

# DOCUMENT AND LOCATION

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

ASMA MUNDRAWALA ON  
HUMA MULJI, YOUR TONGUE IN MY MOUTH  
2022



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میں اور میرے ہم عصر، ہم ایک طوفان کے مرکز میں ہیں۔ اندر سے یہ دائرہ بالکل  
شانت دکھائی دیتا ہے۔ سب کچھ جما جما یا اور unruffled ہے یہاں۔  
ہاں طوفان کا outer perimeter ایک پیس دینے والے فشار میں سنسناتا، گھمسن  
گھیری کھاتا رہتا ہے۔ وہاں ہم رہتے ہیں، outer perimeter میں۔ مگر میں  
'رہنے' کی بات نہیں کرتا... وہ الگ کہانی ہے۔ میں طوفان کے مرکز، اس شانت  
دائرے میں گزارے ہوئے وقت کو بیان کر رہا ہوں، جہاں ہم 'رہتے' نہیں تھے،  
جایا کرتے تھے۔

*My contemporaries and I, we are at the  
centre of a storm. Viewed from inside,  
the circle appears decisively silent.  
Everything appears grounded and well  
placed. The outer perimeter of the storm  
however, resounds with a crushing  
force, moving impetuously like  
a whirlwind. This is where we  
live, in the outer perimeter. But  
I don't speak of where we live.  
That is another story. I speak of  
the time spent in the centre of the  
storm, that distinctly silent circle,  
where we did not live, but rather,  
frequented.<sup>1</sup>*

Asad Muhammad Khan's text  
places him and his contemporaries  
at the centre of a storm, where

existence is tranquil and undisturbed. He  
speaks of Karachi's city centre in the 60s,  
a site peppered with book shops, cafes,  
shops and roadside stalls, where ideas  
are exchanged, conversations emanate  
and creativity abounds. It is the place that  
he returns to time and again as a respite  
from his chaotic existence in the outer  
perimeter of the storm. The text leads us  
from one locale to another, introducing the  
players in disparate sequence, layering the  
palimpsest with acute diligence.

In a short yet intense visit to Karachi,  
Huma Mulji traverses the city in search of  
evidence and resources to piece together  
the fragments of a memorial to Queen  
Victoria, which was inaugurated at Frere

Hall in 1906. She discusses with her peers the findings, anecdotes and the ceaseless bureaucracy she encounters. Upon her return to the UK, a video clip lands up in her WhatsApp messages from a friend. A private television network has run a short segment about a pair of bronze lions placed in the Karachi Zoo. Tracing their history, the anchor narrates the journey of the two bronze statues from the Karachi Zoo to the Mohatta Palace grounds in 2004 and their return to the zoo in 2018, when they are renewed with a near black coat of paint, before restoring them to their old glory. The anchor draws the narrative to the punch line; the lions were indeed repainted black because they now matched the two black lions placed in Buckingham Palace, their only prototypes in the entire world.<sup>2</sup>

A middle-aged man, reputed to be the city's best letter composer and typist, suspends a plastic bag containing his lunch on a tree that serves as a canopy

for his outdoor office. He positions his helmet on a nearby stool, draws out the desk on which his typewriter sits regally, strategically positioning the props that set the stage for his day's work.

In a bid to shed its colonial past and establish its identity as an Islamic state following partition, the government of Pakistan gradually changed the cultural and historical landscape of the country, removing artefacts, reinstating language, and changing street names. In 1970, the central shopping street Elphinstone Street, was rechristened Zaibunnisa Street, referencing the Mughal princess known for her fine taste and literary skills. The street is still known as "Elphi" to an older generation, and according to the journalist / blogger Akhtar Baloch, is recalled by his mentor emotively, as if he were remembering a beloved.<sup>3</sup>

These parallel existences are evident everywhere in the lives of Karachi's





multicultural dwellers. The emphasis on national and regional languages confronts desires of privilege, status and aspirations to be seen as the other. Author and critic Asif Farrukhi recalls his schooling at Saint Patricks School where students were prohibited from speaking Urdu in the classroom, and “character building” classes emphasised “manners and good breeding”.<sup>4</sup> The privilege that a command over English offers is reinstated in the divide between those who speak English and those who do not. As Fanon reminds us, possessing a language also implies an ownership of the world implicit in that language. As colonised people encounter the language and culture of the coloniser, they are elevated above their status in proportion

to their adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards and the renouncement of their own culture.<sup>5</sup> Vestiges of the colonial past emerge in Mulji’s video “Your Tongue in My Mouth” where the protagonist uses archaic English words and canonical language to type letters on behalf of those who do not possess his adept linguistic skills. Yet the divisive relationship his skills generate also serves to bring people together in the expression of a concern. The awkward formulation of his text renews the language and lends it a vantage that is the typist’s own. This proud ownership of the language, paired with a near audacious contamination of the legacy, is reflective of the “unmaking” that Mulji celebrates in this and other works.

