

Erasing Borders Around Our S



rs Skin

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Painting an Image of Ourselves
the Way We Want to Be Seen,
Heard, Loved

शाहमीना शाह रोड
شاهمینا شاہ روڈ



Once upon a time, all touch disappeared from the world as an invisible virus took over the streets. We became suspicious of the air and (sharing) breath – our life force. As women negotiating public space in South Asia, we are familiar with the fear of being touched. Young girls often learn to draw borders and boundaries around their bodies before they have learned what this really means.

Emerging from our first lockdown in India (one of the harshest in the world), the Fearless Collective travelled to Lucknow in September 2020. Here we joined forces with Sabika Abbas Naqvi, a power-house poet, activist, beating heart – whose work lies in reclaiming public space through her spoken word performances. Alongside her, we spoke to a group of Muslim women from the city about decolonizing desire and what it could look like if we erased the borders around our skin.

As you turn off an eight-lane highway, lined with malls and temples, you find yourself being led through intricate alleyways made of red brick, laced with *itr* (rose scented perfume) and the sound of *aazaan* (the call to prayer). Their history is steeped in poetry and stories of legendary monarchs, the Begums and Nawabs, that are written into quiet mausoleums. It is a parallel universe, home to the kingdom of Oudh. Lucknow remembers itself as gracious, diverse, sensual and refined.

“वो जो हम में तुम में करार था तुम्हें याद हो कनि याद हो
वही यानी वादा नबिाह का तुम्हें याद हो कनि याद हो”

*“This (entangled) affair between you and me
You may remember it, and you may not.
You forget all the promises
before you speak them aloud,
You may remember me, and you may not.”*

Walking next to Maqbaras we are warned not to wander too close to fragrant trees because they may house *Jinns* (invisible creatures), a black hand-painted flag

hangs outside the Bada Imbambara and sings “Ya Hussain” as a call to mourning for Shia Muslims to wash the city with their tears. This is despite the pandemic: a *Dastanagoi*¹ is held on Zoom for a group of Urdu poets.

But let us also remember these women who refused to be forgotten: the Indian singer Gauhar Jaan; Begum Samr who ruled over Sardhana; Begum Hazrat Mahal who led the rebellion against the British East India Company in 1857; and singer Zohra Bai. Veiled and concealed from wandering eyes, very little visual documentation of Muslim women exists, but these were women who lived beyond the norm and formed a parallel universe and social ecosystem within their fragrant courtyards. The *Tawaifs of Lucknow*² began as courtesans but became revolutionaries, queens, classical musicians, and more. They would keep their lovers entangled and entertained as economic sustenance.

During India’s fight for independence, the Tawaifs played an active role in the revolt from behind the scenes. Their houses became meeting zones and hideouts for rebels. They worked as informers, carried messages to freedom fighters, provided them with shelter.

Here ordinary men would learn *Tameez* and *Tehzeeb* – an appreciation of all fine things, from poetry to literature. These were educated women, empowered women, and the first to allow themselves to be photographed (bejeweled and fantastic). Their names were inscribed in legal documents fighting for property and illegitimate heirs, their voices were recorded as some of the only women’s voices of that time, singing their broken hearts into immortality. They refused to be forgotten.

On the day of our workshop, we gathered at dusk, as the moon was rising, under a wish-fulfilling *parijata* tree at the tomb of Begum Akhtar.

The last of the day’s light had gone out. The circle we were sitting in had curled and softened.

Taking turns, dipping the fragrant *rajnigandha* flower into perfumed water, we guided it over our skin where we wanted to be touched. We recited out loud how we wanted to be held by our lover, what our skin ached for.

“Slowly and softly across my collar bone, stroked on the small of my back, held in long embrace, her lips on my lips, his chest in my arms, tenderly, forever”

We knew what we wanted. Women are too often portrayed as objects of desire. We wanted to see, instead, representations of the things we desire. Representations of us being desirous.

Writing down our *tammanas* (wishes) we brought the evening a close to by reciting love poems that moved us or we had just written.

Outside of Begum’s dream courtyard, we found ourselves crashing back into the reality that is Uttar Pradesh, infamous for its religious intolerance, extreme patriarchy, and violence against women and minority communities. The wall that we were painting was at Chowk, a bustling intersection in the old city. Here, the streets get narrower and notoriously unsafe for women, who you see few of.

Breathing life into the wall

Time after time we heard from Madiha, Fatima, Raneem (the girls we were painting with) how they did not know what it meant to just *be* in public space here. They navigated it by getting through, quickly, not making any eye contact, making themselves as little and invisible as possible. This was a group of young women who had built new lives for themselves, studying and working in different cities across the country, but had to come back home to be with their families during the pandemic. For some of them, this meant relinquishing the independence they had fought to establish. Coming to the wall to paint (sometimes secretly, sometimes chaperoned) became an act of resistance.

Never having climbed scaffolding before, the girls were doing so now with wild abandon. Wielding their magic wand brushes and breathing life into the wall, like only a group of women can.



Emerging from one of the world’s strictest lockdowns, onto the streets of Lucknow, laughing and painting, was exhilarating. Just a few days into this the rug was pulled from beneath our feet and our faith put to the test as reports started circulating about the brutal gang rape and murder of a young Dalit woman, a few hundred kilometers from where we were standing. In the days that followed, the village of Hathras was

fortified by the police, who cremated her body without the consent of her family. The family were being intimidated and had their phones taken away, while the upper caste perpetrators were being protected. For a couple of weeks, the nation was ablaze, but soon enough everything whimpered into silence.

We've heard this silence before.
When will it end?

We know what we want. And in bold black and white lettering we painted this onto the wall for the world to see:

*"My desire
Live the life that I choose
Wear my hair the way I want to
Work after I'm married"*

Our painting shows two women holding each other in close embrace cloaked on either side by entwined Urdu and Hindi calligraphy expressing their (deepest) (deepest) desires.

जो मैं चाहू
जसिको चाहू
जैसे चाहू

*"What I want
Who I want
As I want them."*

Endnotes

- 1 Editor's note: *Dastangoi* is an ancient form of Urdu storytelling. The word comes from the Persian words for epic (dastan) and telling (goi).
- 2 Editor's note: The *tawaifs* were female entertainers and courtesans in the Indian subcontinent who excelled in poetry, music, dancing, singing, etc.



