

A **Memory** That Cannot Find Rest

By **Nilofur Farrukh**

... moments of history are plucked out of the flow of history, then returned to it—no longer quite alive but not entirely dead, like sea shells left on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.

Pierre Nora¹

The process of investigating layers of personal and public memory of the enigmatic decade, the 1970s in Pakistan—with almost 50 artists and as many writers in the last two years—has slowly shifted the project for me from an act of rekindling memory to one of discovering the complex phenomenon of memory association and re-emergence of historical images in the consciousness of several generations.

The Seventies, which took place almost half a century ago, has an unexplainable hold on the public imagination. Yet there is no easy way to remember the 1970s as it packs so much political and social change. Two history-altering events shook the foundations of the country: a civil war that midwived Bangladesh and the 1977 military coup that de-seated Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a popular prime minister who was marched to the gallows. Between these two tragedies, we find a fleeting spring of false hope when optimism in the air unleashed unprecedented creativity that awakened a sense of nationhood. It is also difficult to forget this heady era because it saw no closure. When it abruptly ended with the ‘midnight knock’, the nation was left shell-shocked and confused; they saw all that symbolized the spirit of the Seventies buried under the Martial Law orders of General Ziaul Haq. Since then, Pakistanis have returned to the memories of the era for unanswered questions. It has become a memory that cannot find rest.

Almost 50 artists excavated memories to memorialize the 1970s. Memories, almost like a living organism, grow within us. According to Freud, it is between seven to ten years in a child’s life that memory develops chronology; before this, memories are random and disconnected. Memories sometimes are real enough to touch but at the same time are faded and ambiguous on the fringes, locked in recesses where they cannot be ever lived again,

which leaves behind a strange poignant desire to return to them. The tussle between the memories that pop up uninvited and the ones we recall on demand, the images of things we imagine after hearing or reading about persons and events, and the visuals we create by hand to understand the phenomenon of the past, can all fuse into an evocative coherence within a space where connection and relationship transcend linearity. *The 70s: Pakistan's Radioactive Decade* became this space that provided an experiential link to bittersweet memories, a place of the past that had to be entered with the knowledge of today with social and political baggage to understand the power of an interrupted destiny.

As I stood in the middle of the exhibition among hundreds of visitors, some visibly teary eyed with nostalgia, a question kept echoing in my head: would a show like this have been possible in the 1970s? The answer was no. This show was a trauma site where artists were dealing with a nation's anguish from a distance of almost 50 years. The aftermath of a brutal civil war bizarrely fused with social freedom and innocence. The guilt of getting it wrong, the helplessness of not knowing how to have fixed it, the questioning and frustration it evoked—all of these sensations were palpable.

Modern memory is first of all archival. It relies entirely on the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image. The process that began with writing has reached its culmination in high-fidelity recordings.

Pierre Nora²

Pakistan was a single television channel country in the 1970s. PTV (Pakistan Television Corporation), as the sole player, dominated the new electronic device that had entered the nation's homes in the 1960s. From then onwards, it was the lens through which everyone saw a unified version of culture and news. It was also pivotal in creating shared visual images of historical moments associated with the best and the worst of the era.

Benish Mahmood's video montage was a pictorial séance with its evocative tapestry of song and dance from PTV archives, anchored by the haunting speeches of Bhutto and General Ziaul Haq. Who would have imagined that Alamgir swaying to the popular '*Dunya Hamey Jo Kabey*' and Nahid Siddiqui's Kathak performances would face a ban and that popular culture would become taboo? In their interviews, both Sheema Kermani and Indu Mitha elaborate on how their Seventies' dance practice was (mis-) shaped by official edicts. According to Indu Mitha, the Islamabad-based classical dancer, 'Once Ziaul Haq came in, this is towards the end of the Seventies, the only dance that was left was folk dances by men to greet foreign bigwigs at the airport and sides of streets where their motorcades passed. Because of the burning heat

and tarred streets, it became practice to dance wearing white tennis shoes, called 'fleets', at the time. Wearing those shoes, dancing on government orders on roadside processions was a degradation of the spirit of folk dancers ... This indignity in the country of the Dancing Girl of Moenjodaro, where dance forms are scratched on rock art from centuries ago, where dance is an ancient tradition ...'

At the exhibition, Syed Ammad Tahir's video's reenactment of a dance from the blockbuster *Umrao Jaan Ada*, and its deliberate tampering with the images, alluded to both the defacing of the classical dance form and clumsy attempts at its censure. Aisha Gazdar, in her video work, highlighted her father Mushtaq Gazdar's banned film *They are Killing the Horses* with footage of state-sanctioned public whippings at a Lahore stadium. This rubbed shoulders with a backlit still from yet another film that was refused screening: *The Blood of Hussain* by Jamil Dehlavi. With these films as the backdrop, Angeline Malik carried out her performance piece in the shadows of the screening room. She sat surrounded by spools of film that she cut with menacing scissors for a period of two hours. Silently looking over the scene was a stand-mounted TV screen that displayed 'Intezar Farmaiyeh' (Please Wait), a slide that was often seen on the official channel and a butt of endless jokes on ham-handed censorship and inefficiency. Here, these words have the ring of a prophecy for a country in constant crisis since the 1970s.