The experience of unmaking may also be perceived with the notion of rupture

with the past. In extricating from the past, something new is born with a vitality that speaks back to its predecessor. Whether it is the typist who renews language, or the authorities at the Karachi Zoo, (previously Gandhi Garden), who polish, buff and paint the bronze lions to a shade akin to their perception of past glory, it is here, in this partial erasure of the past, that stories are fashioned and meaning is made in a pulsating urban landscape.

In its unforgiving, constantly unravelling chaos, Karachi offers silent spaces where memory, emotions, passions, senses, and desires play out. When Khan likens his haven in Karachi to the centre of a storm, he also mentions that this invulnerability is relative.<sup>6</sup> Whether existence is characterised by the unwavering calm of the centre, or the chaos of the circumambient perimeter where survival is exacting and formidable, the city offers

perceptual spaces that enable the creation of associations through the senses and with locations and their inhabitants. It is in these physical and perceptual spaces that the theatre of the city plays out. The city then becomes, as Mumford writes, “a consciously dramatic setting for the more significant actions and the more sublimated urges of a human culture.”<sup>7</sup>

Mulji’s work responds to the materiality of the city; to its sights, sounds and senses, and to its theatricality. The body of work, *Your Tongue in My Mouth*, commissioned by MIRROR in Plymouth, is an immersive experience that encapsulates her continual inquiry of the urban and its myriad players. The seven works consisting of films, photographic prints, and sculptures, tease the space between absurdity and reason. Sharing the title of the show, the video *Your Tongue in My Mouth* is distributed across



three screens, each lending a particular vantage of the place and space occupied by a typist and his apprentice. As the protagonist types letters to authorities on behalf of a beleaguered populace, his self appointed assistant sets up a half broken stool, tasking himself to draw in more customers than the competitors nearby. In close proximity stands Raat ki Rani, a life size photograph of the ever elusive statue of Queen Victoria, lost in the annals of bureaucracy. Partially concealed by swathes of the bougainvillea and Raat ki Raani (Queen of the Night) plants, she stands forgotten in a dilapidated corner of Mohatta Palace in Karachi. The photograph is propped against a pillar to reveal painted impressions of text and imagery on its reverse, referencing the articulate walls of Karachi. The Karachi Star enunciates Mulji's discovery of the vestiges of a broken plinth found at Frere Hall, and the ensuing sculpture traces

its assumed dimensions on a floor of mosaic tiles, neatly cut away to reveal its absence. This inquiry also informs Rumour, a quieter yet sinister work, partially disclosing the presence of a broken nose tucked in a brass container. The carved marble nose honours the "found" broken nose of the statue and echoes the rumours surrounding the damage and brutal repair inflicted upon the statue. Perhaps these works collectively may be read as Mulji's illustration of the monument's displacement and fragmentation across time and the city, and as an acknowledgement of her vexatious hunt to locate it. As if to lend this narrative a monumental presence, the work Red Carpet is a large-scale backdrop of the Frere Hall grounds, depicting a red carpet rolled out towards the building, anticipating the inauguration of the Queen Victoria memorial in 1906. Slightly removed from this content, yet



inextricably linked to the discourse, is the video Gandhi Garden, a two-screen work that takes the viewer through a single day in the life of two brass lions stationed at the Karachi Zoo. The stoic presence of the lions is in sharp contrast to the frenetic activity that surrounds them. With the pace of the day gradually building up from the early morning silence to the raucous voices and activities of visitors, the film also lends the gallery space with the sounds and ambience of the city. Inviting visitors to take a part of the city with them, a set of four postcards rest on a wall, documenting unidentifiable statues covered in plastic that were once part of the memorial. These are accompanied by stills from the video Your Tongue in My Mouth, that carry text from the typist's letters on the reverse. The installation of the show carefully engages viewers beyond the visual experience. The painted teal wall and half painted pillars offer a staging of the collective narrative,



immediately creating a sense of place. The sounds from both videos transport the visitor to a locale that is inherently that of the works on display, and the mild fragrance of the Raat ki Rani nudges the senses when viewing its presence in the photograph. In creating this all-encompassing experience, Mulji draws us closer to the city and its players.

