphere in the evening. We entered the portal of ShaheenPura previously MadanPura. We were welcomed by the sight of a Temple's silhouette and the smell of popcorn. The atmosphere was airy and happy till we walked further into alleys and heard heart wrenching voices of a woman screaming, a child crying and a man shouting. My legs were moving but my soul was still. What did this settlement sound like when women were being raped, abducted and killed? What was it like when the settlement cried and screamed all at once?

And having been witness to all this, was this the reason you greeted women of every age, even ones who were strangers to you, with a dua for their well-being?

13th November 2019, Wednesday

After acquiring the reference letter stating my interest to learn about Architectural Heritage I knocked at GHS Shimla Islamia School previously Gurdwara Nirankari in Nankari Bazar with determination of finally seeing the place but with property disputes between the school and some other party my intent or will to familiarize myself with my roots did not matter at all. I was pushed out from the school once again, with a heavy heart I started walking away from the Bazar and ended up in Satellite Town. Everything changed, everything tangible and intangible, I had no desire of being part of the crowd here.

Paaji! Was this the determination you went back to your home during 1965 war, with hopes of borders tumbling down? Was this the pain you felt when you were sent back and told that the dispute was larger than your longing for home?

With this letter, I am fulfilling a promise I made to you two years ago. I am sorry I had not been able to fulfill your request of painting your portrait in your lifetime. The truth Paaji is that I was unable to find a medium that could do justice to you and your life. But I have found it now; in the streets of Rawalpindi. The dust from the bricks of Sujjan Singh Haveli is a symbol of your strength, resilience, vulnerability, fear and pain; Withered by time, immortalized by memory.

Yours Grandson,

Hussain.



Medium: Dust from the bricks of Sujjan Singh Haveli, rose water & ink