The purpose of studying places of memory is not simply to define contemporary memory as a state of awareness of rupture between historical and social consciousness ... instead it is designed to lend and therefore intervene in the status and configuration of the symbolic framework of contemporary memory by highlighting less familiar places of memory and tampering the emotional appeal of more familiar places.

Peter Carrier³

Freedom was the mantra of the time, inspired by flowerchildren navigating the hippie trail to Katmandu. The new boom in fashion and the social scene created a glamorous sensibility that was often showcased in periodicals like *She* and *Herald*. Samina Ibrahim remembers, 'From Western dresses and pants and shirts to the *awami jora* and bell-bottoms by day and risqué saris by night, it was a glamorous era.' She adds, 'Bhutto's liberalism was at its zenith and it made him a hero in the eyes of the country's youth.'

This inspired the entry of educated youth into the fields of entertainment and fashion. Javed Jabbar, who made the film *Beyond the Last Mountain* in the Seventies, elaborates, 'This was the first cinema film in which the main roles concerned three educated, independent-

minded women, not singing, dancing heroines. These characters were in turn portrayed by, for the first time in Pakistani cinema history, three highly educated Pakistani women making their first appearances on the cinema screen. This dimension was a reflection of the major changes taking place in the first half of the 1970s.'

Titillating cabaret shows took up much of the entertainment advertisement space in dailies. Marzi, alias Princess Ameena, Pakistani star performer, whose several other identities gave her an aura of mystique and kept her in demand, appeared in many. Most hotels boasted a nightclub with foreign artistes on the payroll. This proliferation of shows was aimed at a growing Arab clientele as Bhutto strategized to emulate Beirut's nightlife.

Amongst this feel-good social exuberance, urgent issues like the repatriation of thousands of Pakistanis of Bihari descent stranded in Bangladesh and the 90,000 Pakistani prisoners of war in India seldom, if ever, were allowed to dominate the headlines. Zubeida Mustafa, who started her career in journalism at *Dawn* in the 1970s, remembers a time of strict control over media. According to her, print journalism experienced the advice system under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's rule with stringent control over the press. To promote the nationalization policy (1972 onwards), a large chunk of government advertising was used as a tool to muzzle the press. The Zia rule was particularly brutal as dissident journalists faced flogging. Each and every page of the daily newspaper was sent to the assigned official and, only after it was approved and stamped, could it go into print. Some newspapers took a decision to start sending the full news to the official so that when it was taken out the pages were printed with blank spots.

Ask anyone from the Seventies to recall images of the civil war in East Pakistan and they will most likely remember only one—the surrender at Dhaka. An image was shown on the insistence of Aslam Azhar, the then MD of PTV, but no public debate on the debacle was ever permitted. It was only in 2002, when the truth about the atrocities was published in books, that General Musharraf became the first military ruler to officially express regret during a state visit to Bangladesh.

زرد پتوں کا بن جو میرا دیس ہے
درد کی انجمن، جو میرا دیس ہے

This thicket of dying leaves that is my land
This assembly of anguish that is my land

Faiz Ahmed Faiz⁴

(Translation by Mustansir Dalvi)

Two separate worlds seemed to exist. The society elite, and even the liberal middle class, lived in a bubble that isolated them from the reality of a democracy besieged with problems. The popular imagination and the truth of the time do not match. And this book, like the exhibition, is an important document located at the intersection of these two realities.

Hameed Haroon attributes this cultural schizophrenia to the rapidly changing political systems within the decade that impacted society. In the words of Sheema Kermani, 'Karachi had a pulse' in the 1970s but she also recalls that 'Islamization had already been initiated by Bhutto ... The anti-Ahmadi bill, the ban on alcohol, etc. were initial steps catering to the religious parties. The problem was [that] Bhutto didn't pose as an Islamist! He posed as a free thinker. Bhutto was a liberal behind closed doors. However, to hold on to political power, he appeased the religious parties by giving into their demands.' Bhutto's newfound conservatism disenchanted the progressive intellectuals who had been the architects of his cultural policy and institutions.

Almost every writer and every interviewee in the book regrets how an opportunity was lost when the peak of creativity and cultural zeitgeist was unable to translate itself into a collective greatness. Tragedy struck when the Zia dictatorship, a time of oppression and loss in the second half of the Seventies, turned the country into a *zard patton ka ban* or the land of sadness.

The Seventies was the last time Pakistanis felt like a complete nation. It is ironic that Bhutto unified Pakistanis with a belief in themselves at the lowest point in their history, after the cleaving of East Pakistan and his own divisive bill on Ahmadis. His charisma inspired men and women of immense talent to forge a leadership for a modern and forward-thinking country. When this dream crashed, it was not just the end of a democratic era; something broke that was more personal, more intimate.

Bhutto's short honeymoon, however, did birth a group of diehard idealists who became the conscience of the nation and authors of the counter narrative to the dictatorships that followed. They are the children of this watershed moment of conviction and an unflinching belief in autonomy. Many of them are the voices included in the exhibition and this book.

NOTES

1. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman (eds.), *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
2. Ibid.
3. Peter Carrier, 'Places, Politics and the Archiving of Contemporary Memory in Pierre Nora's Les Lieux de mémoire', in *Memory and Methodology*, ed. Susannah Radstone (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 37–58.
4. Mustansir Dalvi (trans.), 'Intisaab,' *Faiz Ahmed Faiz—New Translations* (blog), 2 December 2014, <http://faizahmedafaiznewtranslations.blogspot.com/>.

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