The city's unrelenting pace and the continuous mobility of its populace lend to its performative nature where the stage is set for stories to be invented and enacted. Linked inextricably with time and space, these tales cradle a palpable presence of the past and a desirous imagination of the future. As the story of the bronze lions ends with their placement in what could



be a final destination, another series of narratives emerges around them. Used as props for selfies and family photographs, they stare silently in their misplaced grandeur, reflecting stoically on their lost provenance, as they offer themselves as a site for renewed narratives.

The manuscript of Mulji's Karachi is played out by the characters that she depicts, ably placed in the liminal space between fact and fiction. As the author of these narratives, she assigns roles not only for them, but positions her vantage somewhere between the inside and the outside. The city viewed from a distance enriches her perception as she layers the past with the present. But Karachi can never be extricated from the very soul of those who have breathed its air. This is reminiscent of Farrukhi's text in which he seeks Karachi in other cities, and conjures its images when distant from it, likening the experience to

the camera film roll that does not move forward. The resulting negative offers multiple images, similar to the layering of his blurry and nebulous memories with precise images of his present.<sup>8</sup>

The city in perpetual motion works its way from the centre to the outer periphery, collecting and fashioning stories of and by its inhabitants, who are relentlessly searching for clues and constructing a repository of archives. There is an urgent need to remember, to memorialise, lest all is lost with the unforgiving pace of erasure. The narrative's graph ebbs and flows, oscillating between whispers and crescendo, unfolding the plot insidiously, offering no respite to its actors. Paul Makeham describes the city as a site where the populace performs its collective memory, imagination and aspiration in the practice of everyday life. It is indeed as transient as performance, because the city itself is a performance of individual and collective desires, values and memories. With the stage set for urban



performativity, the citizens are empowered with the agency to invent new ideas about themselves and their relationships with the urban landscape. It is in the theatre of the city, activated through an exchange of signs and meanings, dialogue and conflict, and telling stories that core practices of performance are played out.<sup>9</sup>

And it is in this plexus that Mulji finds the stage, scene, sets, props and drama that inform her work. As she gathers the assemblage of her subjects, she creates a landscape that is in direct discourse with a landscape she knows best. As her characters navigate the urban landscape, strategically negotiate its precarious balance, create spaces and transform them, they come alive as enablers of a vibrant, discursive narrative that places them pointedly at the centre of the storm.

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<sup>1</sup> Asad Muhammad Khan, “Toofaan kay Markaz Mein,” in Ghussay ki Nae-e Fussul, (Lahore: Ilqa Publications, 2013), p.131

<sup>2</sup> “Why the original colour of bronze lions in Karachi Zoo being changed? [sic]”, Samaa Originals, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://youtu.be/mDO8CZhE3zo>

<sup>3</sup> Akhtar Baloch, “Elphi Zaibi na bun Saki” in Karaanchi Wala, (Karachi: Aaj ki Kitaabein, 2016), p.148-151

<sup>4</sup> Asif Farrukhi, “Iss Shehr main Rehna”, in Karachi ki Kahaani (2), ed. Ajmal Kamal, (Karachi: Aaj ki Kitaabein, 2007), p.593

<sup>5</sup> Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Masks, (London, Pluto Press, 1986), p.9

<sup>6</sup> Khan, “Toofaan kay Markaz Mein”, p.150

<sup>7</sup> Lewis Mumford, The Culture of Cities, (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p.480

<sup>8</sup> Farrukhi, “Iss Shehr main Rehna”, p.579

<sup>9</sup> Paul Makeham, “Performing the City”, Theatre Research International, Vol.30 No.2, (July 2005): 151-158, doi:10.1017/S030788330500115X

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## DOCUMENT AND LOCATION

Document and Location is a research group developed by academics from Fine Art, Photography and Architecture at The University of The West of England, Bristol, in partnership with Foreground.

The group's research and accompanying public programme of exhibitions, events and publishing that will investigate how our understanding of place is directly formed through how locations are recorded and subsequently narrated by different disciplines.

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